

VIA DOLOROSA: FAITH and FIDELITY

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Abstract: *David Hare is one of the most fulgent figures of the global theatre who peculiarly places national and international political issues and their effects on the individual and society in his non-fiction drama. The political struggle between Palestinians and Israelis has been brought into debate through the imagination of several leading dramatists so far. Hare presents the purest ideas about this issue throughout his work, Via Dolorosa. However, his main concern is the corruption of faith and the meaninglessness of life, chiefly in the western world. In this respect, the playwright deals with the notion of faith in a universal point of view in this monologue play.*

Key words: *David Hare, faith, Israel-Palestine, non-fiction drama, the West.*

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, and particularly after the events of 9/11, it is highly popular among theatre-goers to see a play that covers national and international issues. It seems that the popularity of political plays will carry on in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. This paper presents a literary analysis of *Via Dolorosa*, which is one of the hottest political plays by David Hare. Billington (2009:387) delineates the play as “a brilliant piece of subjective reportage... so moving”. It is not only authentic with its technical style and rendition, but also with its vivid and gripping subject matter.

In fact, David Hare, who is one of Britain’s most prolific political playwrights, has been using national and international fresh political material in his multi-coloured drama to meet the demands of theatre-goers for forty years. As a pioneer social commentator, Hare displays that the stage is a kind of place where playwrights give political lectures. According to him, a playwright must reject being didactic on current politics and their effects on the human beings, because the audience merely needs to hear the pure facts from a dutiful and responsible playwright. He simply aims at keeping his audience aware about what happens in and out of Britain. Thus, he is against a kind of drama without socio-political concerns. He states that:

To be interested in politics is just part of being grown up. I hate the childishness of the theatre. A lot of people love the theatre as a sort of play pen, or a sort of kindergarten for the psychiatrist. I *hate* those kinds of evenings. I believe history has a great effect on who you are and how you think... it mystifies me why so many playwrights write in bell jars, where there is no sense of what society is like outside, where there is no sense of which historical events affect the emotions and thoughts of the characters on the stage. (Gaston 1993:217-218)

Hare believes that over the past fifteen years there is a common sense all around the world that unlike theatre, the media is not a trustful establishment. Moreover, he asserts that “theatre is not journalism. The mistake is to imagine that simply because it can incorporate real-life material, so it can be judged by similar criteria” (Luckhurst 2008:210). For this reason, David Hare’s “dramaturgical strategies reflect his political interpretations of his environment. His body of work reflects his method of theatricalising politics” (Oliva 1990:155) without journalism. As he always involves himself in very contemporary political issues, he considers himself as a dramatist of political history plays.

Therefore, this paper also focuses on political issues between Israel and Palestine through the lens of David Hare. The playwright seems to inform his audience about the current political issues of the Middle East through his play, *Via Dolorosa*. In this respect Billington (2009:387) summarizes the political background of the play saying that:

As a good reporter, Hare told us a lot about life in the Middle-East. About the conflicts within, as well as between, the Israeli and Palestinian communities. About the gulf between secular, liberal Jews and those families living in the Occupied Territories... About the contrast between the epidemic corruption of Yaser Arafat’s PLO and the intellectual rigour of Arab intellectuals.

But, it is restrictive and illusive to analyse the subject matter of *Via Dolorosa* just within its political background. Behind the pure and valuable social and political information that Hare shares with his audience, the play is exceptional with its thought-provoking and humanistic rhetoric on the notion of faith and the meaninglessness of life, especially in the West. In that sense, the paper particularly concentrates on what faith and fidelity mean for both Israelis and Palestinians. Therefore, this paper separates *Via Dolorosa* technically from the former non-fiction or documentary works of the playwright and focuses on its outstanding themes of faith and fidelity.

2. David Hare’s Political Stage and Revelations

David Hare has turned his face to the Middle East for fifteen years. The Middle East, in which Jerusalem, the most important religious city in the world for Christians, Muslims and Jews is located, has been a centre of attraction for a lot of playwrights. Dramatists do not regard their journeys to Jerusalem as merely pilgrimage journeys. They have travelled around the Middle East, as they consider that the holy land can powerfully form the most enchanting background of their art. It is known that, in the late twentieth century, the British Drama deals with a lot of controversial international political issues and interrogates them intensely for its audience. David Hare is among these playwrights who use socio-political conflicts about the land. For him, the Middle East constructs both one of the main sources of his international political drama and the global subject matters attached to these issues.

In this respect, David Hare was asked to pen a play which is thought to be dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the State of Israel in 1997. The International Department of Royal Court Theatre projected the play as a material telling the story of the British Mandate in the 1930s and 1940s in the Middle East. An Israeli and a Palestinian playwright also would assist Hare in writing the play according to the project details. However, *Via Dolorosa* emerges as a one-man demonstration, written and performed by the dramatist on his own and directed by Stephen Daldry after Hare's visits to the holy land in 1998. Thus, it is thought that the play is a diary or travelogue of the playwright, like the former plays that take the Middle East as their background of the subject matter, at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the playwright "seeks to add authority and weight to his account by positioning it within a broader literary/journalistic tradition" (Bar-Yosef 2007:264). In fact, Hare's ninety-minute solo-show not only includes the vivid literary and journalistic descriptions of the holy land, but it also includes his personal researches, observations, thoughts and feelings, compiled like a colourful and useful history lecture on the Middle East, with minimum British pedantry.

