

Hare acts the part of the story-teller

Via Dolorosa – Royal Court at the Duke of York's

WITH a title like *Via Dolorosa*, one feared the newly-knighted David Hare might be getting ideas above his station with his first one-man show. What next? Walking on water?

In fact the evening turns out to be a conspicuous success, with scarcely a hint of megalomania about it.

Indeed Hare looks like the diffident public schoolboy he once was as he takes to the stage (a neutron bomb appears to have hit the theatre in Ian MacNeil's modishly stripped back "distressed" design) and confesses that he hasn't acted since playing Thomas Cromwell in *A Man for all Seasons* at the age of 15.

"I just want to see what it's like," he adds endearingly.

That though is only part of the reason he's taken to the boards. The other is that he has a fascinating story to tell, and it needs Hare to tell it.

As he proved with his General Election coverage for *The Daily Telegraph* last year, David Hare isn't only a fine playwright: he is also an astute and inquisitive reporter, with a real knack for getting people to talk.

In this fascinating, humane, funny but also deeply depressing show, he describes his trip last year to both Israel and the Palestinian territory, recounting the conversations he had with both Jews and Arabs and offering his own insights and impressions.

It is, I suppose, more of a lecture than a play, for Hare doesn't really try to impersonate the people he met.

What he does capture, with beady observation and a remarkably confident stage presence, is the passion of their beliefs and the irreconcilable differences between them.

As you'd expect, Hare's sympathies seem to lie with the liberal Jews and the per-

First Night



by Charles Spencer

Theatre Critic

secuted Palestinians but, as in his plays, he is often at his best when trying to understand those he instinctively disapproves of, such as the deeply religious Orthodox Jews settling on the West Bank.

He describes their arguments, and the uneasiness he feels about them, with a fine candour.

The whole piece is alive with both debate and vivid images.

Moving from Israel to the Gaza Strip, he says, is like moving from California to Bangladesh.

There's also a good deal of self-mocking humour. In Gaza he finds himself in a panic because he is about to interview a distinguished politician and hasn't got a clue what to ask him.

Needless to say he comes out of the encounter with excellent copy.

Via Dolorosa is undoubtedly superb, revealing reportage but the piece, atmospherically directed by Stephen Daldry, strikes me as being much more than a news feature brought to the stage.

Hare raises fascinating questions about whether art can ever come to grips with the Holocaust, while in his descriptive writing he sometimes achieves real stage poetry, a glimpse of the numinous qualities that have often eluded him in the past.

Via Dolorosa is certainly an education for the audience. You also sense that Hare has learned a good deal about himself.

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Sun, Sep 24, 2023