

## **TheatreFirst's interesting trek down Hare's 'Via Dolorosa'**

**by Chad Jones, STAFF WRITER  
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NOBODY, says playwright David Hare, believes in anything anymore.

That's essentially how the British author of plays such as "Plenty" and "Amy's View" and the screenplay for "The Hours" came to write a one-man show about Israel and Palestine.

In 1997, Sir David, under the auspices of the Royal Court Theatre's international department, traveled to the Middle East for research purposes and to find a subject for his next play.

During a journey that took him from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in Israel and "through the mirror" into Gaza and Ramallah in Palestinian territory, Hare found all the history, religion and politics too complex for a play. Burning to talk about what he'd seen and experienced, Hare created instead a first-person account of his trip called "Via Dolorosa" that the author himself ended up performing in London in 1998, in New York a year later and again in London last year.

Hare was invited by Oakland's TheatreFirst to perform the show for local audiences, but he declined, so company director Clive Chafer turned to frequent collaborator and fellow expatriate Brit Simon Vance to inhabit the role of the author.

"Via Dolorosa" opened at Oakland's Islamic Cultural Center last weekend and continues there through Sunday. The show then heads to the Berkeley Richmond Jewish Community Center followed by a short run at San Francisco's A Traveling Jewish Theatre.

The extraordinary thing about "Via Dolorosa" -- apart from a crisp, beautifully realized performance by Vance -- is the simplicity, intelligence and humor with which it approaches its dense, often confusing subject matter.

On stage in the gorgeous Islamic Cultural Center hall -- sort of a California gothic look with the upswing of ornate buttresses and the dark wood of carved beams and paneling -- Vance-as-Hare tells us that he is drawn to Israel because, unlike most of Western civilization, people there are fighting for something they believe in.

American novelist Philip Roth encourages Hare to make the trip. "These people are absolute lunatics," Roth says. "They're the maddest people I've ever met in my life. For any writer of fiction, they're the most wonderful material."

Indeed, the people Hare meets are wonderful material. In Jaffa, Hare meets with Eran Baniel, a theater director who co-produced a version of "Romeo and Juliet" in which the Capulets were Palestinians and the Montagues were Jews. The production, it turned out, was not at all about love, but about a very specific hate.

Hare also hears a story about an actress who finds religion and decides that acting, and even the act of creating fiction, is wrong because only God can make stories. We are here to search for the truth, so why, she asks, should we "fabulate"?

While spending the Sabbath with Orthodox Jews in the settlement of Sheri Tikva, a few miles across the border into Palestinian territory, Hare is shocked to find not scrappy encampments but wealthy suburbs that remind him of Santa Barbara or Bel Air.

In Jerusalem, Hare meets with Benni Begin, son of former Prime Minister Menachem Begin, then heads into the West Bank, where he visits Gaza and Ramallah. Traveling from Israel into Palestinian territory, Hare says, is like going from California to Bangladesh.

Interviews with Arab politician Haider Abdel Sharif, historian Albert Aghazerin and theater producer George Ibrahim reveal just how inscrutably complex the whole conflict is.

Written more than four years ago, before the latest wave of violence rocked these disputed territories, "Via Dolorosa" does not begin to answer the big questions, but it does put human faces and experiences on an issue that tends to make Americans glaze over.

The ultimate success of Hare's play, and this expert TheatreFirst production, is that it inspires audiences to want to know more.

In Jerusalem, while walking the Via Dolorosa, the "way of sorrows" that follows Christ's route to his crucifixion, Hare wonders, finally, what matters most. Is it really the literal truth? Or could it be ideas?

Returning to London, to his comfortable suburban home, to his wife and to his dog Blanche, Hare calls into question his own deepest beliefs, and in a small triumph of life as art, he gently pushes his audience into doing the same.