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Stones and ideas on the 'Via Dolorosa'

By ADAM SOBSEY, Correspondent

CHAPEL HILL -- In 1997, when 9/11 was just another day in September, the celebrated English playwright David Hare traveled to Israel full of questions: about faith, homeland and the ancient grudges that pit neighbors against one another. The next year he wrote a monologue about the trip, in which the answers are as eternal as the crumbling stones of Jerusalem and as disputed as the West Bank.

Seven years later the world has changed, and Deep Dish Theater Company has remounted Hare's "Via Dolorosa." "Our intention," writes director Paul Frellick, "is to provoke discussion, assessment, contemplation." In that goal, the company ably succeeds.

Hare performed the original "Via Dolorosa" himself. His Dantesque role as both voyager and author was essential to the play, in which he described meeting various Israelis and Palestinians who hoped to use him as a mouthpiece for their righteous ideologies. Caught between, the Gentle Hare tried to name what he sought in others' holy land, but not even a pilgrimage over the sacred titular road revealed it. "My subject is belief," Hare declared. Trusting that impulse, he traveled on and told the tale.

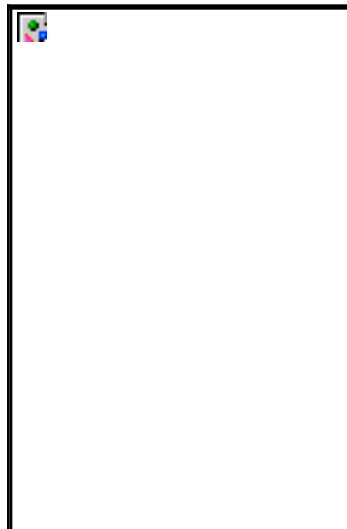
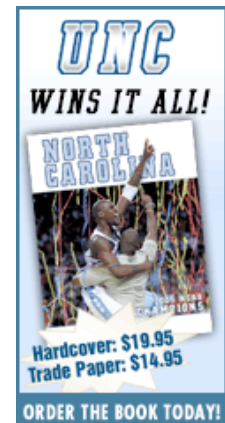
Into Hare's vacated spot steps the veteran local actor David zum Brunnen. It's a daring and perhaps dubious move. What is a 90-minute monologue, written for the playwright's own voice, from his very personal and murky motives, without the playwright to deliver it? But with unassuming candor, zum Brunnen tries neither to replace nor to mimic Hare. Instead he offers himself as a surrogate, retracing Hare's search with confident, brisk steps. In doing so he provides a full view of both the author's uncertainty and the welter of hate, mistrust and devotion he found in Israel.

The set design, by Christa Devitt, aptly displays the eventual theme of "Via Dolorosa." Upstage looms scaffolded, unfinished scenery. Is it partly assembled or partly razed? The only furniture is a drafting table and chair. As the monologue develops, it compasses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: a peace in endless disrepair, halfway built and then ruined by its own makers. It also admits that the play too is an idea-in-progress.

Hare could create only this eloquent sketch -- a staged drama would never recapture the real one playing out in blood and in the news. Devitt's set is willfully unsightly to mirror, in Hare's words, both the "little strife" of holy war and "the bigger strife of the soul."

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Advertisements



David zum Brunnen performs 'Via Dolorosa,' a monologue by David Hare.

INFO

WHAT "Via Dolorosa."

WHEN Tonight, Thursday-Feb. 21 and Feb. 27, 8 p.m.; Feb. 25, 7:30 p.m.; and matinees Sunday and Feb. 22, 3 p.m.

WHERE University Mall, Chapel Hill.

COST \$10-\$14.

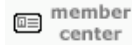
CALL 968-1515, www.deepdishtheater.org.



"Via Dolorosa" is virtually actionless. Zum Brunnen speaks, sitting or standing, with little directorial embellishment by Frellick. The effect, heightened by zum Brunnen's intellectual zeal, is that of a master lecturer's exegesis on a thorny subject that both thrills and vexes him. The script and the actor lightly tread the thin ice between cerebral excitement and personal detachment. It never breaks. The minutes zip by.

"Via Dolorosa" isn't for everyone. Its pleasures are almost entirely mental, and it's as much a learning tool as it is theater. Despite the post-9/11 context, the Deep Dish production neither predicts nor resituates that cataclysm: This religious war long precedes jihad, and outlasts global sea change.

The play can't resolve Palestine or its author's purpose. It lacks even a true ending, and this too suits its skeptical mood. "Stones or ideas?" Hare asks of Jerusalem, of theater and of himself. With zum Brunnen's poised, intrepid guidance, "Via Dolorosa" sheds light not on the answers, but on the reticulate questions.



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