

Letter From the Middle East

David Hare evokes a whole region through one man

by **Michael Scott Moore**

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If Mayor Brown cared about good writing he would name February "David Hare Month," because really devoted fans of the British playwright can pull -- in one weekend -- a Hare triple-header: *The Blue Room at the Exit* (highly recommended), *The Hours* at some cinema (he wrote the screenplay), and *Via Dolorosa* at various venues around the Bay Area. All three shows are thoughtful, witty, rather dry, and totally uninfected with suspense. *Via Dolorosa* is maybe the best example of these reserved qualities, because the other two shows have, at least, characters and conversation. *Dolorosa* puts the playwright himself onstage (in this case played by Simon Vance) in order to engage the audience frankly about Israel and the occupied territories.

It's a kind of Letter From the Middle East, written for *The New Yorker* or the *Times Literary Supplement* by -- well, by David Hare, or anyone else as balanced and rational (meaning not Susan Sontag or Christopher Hitchens). It really is an act of journalism. You have to care about Israel to enjoy it. The actor playing Hare describes his trip in a skeptical, humane voice, now and then lapsing into character as an Israeli theater director or a grave Palestinian historian. It's a reversal of the playwright's customary job, which is to write lines for other people. "I usually try to get Judi Dench to do this sort of thing," he quips. Hare has performed the 90-minute show himself about 200 times.

As a writer he does justice to everyone, on either side of the conflict, with the crucial exception of Israeli settlers, who come off as dangerous Jewish fundamentalists, well-off fanatics who believe that the words of the Old Testament give them every right to squat on Palestinian land, no matter how much trouble it causes. When Hare asks one of them about "the way forward" -- that is, how she envisions peace -- the answer is as striking and blunt as it is innocent, polite, and Canadian. (The woman hails from Canada, and would do damn well to go home, in my opinion.) She says, "I don't know."

He talks to Israeli novelist David Grossman, a nuanced critic of his own culture, who points to the Six-Day War in 1967 -- when Israel took by force and held what are now call the occupied territories -- as a turning point in "our basic Jewishness," because it was the first time in recorded history that Jews had ever fought to acquire land. "It's new, this idea that you have to own things," he says. "Suddenly the religious Jew saw the Bible not as a historical story, but as a contemporary operations manual."

Hare also meets with Benni Begin, the conservative son of Menachem Begin (the former Israeli prime minister), who serves in the Likud party. He's described as a steely, slight, low-voiced man with eyes as "black as caviar." In Begin's guise we hear the conservative opinion that a Palestinian state, under Yasser Arafat, would equal a terrorist state right

next to Israel . Hare is skeptical, but still gives him a few good lines: "When you see the Nobel Peace Prize pinned on the chest of a man whose maps still do not depict the state of Israel " -- Arafat -- "then you know there is nothing you can do." This trip was made before the current intifada, in the palmy, hopeful days of 1997, and the intervening years may have proved Begin's point by reducing Arafat's Nobel Prize to something worse than bitter sarcasm.

After Begin, for contrast, Hare travels to Gaza, and remarks that passing out of Israel is like "driving from California into Bangladesh," into a country of mules and dusty streets that flood with three feet of shit-filthy water when it rains. "Even now, one-third of Gaza is held by the Israelis," says Hare, "on behalf of just 6,000 religious settlers. Around them are crammed 750,000 Palestinians, half of whom live in the refugee camps, which were temporarily established in 1948."

Hare talks to a number of Palestinians, including the historian Albert Aghazerin, "a frightening figure with a big pipe and a superb sculpted face, rather like the actor Anthony Quinn." Aghazerin's mind leaps about "like an angry gazelle" as he regales Hare with facts and opinions and colorful stories about his mistreatment by frivolously cruel Israeli checkpoint guards. This portrait is one of the strongest segments of the show, partly because Vance does such good work evoking (Hare, evoking) Aghazerin, and partly because Aghazerin is such a powerful voice of outraged reason.

Other portraits in Gaza feel dated, though -- especially the fervid Palestinian poet Hussein Barghouti, who complains about Arab stereotypes in the United States . Without a Soviet Union , he says, "[I]t suits the Americans to say, 'The Arabs are the people who will start the third world war.'" Does it? That silly stereotype of murderous anti-Western Arabs has turned out, in the meantime, to fit, at least for 19 men who for their spectacular bloodlust never even had the excuse of a ghetto in Palestine .

Still, *Via Dolorosa* is a fine piece of writing exactly because it visits so many opinions. It's up there with the movie *Promises* as a record of trouble in Israel . Vance and his director, Clive Chafer -- along with Hare himself -- have put together a sometimes slow but provocative snapshot of the melancholy (and currently hopeless) road to peace.