

patterns of grief and beauty etched into Tchaikovsky's music remain one of the wonders of the ballet world.
Judith Mackrell
Ends tonight. Box office: 020-7304 4000.

Theatre

Alive From Palestine

Royal Court, London

★★★★★

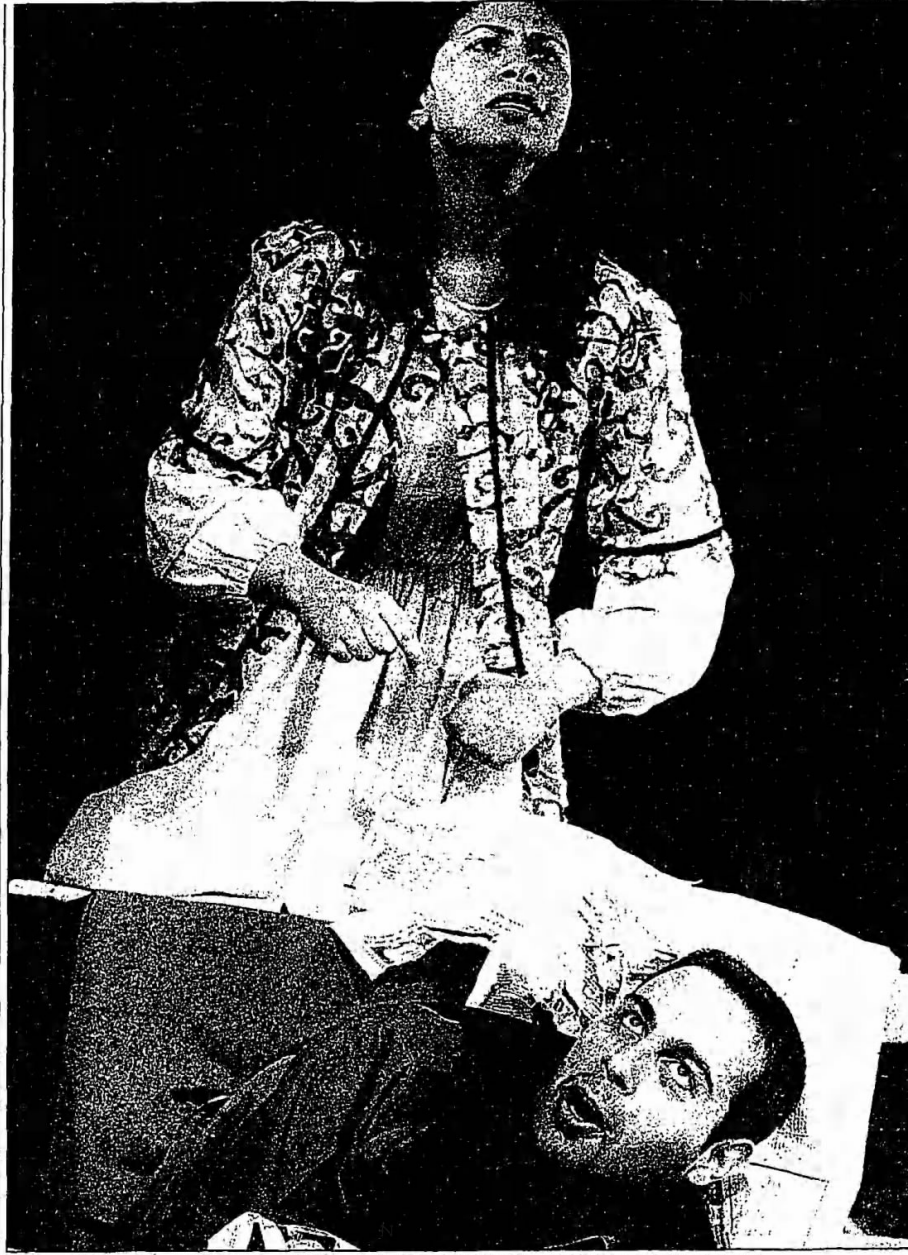
How often do you see a piece of necessary theatre? Pretty rarely. But these "stories under occupation", brought to us by George Ibrahim's Al-Kasaba Theatre from Ramallah as part of the London international festival of theatre, fall precisely into that category. We are used to the idea of theatre as a diversion. Here it is fulfilling a more important function of bringing us the news.

News is indeed a dominant element in this remarkable hour-long, late-night production. The stage is piled high with mounds of Palestinian newspapers, from which the seven actors emerge to tell their stories. It is a potent image because it suggests that for all the news reports of the Palestinian intifada, and the 500 deaths that have accompanied it, we have little sense of the reality of daily existence. What these tales offer is an indication of the mordant humour and survival-instinct irony that many Palestinians bring to their occupied lives.

Perhaps the most eye-opening of many sketches and tales is one in which Hussam Abu Eiseh plays a West Bank resident on the phone to his son in London. As he chattily catalogues the family's endless succession of disasters, he keeps saying: "No, no we're fine, don't worry," as if tragedy were now the norm. And the point is reinforced by another sketch in which two lovers meet for a dinner date; they go through the expected rituals of courtship except that their presents to each other consist of rubber bullets and small armaments.

Under the show's satire there is clearly both fierce anger and sadness at the extent to which the abnormal has become the normal for Palestinians. But the stories are also capable of recording naked desperation. One man, tracked by a buzzing helicopter, raises his arms to it, crying, "Let me die as I wish." And there is a potent tale of a boy, reared on fictive American images of violence and regretting the closure of the cinemas under the intifada, awakening to the fact that he is living amid something far more terrifying than movie-location mayhem.

Performed in Arabic with English surtitles and directed and designed by Amir Nizar Zuabi, this show is an astonishing testament to the power of theatre. It shows



Testament to the power of theatre... Alive From Palestine at the Royal Court Photograph: Tristram Kenton

how, even as a society's infrastructure collapses, people continue to tell each other stories to make sense of their lives. What I also learned was the desperate desire of the Palestinians to be something other than global headlines. As the actors are finally obliterated, they sink once more under a morass of newsprint. But the emergence of their flickering hands through the jumbled-up journals unforgettably asserts their unsuppressed humanity and wish simply to be allowed to live.

Michael Billington
Ends tonight. Box office: 020-7565 5000.

World music

Paco de Lucia

Royal Festival Hall, London

★★★★★

Despite all the detours in Paco de Lucia's career, his current seven-piece ensemble maintains links with his past. Still present from the group's original 1981 incarnation are flautist Jorge Pardo, Paco's brother Ramon on guitar, percussionist Rubem Dantas and Carlos Benavent on bass and mandola. They have the kind of rapport that only a couple of decades of playing together can bring.

There's no space for de Lucia's jazzier excursions here, but there's plenty of traditional improvisation. He began with a solo guitar piece that apparently fell together by accident. At first, he seemed just to be tuning up, then suddenly he was in full flying-fingered spate, commanding the stage like a baleful stone lion. Even if he was only filing his nails you'd feel compelled to pay attention.

Then the band began to slip in from the wings, in assorted configurations. A couple of them clapped and stamped their feet while Dantas whacked out some cross-

rythms behind de Lucia's thrumming guitar. Then we had three guitars engaged in a dramatically stereophonic debate, buoyed up by Benavent's five-string bass. And finally, the ensemble sat in a semicircle, Paco driving the music forward by what appeared to be mind control.

Whether this is totally unadulterated flamenco I couldn't be certain, but there's a dark undertow to it that exerts an irresistible pull. It wasn't until Joaquin Grilo suddenly sprang to his feet and snapped into a tense and dramatic dance routine that the picture felt com-