

## This miniature epic emerges as a triumph of Olympian proportions

MARTIN SHERMAN, an American writer based in Britain, is best known as the author of *Bent*, his moving play about homosexuals in a Nazi concentration camp.

He is refreshingly difficult to categorise, however, and plays such as *When She Danced* (1988) about Isadora Duncan and *Some Sunny Day* (1996) about wartime Egypt, have a quirky individuality that sometimes verges on the downright dotty.

His new piece, *Rose*, is a monologue for an 80-year-old Jewish woman looking back on her life as the millennium turns. It is an epic in miniature — funny, deeply moving, just occasionally a touch glib. Canny Trevor Nunn is programming it in repertory at the Cottes-

loe with his own outstanding production of *The Merchant of Venice*, and the pair make fascinating companion pieces about the Jewish experience.

Sherman's main problem is that his material is so over-familiar — an East European moves from remote shtetl to the city, endures and survives the Nazis and then embarks on a new life in America.

The danger is that Rose, played by the distinguished American actress Olympia Dukakis in an impressive British debut, will seem more like an archetype than a character, a representative of a persecuted race rather than a fully rounded individual.

There are indeed moments when Sherman seems to be exploring

### Theatre

Rose  
National Theatre

themes rather than a person but, thanks to the wise compassion of his writing, and a performance from Dukakis that walks a skilful path between engaging Jewish humour and sudden glimpses of unimaginable pain, the piece emerges as a real triumph.

One of the monologue's themes is the nature of memory. As she describes a pogrom in her childhood's Ukrainian village, Rose wonders just how much of the memory is hers and how much she has superimposed from seeing films such as *Fiddler on the Roof*. And, in

the extraordinary, understated account of the Warsaw ghetto, the death of her three-year-old daughter and the two years she spent in hiding in the city's sewers, Rose repeatedly and defensively insists that she doesn't remember, though it is clear that the horror will never leave her.

It was in the ghetto, she says devastatingly, that God died.

At the start of the play, skilfully directed by Nancy Meckler, Rose announces that she is "sitting shivah", a Jewish ceremony of mourning. What is not clear until the end is who she is mourning, and the answer raises provocative questions about present-day Israeli morality on the West Bank.

But Rose is also in mourning for a

whole way of life, for the experience of Jews during the diaspora and for the loss of both the Yiddish language and the patterns of thought and values it represented.

In the second half, Dukakis's command of this dense and demanding script sometimes wavers, and the narrative itself is marred by an over-reliance on contrived coincidence. These are minor blemishes though.

The impression of a frail yet indomitable old woman confronting her often traumatic memories with such humour and bracing honesty is unforgettable. There is no mistaking the play's great heart.

Tickets: 0171 452 3000

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