It is certain that David Hare's many plays reveal that he works like a journalist, historian and lecturer before he puts his ideas on the stage. There is a parallel dimension with his lectures given before the plays are ready for the stage. Similarly, there is a parallelism with the play and the raw material the playwright gave at Westminster Abbey, called *When Shall We Live?* It is also conceived that the play "emerges naturally from an earlier play about the Church of England, *Racing Demon*, about the bankruptcy of religious belief" (Gleick 1999), but *Via Dolorosa* is an original play both in text and performance, telling the old story of the polarised people living in the Middle East.

Via Dolorosa, a monologue play, is unconventional in its textual structure. Oliva (1990:163) notes that "Hare is an innovator willing to experiment with all the dramatic elements" in his theatre career. Many critics share the similar idea that the playwright likes to push the boundaries both in the frame of art and in the use of the theatrical material. In *Via Dolorosa*, Hare actually distracts his audience from both the basic and serious political clashes and from a kind of art form based on mathematical formulas. Thus, the play is defined as "the theatre without fiction, but much more In-Yer-Face" (Boireau 2003:34). In this respect, Hare "abandons theatrical representation almost entirely in *Via Dolorosa*" (Soto-Moretti 2005:314) unlike the offers of the traditional drama. *Via Dolorosa* has an odd construction, without an actual plot, any actors or actresses, dialogues, costumes and even any furniture, except for a chair of the playwright, because "with this particular subject matter, the artistic logic was so compelling" (Hare 1999:75). Although verbatim plays "rely wholly on others to provide the material" (Luckhurst 2008:215), *Via Dolorosa* is just full of quotations and indirect speeches of "a very few of many, many meetings" (Hare 1998:2) as the playwright says.

Through such methods Hare wishes to achieve maximum sense and simplicity which should clearly reflect the social, cultural, economical, political, moral and religious contradictions between Israeli and Palestinian Middle Easterners on his stage. However, he does not take a side or intend to evaluate the

political matters and the distortions within the two communities in such a stormy area. The play is internationally a new level for the playwright, because he mirrors both sides of the present argument in a dialectical way that demonstrates he always enjoys dialectic. Hare focuses that “to keep writing about the present day is the job” (Zeifman 1994:16) and argues that “a play is not comprised of the text or actors, nor of the opinions and ideological convictions of the playwright” (Megson and Rebellato 2007:240). According to him it “is what happens between the stage and the audience. The play is in the air” (Hare 1999:118).

Yet, the playwright receives negative criticism for being purely objective and sceptical on such a world-wide political issue. In his open letter to David Hare, Arnold Wesker (2003) criticizes the playwright for being “the genuine, troubled artist himself conducting and playing his own concerto with no distorting intermediary”. Although Hare enjoys turning his stage into a political arena, for him, it is a kind of insult to impose any ideological ideas on the audience.

3. The Faith and Fidelity in *Via Dolorosa*

At first sight, the playwright seems to be giving an objective lecture merely on the political dilemmas between the Israelis and the Palestinians. However, his main concern is to demonstrate to the audience how huge the diversity in the East and the West is in terms of religious faith. As all codes were discredited after the World War II, it is inevitable that the religious system was negatively affected by it as well. Thus, David Hare brings to forefront the view that the human being was lost spiritually after the war.

Having been brought up in an Anglo-Catholic school, the playwright is well aware of the spiritual part of the human nature. According to Hare, *Via Dolorosa* is the universal story of a Westerner “trying to understand two societies where belief is at the centre of the way of life. It is about the wrenching effects on a person apparently without faith meeting a whole lot of people who have only faith” (Hare 1999:7). As a result of diminishing the significance and the effects of the rules that religion, law, custom and moral determine, the individual loses all his values. In the background of the play, on the one hand there is the out-of-sight western world which is gradually corrupted politically, morally and religiously, and on the other hand, there is a world of two communities whose members are strictly bound to their beliefs in spite of huge inefficiencies, political problems and their fear of being killed everyday.

