



First night: Sir David Hare, right, is congratulated by Stephen Daldry

Picture: GREG BOWETT

SIR DAVID HARE, the newly knighted dramatist, took on the fearful task of playing himself last night and won. He's a reactor in the dull bench class, or several classes below here. Yet in his first professional appearance on stage a nervous Sir David, hands busy as agitated windmills, manages to hold a theatre audience nicely enthralled. He has, of course, the advantage of speaking his own words — all 12,000 of them, in a fascinating monologue and feat of memory — reporting on his visit to the preoccupied world of incompatibles that is Israel and Palestinian territory today.

In *Via Dolorosa* Hare plays one of his various selves — an astute, observant reporter casting a fresh mind and turn of phrase upon the relatively familiar. He strolls awkwardly on stage down a long, theatrical walkway to a bare centre-stage and stands wreathed in unspontaneous smiles as though preparing to trade on charm. The awkwardness passes. With his white shirt, grey trousers and sorry hair that needs a good styling he faintly preserves the aura of the brilliant school prefect giving a lecture.

Hare has fortunately never lost a youthful energy or passion and his eruptions of fury give the evening its theatrical dynamism. He has no great, new insights to offer. Yet how vivid, how lightly humorous, how eloquent he makes his voyage of discovery. He shows up the stark difference between a prospering Israel and the impoverished Palestinian lands.

"An whole, his brown storm of pure dirt" greets his arrival in the Gaza strip, while one Jewish settlement inside Palestinian territory proves more like the sumptuous suburbia of California's Red Air or Santa Barbara than the American wild west of his imagining.

Gaza's pure dirt, with the menacing atmosphere of a John Le Carré movie, reminds him that here people "earn precisely eight per cent of what their opposite numbers earn in Israel".

Hare, whose wife is a Turkish Jew whose family escaped from the Nazis, is no partisan. *Via Dolorosa* is coloured by a questioning scepticism and neutrality. He is only on the side of reconciliation, a consummation which in Netanyahu's Israel seems a mere mirage. The climax of his trip comes when visiting Shimon Ailon, "the flaming red firebrand"

Theatrical coup that stages an eloquent political debate

FIRST NIGHT
by Nicholas de Jongh

Via Dolorosa **
Royal Court Theatre

of the assassinated Rabin's government. Hare does not change his tone of voice when speaking for the individual Israelis and Arabs he meets. He memorably captures, however, the extremity of Ailon's rage and despair directed against a "strong and greedy Israel" that has given power to its righteous clergy.

HARE discovers a matching sense of internal criticism when he goes to Gaza, where at dusk "time steps back 40 years," and meets the popular politician who resigned in protest against Ailon's "notorious corruption". Stephen Daldry's production has a few intrusively theatrical touches and irritating changes of light. But Sir David's text and performance achieve an arresting theatrical coup. They show that theatre can be provocative like journalism and more durable. For Hare's articulation of the outrage of Arabs and Jews in the sight of their hopeless rule shows how to put the stage back into political debate.

*Reviews: -3 adequate
* good
** very good
*** outstanding
* poor*
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Dolorosa de Jongh Standard



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