

Theatre

Irving Wardle

Via Dolorosa
Crave
Phèdre

WHY should a vastly successful, 50-year-old playwright who could summon up any company he cared to name take the risk of exposing himself as an actor in a one-man show? David Hare answers the question in every line of *Via Dolorosa* (Royal Court). "Fah!" he says. "I just want to see what it's like... the last time I acted was when I was 15."

As it turns out, he proves to be an eloquent and graceful performer apart from a habit of launching into emphatic gestures and then cutting them short. But his real reason has nothing to do with personal curiosity or ambition. It arises from his subject-matter itself.

Throughout the play, the question keeps recurring: how dare anyone write a play about Israel? Why complicate an already labyrinthine theme with technical complexities? Why dramatise when the average Israeli undergoes daily emotions "that would keep a Swede going for a year"? Why fabricate, when the Jewish tradition itself has been to study the work of the original fabulist, the creator of the world? Art is superficial, like the paintings in the Holocaust museum: it is facts that matter. Testimonies, not fiction.

Hare visited the country for the first time last year, and saw what one of his interlocutors calls the "three heres": of Judaism, ancestry, and madness. His record of this experience is packed with facts, but he does not pretend to be an impartial observer. It is a play in the sense that it has a protagonist and a quest. And in Stephen Dinko's production, featuring a flying model of the holy city, it is articulated just enough to dispel any lecture-hall association.

Hare's point of departure is that of a writer from a land where faith is in decline visiting a land that is still a battleground of beliefs. He is, at once, an innocent observer, like observer ("I am a pen"), and a pilgrim pursuing his own *via dolorosa* through the tensions of Tel Aviv: stage politics, West Bank frontier instability, Palestinian dispossession, before returning to the spiritual desert of Hampstead.

The effect is theatrical rather than journalistic because the characters are as

READERS!

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Sarah Kane's *Crave* (Theatre of the Royal Court and Paines Plough) is a one-man show for four voices. Two men and two women sit on seven chairs, sometimes facing each other, and engage in apparent exchanges that are really cries of pain from the solitary confinement of the self. Varying the metaphor, it is like walking through a hall of distorting mirrors where the same basic image becomes a focus for desire, fear and disgust.

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As an actor: David Hare as himself in *Via Dolorosa*, a record of experience packed with facts, which mistrusts imagination

Pen and pilgrim in a battleground of beliefs

important as the argument and because Hare brings them fearlessly to life, without passing judgement. When he evokes a writer, family rowing over some microscopic Biblical detail, it is up to you to disengage the farcical from the awesome.

What Hare adds, as a performer as much as a writer, is the ability to switch instantaneously between the tragic and the trivial. He gives his prophetic figures — Benin, and Gura's, Hader, Aldri, Shari — breath-stifling authority, but at the next moment he breaks the spell and is dancing away from them.

This is not a simple matter of manufacturing anti-criticism. Rather it arises directly from his discovery of Israel as a mosaic of mutually exclusive certainties, as Hare moves between them he finds down between them he finds down grand-scale corruption and solidity.

The sheer energy of the debates also creates a sense of movement. But the one phrase that reaches through them is Hare's question: "What is the way forward?"

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speeches combining aggression with resonant poetry, which echo, overlap and chime in Vicky Featherstone's musically disciplined production. It runs to barely 45 minutes, so forget the obscurities and surrender to a commanding talent.

IF YOU were asked to concoct a dose of infallible, low-office poison, the winning recipe would have been a West End repertoire season of Racine in English.

The fact that the Almeida Theatre Company have just opened such a season at the Albany strikingly demonstrates the breadth we have been making with French classical tragedy. Thanks largely to the work of outfits like Clark, by now and the Almeida itself. Their strategy has been to acknowledge the poetry as untranslatable, and to concentrate instead on character and dramatic struc-

ture. This can work extremely well with the post-blank realism and nuanced delivery of studio performance. But judging from Jonathan Kent's production of *Phèdre*, its success on larger stages is problematic.

The text, by Taci Hughes, is in the same unyielding, regularly muscular vein as his David translations. But in dialogue this yields more than is intended. Naturalistic, not poetic, but merely effective.

Overcome the daily grating scolders, what is left is an emotional blueprint. Inviting actors to generate a line of feeling at the expense of a forcibly accelerated text. Kent's actors are too good to resort to gabbling, but what you receive from them is a highly charged outline of the play's theme of its psychological content. The most we see of the gods are the statue of Venus and the storm-lashed windows of Marie Byrnes's set. This could have had a de-

stating effect on *Phèdre* herself, of whom it is vital to know that she is simultaneously a child of the sun and of Athena, judge of the Underworld.

Psychologically, however, this is fully explicit in Diana Rigg's performance which agonisingly combines fortitude with pitiless self-condemnation. I have seldom seen a performance that conveys such a sense of being physically present.

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Just a babe in a video world

Peter Reed

Penny Pavilion

THIS leaves the traditional Chinese opera, Hua Wen, and the computer world behind. One case of the head or arm gesture is so eloquent as to make all the paraphernalia on stage redundant. And the traditional music that the two women sing, while it may sometimes sound like the Changers with added helium, is strange and unWestern, and immediately expressive, and reminds me that the world is a big place, that foreign cultures can open for themselves. So what is the point of trying to lift it up with this sort of cultural synthesis?

The first two of *Penny Pavilion* is in 35 scenes and could take up to a week to perform. Peter Sellars's version lasts no more than four hours, at the end of which my crutchman went to the staffs, was beginning to feel dead, only to jump up to see if the man really was Wen! — she is spellbinding.

His most significant step in helping us grasp this mythic story, with its shades of *Orpheus* and *Roméo and Juliet*, is to have the part of the girl, Du Linling, played by three women — a traditional Chinese opera singer / actress, a young actress and a Western-style opera-singer. And it is here that Sellars's concept falls short. The young actress Lauren Funn performs Du Linling as a posturing, who-is-it-happening-to-me-babe, familiar from American TV, and not remotely comparable, the soprano Ying Huang, who dominates the second half, sings Du Linling's music heartily but the music itself is not especially memorable.

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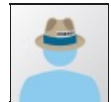
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