



**PREVIEW: Deep Dish Theater Company Preview: *Via Dolorosa* Presents David Hare's Insights into the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

by Robert W. McDowell

Chapel Hill-based Deep Dish Theater Company will present the regional premiere of *Via Dolorosa*, British playwright David Hare's powerful one-man show based on his 1997 travels to — and conversations with the residents of — Israel and Gaza, from Feb. 5 to Feb. 28 in the space behind Branching Out at the Dillard's end of University Mall. Triangle theater veteran David zum Brunnen will play David Hare in this provocative autobiographical drama.

*(Note: The "Via Dolorosa" — a.k.a. the Way of the Cross, the Stations of the Cross, and the Via Crucis — represents key scenes from the Passion of Christ. The 14 stations may be composed of sculptured or carved wood, stone, or metal — or they may be engravings or paintings. These images commemorate the series of events from the moment that Jesus was condemned to death until the moment that He was laid in His tomb.)*

One of Great Britain's greatest contemporary playwrights, David Hare was commissioned to write a play about Israel. The occasion was that country's 50th anniversary. Hare subsequently performed *Via Dolorosa*, with great success, in London (1998) and New York (1999).

In preshow publicity, Deep Dish artistic director Paul Frellick wrote, "This play is really unique. On the surface it couldn't be simpler — one man recalling events and conversations from a trip abroad. But by the end of 90 minutes, the author has assembled an astonishingly complex picture of the forces at work in the Middle East and the multifaceted nature of the conflict there. *Via Dolorosa* has all the brilliant, lightning-witted writing of Hare's other well-known plays (*Plenty*, *The Secret Rapture*, *Skylight*, etc.), but above all, the play is a very human look at the present state of life in Israel and the occupied territories. It's a heady mix of ideas and passions — there should be plenty for theatergoers to talk about on the way home."

Frellick told *Robert's Reviews*: "This play, written to be performed by the author, is rarely performed. I read about the original production in London and New York back in 1998."

Paul Frellick says that he likes the play's "mix of journalism and drama. The playwright's intent, and ours as well, is to serve as a witness to the many emotions and points of view at work in the region, not to comment on them or to prescribe a solution," Frellick claims.

As this one-man show unfolds, Frellick says, "The author, David Hare (David zum Brunnen), recounts the story of a trip to the Middle East, telling of the people and places he encountered, and exploring the multifaceted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Besides director Paul Frellick, the show's production team includes set designer Christa Devitt; lighting designer Steve Dubai; costume designer Judy Chang; props mistress Devra Thomas; and composer Kit Wienert, who has created some original music for the show.

Frellick says, "The event takes place in an empty theater, a transitional space." Thus, the emphasis will be on the acting and David Hare's piercing insights into the causes and current nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

He adds, "We have scheduled two post-show discussions with Sarah Shields, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at UNC-Chapel Hill; but we hope that the play will engender discussions well beyond the confines of the theater." These audience-feedback sessions will follow the show's Feb. 19 and 22 performances.

Also, at 7 p.m. on Feb. 26, the Deep Dish Theater Company Book Club will discuss Amy Wilentz's first novel, *Martyrs' Crossing*. Dr. David Carr will lead the discussion, which will take place in Tyndall Galleries, near the theater, in University Mall.

A Jerusalem correspondent for *The New Yorker* from 1995 to 1997, Amy Wilentz was nominated for a 1990 National Book Critics Circle Award for her nonfiction book *The Rainy Season: Haiti Since Duvalier*. According to preshow publicity, *The New York Times Book Review* praised *Martyrs' Crossing* as "sophisticated and suspenseful" and "tautly written.... Wilentz knows the world she writes about very well, and her descriptions have a solid specificity that lends authority to her fiction."

Also according to preshow publicity, "*Martyrs' Crossing* vividly depicts the tumultuous, tragic events that unfold when Marina Raad Hajimi, the wife of an imprisoned Hamas terrorist, tries to bring her desperately ill son into Israel for medical care. Mother and child are refused entry at the Israeli checkpoint, and the youngster dies at the scene. Marina's Palestinian-American father, prominent cardiologist George Raad, returns to Ramallah to be with his bereaved daughter. Lt. Ari Doron, the young Israeli post commander who obeyed orders to prevent Marina and her son from crossing the border is plagued with guilt over the child's death — and seeks absolution from Marina and George before Hassan Hajimi, Marina's husband, gains his freedom."

Deep Dish Theater Company presents *Via Dolorosa* Thursday-Saturday, Feb. 5-7, 12-14, 19-21, and 26-28, at 8 p.m.; Sunday, Feb. 8, 15, and 22, at 3 p.m.; and Wednesday, Feb. 25, at 7:30 p.m. in the space behind Branching Out at the Dillard's end of University Mall, at the intersection of Estes Drive and U.S. 15-501, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. \$14 (\$10 students and \$12 seniors), except pay-what-you-can matinee Feb. 8. 919/968-1515. *Note 1*: Deep Dish's storefront theater is located in the area behind Branching Out, which is located between Cameron's and The Print Shop. Enter through Branching Out. *Note 2*: There will be post-play discussions, led by UNC-Chapel Hill professor of Middle Eastern studies Sarah Shields, following the show's Feb. 19 and 22 performances. *Note 3*: Dr. David Carr will lead the Deep Dish Book Club discussion of Amy Wilentz's first novel, *Martyrs' Crossing*, at 7 p.m. Feb. 26 in Tyndall Galleries in University Mall. *Deep Dish Theater Company*: <http://www.deepdishtheater.org/dolorosa%20release.html>. *Via Dolorosa* (PBS web page): <http://www.pbs.org/viadolorosa/>. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912 Edition): <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15569a.htm> [inactive 9/04]. *Martyrs' Crossing* (Random House web page, which includes an excerpt from the book): <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=0-345-44983-5>.

