

The great divide

The critics loved David Hare's play about Israel and Palestine. But how does *Via Dolorosa* measure up to reality, asks Ian Black

Crossing from Israel into Yasser Arafat's little bit of Palestine, says David Hare in *Via Dolorosa*, is like going straight from California to Bangladesh. In his riveting monologue on the world's most intractable conflict, this is one of many moments where the playwright conveys a sharp but fundamental truth about the odder aspects of life on both sides of the Middle Eastern divide.

History this isn't, but in his 90 minutes on stage he impressionistically but accurately sketches how Jews and Arabs came to be locked in their deadly *folie à deux*. "In some terrible way we're both bound up in each other's unhappiness," a Palestinian academic tells the bemused Englishman. "We cannot be separated."

Hare is braced for attacks by partisans and specialists, but he has done his homework and talked to enough of the right people to produce not only great quotes but a depressing *tableau vivant* that the journalists he envies would be proud to paint. The "necessary dramatisation" he astutely observes, when Israelis talk of their own complex history, serves him brilliantly.

Fun-loving Tel Aviv is contrasted with the neat suburban fanaticism of a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, where he encounters the baffling American-accented suspicion that Yitzhak Rabin, architect of the Oslo agreement with Arafat, conspired to have himself assassinated



Lookalikes?... In this extract from his play, David Hare (left) tells how he was mistaken for journalist David Hirst (right)

'As soon as we are ushered into Haider Abdel Shafi's elegant living room, it becomes clear why he has agreed to meet me. He believes that I am the Guardian journalist David Hirst and, as such, the author of a recent two-page exposé straplined Shameless in Gaza. 'Since Shafi has lately resigned from the legisla-

so the right could be blamed for starting a civil war.

Hare is at his best with Israel's gloomy left-wingers, who feel their country has been stolen by Binyamin Netanyahu and his orthodox and nationalist supporters and cheated by the slow death of Oslo. Shulamit Aloni — a former minister of education, civil-rights activist and secular heroine described as a "manic-depressive Melina Mercouri" — literally shouts her despair



tive body in protest at the notorious corruption of Arafat's regime, he is keen to congratulate me on my work.

'It seems somehow appropriate to this peculiar, hushed city that someone who knows nothing is now about to interview someone who thinks he is someone else'

Via Dolorosa

But like many western liberals and socialists, Jew or gentile, Hare shies away from plumbing the depths of fundamentalism — on either side. He is right to ask what makes young Palestinians strap explosives to their bodies. Gaza's open sewers, corruption and the disappointed hopes of the *intifada* generation are part of the answer, but not all of it. Unfathomable hatred is difficult material, on or off stage. Journalists traversing these

minefields worry that their carefully-honed pieces are tomorrow's fish wrapping. *Via Dolorosa* will survive even though — or perhaps because — it lacks the immediacy of this morning's paper or last night's *Newsnight*. But no one who has seen it will be surprised by the news of Gaza's first firing squad, or by next week's certainty that a new settlement will spring up on some Samaritan hillside when Netanyahu agrees to the next tortuous stage of withdrawal.

Yet, whether it's docudrama or something subtler, this is a curiously unjudgmental work. No one looking at the Arab-Israeli conflict should be thinking goodies and baddies, for there are victims and fools on both sides. But the playwright seems scared to speak out, in the way, say, that a newspaper editorial often does.

Via Dolorosa is full of harsh truths delivered with gentle humour and without the condescension of the foreigner crowing at someone else's mess. "If the Israelis were really clever, they would give the Palestinians every inch of land they want, then stand by and watch them fuck it up," Hare is told. "The truth is, the Israelis have given the Palestinians much less than they should, for their *own* good. And neither side has a monopoly on getting anything right."

Ian Black is the Guardian's diplomatic editor. *Via Dolorosa* is at the Royal Court Downstairs at the Duke of York's, London.

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