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## REVIEW: Deep Dish Theater Company Review: *Via Dolorosa* Is a Thought-Provoking Solo About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

by Scott Ross

One-person shows are notoriously difficult to pull off, for any number of reasons. The thorniest problem is the necessarily subjective nature of the form. Drama consists largely of human beings in conflict; a solo presents only one perspective — and not always the most reliable one at that. (cf., *Tru*, *Give 'Em Hell, Harry!*, and *Bully!*) Few

playwrights have mastered the trick. There's Alan Bennett in Britain, whose *Talking Heads* series managed the nimble feat of allowing his characters to provide just enough detail for the audience to see the speakers far more clearly than they perceived themselves.

Remember too that most single acts are devised for specific actors: Hal Holbrook, Julie Harris, Lily Tomlin. Performers such as Eric Bogosian and Eve Ensler (and, until recently, Spaulding Gray) write or improvise their own monologues, and can scarcely be bettered in them. Indeed, Gray's work is so specific to his own persona that another actor performing his pieces would be an act of extraordinary hubris — or perhaps plain madness.

Such is the case with David Hare's extraordinary 1998 solo effort, *Via Dolorosa*. The material is so personal, the piece so recent, and the playwright himself so deeply involved in its exploration, that watching an actor *pretending* to be Hare himself narrating the dramatist's revelatory experiences robs it of its topical specificity and its genuine authorial voice.

That is precisely what Deep Dish Theater Company does in its current production, performed by David zum Brunnen under the — admittedly fluid — direction of Paul Frellick. That this *Via Dolorosa* still holds our attention and moves us as it does is attributable purely to Hare's exquisite grasp of place and people and his finely honed dramatic instinct for making a coherent whole from the wealth of material he gathered. But observing an actor as Hare imposes a curiously distancing effect on what is, ironically, exceptionally personal material. We're constantly aware that we're watching, not David Hare, but a simulacrum — and a rather unconvincing one at that.

The piece describes the writer's 1997 visit to Israel and Gaza, and his impressions of their residents. I would scarcely argue against the timeliness of the work as theater. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict resounds more alarmingly today than at any moment in recent history, and Hare's piquant observations illuminate with subtle brilliance the essence of its tragic insolubility. My quarrel lies with its being performed by anyone *other than* David Hare. Added to which, zum Brunnen's *faux* British accent is an impediment and, to put it kindly, less than persuasive.

David Hare's work includes any number of superb meditations on the state of post-war British sensibility: the funny and prescient *Pravda* (written with Howard Brenton); the misunderstood *Plenty* with its hauntingly ironic final line ("There will be days and days like this"); and a superb triptych — consisting of *Murmuring Judges*, *Racing Demon*, and *The Absence of War* — examining the troubled condition of his nation's public institutions. He is, as few American dramatists, engaged with the world in a spiritual, if overtly political fashion; as he relates in *Via Dolorosa* (Latin for the Stations of the Cross, and an achingly apt metaphor for the uneasy negotiation between two, seemingly implacable, spheres) his major theme has been faith — the need to believe in *something*, however secular.

*Via Dolorosa* raises deeply uncomfortable issues. The novelist David Grossman brands the Six-Day War as "un-Jewish": before the state's 1967 incursion into Arabian land, "ideas" mattered to Israel; now the more modern concept of ownership does. Some Israeli settlers voice irritation at the Orthodox sect for "sucking the marrow from the state." The murder of Yitzak Rabin by an ultra-Orthodox Jew unsettles them because they might have to admit some culpability in one Jew killing another. It is suggested that the aura of victimhood suits both camps, since "victims can do no wrong."

These are incendiary notions, the kind that can raise charges of anti-Semitism, not so much from Israelis themselves as from the Norman Podhoritzes and Midge Decters of America who see any questioning of Israel's policies as an *ad hominem* attacks on Judaism itself. Yet Hare includes ideas, like that of a distinguished Palestinian who

believes the most urgent issue facing his people is the need " to reform ourselves," that eschew any easy taking of sides. Indeed, the most ineffably moving passage in *Via Dolorosa* describes Hare's visit to the Israeli Museum of the Holocaust, with its endless, overwhelming Hall of Names and that infamous letter from Himmler to his troops, praising them for having "stayed decent."

If Hare's observations have a single failing, it lies in his giving rather short shrift to the culpability of his forebears, who bequeathed us the conflict through their meddling in the Middle East (although an Israeli activist does tell the playwright that "we love the British — now that you've left.")

By the end of *Via Dolorosa* my notebook was filled with quotations, both Hare's own lines and those said to him by the Israelis and Palestinians he encountered. But on reflection, it seems to me that citing them would be more appropriate to a review of Hare's play-script or of his own performance (broadcast on PBS and available on DVD) than to a critique of this production, which I nonetheless recommend — advisedly — for the engrossing clarity with which this essential modern playwright "swim[s] in the coral reefs of these arguments."

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