David Hare thinks that he has to be in Israel to meet those believers, because one of the subject matters he has been expressing through his quintessential drama is faith for a long time. He clarifies that “It’s only ten years later that I realize, almost without noticing, that for some time my subject as a playwright has been faith. My subject is belief. And so it comes to seem appropriate – no, more than that, it comes to seem urgent” (Hare 1998:6). Therefore, visiting the fifty-year-old Israel, the fifty-year-old British dramatist shows his main concern. In one of his interviews he declares that:

The metaphor of the play was not about Israel and Palestinian territory, it was about the contrast between lives of people in certain parts of the world for whom everything is at stake in every daily decision, as opposed to those who live in the West who face no such daily pressure, namely myself. (Hammond and Steward 2008:67-68)

David Hare also exhibits his main intentions on writing such an international play via the statement above. The playwright criticizes so called western man, his civilization and even himself negatively. He clarifies why he has visited Israel, making a charming distinction between the life in the West and the East:

People always say that in England we lead shallow lives. Our lives must be shallow because we live in a country where nobody believes in anything anymore. My whole life, I've been told: 'Western civilization? An old bitch gone in teeth.' And so people say, go to Israel. Because in Israel, they're fighting for something they believe in. (Hare 1998:4)

After explaining how he builds his own project, Hare points out that one of the main failures of the Middle East is that Arabs and Jews are not successful in living together in peace. David Hare's various plays can be regarded as the works which put a signature on modern political history. *Via Dolorosa* is one of these works; actually, it not only puts forward the historical and political conflicts between Israel and Palestine which go back to the first half of the twentieth century in the modern sense, but it is also a play which perpetually searches for the possible ways for people to share the holy land in concord. In that sense, throughout his play, the playwright does not increase the tension on the political issue; on the contrary, he tries to turn up the soft voices of both communities.

One of the soothing voices of the play belongs to his Jewish novelist friend David Grossman. Although David Hare was formerly misled by the idea that "Israelis are loud and argumentative" (Hare 1998:7), he realizes that Grossman is not such an extremist Israeli intellectual. Hare expresses his anxieties about whether Israel will "one day have to become a modern country, multicultural, like any other" (Hare 1998:7) or not. The playwright is aware that Israelis and Arabs have lived together for more than two thousand years on the holy land. However, it is a pity that they cannot succeed in sharing their cultures. Yet, for Grossman, there is always a lot of hope that they can live together peacefully. Many Israelis state that it is probably vital to worship in Jerusalem or in other holy places in Israel, but they do not need to own the Wailing Wall. The idea of owning any of the holy places is really conventionally "un-Jewish" (Hare 1998:7) according to Grossman.

Being a citizen of the modern world, Hare believes that all individuals should collaborate and try to establish harmonious relations because they have the right to live under equal circumstances. These are the requirements for an acceptable community system. Nevertheless, the playwright seems to picture a kind of desperate, gloomy but non-utopic world in *Via Dolorosa*. Depicting such a

dreary world, the playwright makes his audience ponder over the ways to get rid of the worldwide social problems.

In that sense, Hare mentions a cooperative theatrical play, which is a sample of a multicultural project, and reveals the hope that the conventional conflicts of the land may possibly be overwhelmed one day. In this project, a successful secular Israeli theatre director, Eran Baniel together with a marginal Palestinian playwright, George Ibrahim, produce a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the play, the Palestinians play the Capulets and the Jews play the Montagues. Thus, the play is not considered about love but about dislike. It is one of the little social projects indicating that there is always hope to become multicultural - for the future of two communities.

After the interview with Eran, the playwright spends the Sabbath in the Jewish settlement of Sheri Tikva one Friday afternoon. One of Hare's distinctive characteristics is his enthusiasm about the journalistic investigation on the holy land. He meets a Jewish couple, Danny and Sarah Weiss, to show them that there are many Jewish settlers that seem prosperous in Israel. The playwright shares their thoughts, discussing their religiously unshakeable life style in the West Bank. Hare gives details about Danny and wife's life back in Israel: "Years ago they tired of America as a place without any spiritual values, and where life is completely empty and meaningless" (Hare 1998:14). Danny makes a comparison between the Israeli and the American culture and attitude towards religion:

Memorial Day here is a day where we all get out of our cars, wherever we are, in the middle of the road and stand for two minutes remembering the dead. In the US it's a day when you have a mattress sale. Memorial Day Sale! Mattresses cheap! That's all it means. Here whether you were secular or religious, you wept that day when the Biblical land was returned. (Hare 1998:15)

David Hare deduces from Danny's words that life is dull and shallow in the West in the eye of an Easterner. It is clear that the symptoms of decadence and corruption in the western culture are not new. According to Danny's story, there is always a spiritually absurd and dull life in the USA. Hare believes that the religious system is declining in the West because many people can no longer make any honest sense of it. Thus, the playwright practically points out how the couple is fed up with that empty and materialistic American world and wishes to go on living on the holy land, henceforth.

As Hare "carefully contrasts and orchestrates the individual voices to create a vivid mosaic of people with strong beliefs" (Pavelkova 2010:34), he has to drive from Israel into the Gaza strip to conduct an interview with some Palestinians. Hare expresses his despair at the journey with the words that "nothing prepares you for the physical shock of the passage" (Hare 1998:24) and gives the details of this passage:

[It] is like moving from California into Bangladesh. You become so used to the broad highways and the easy sensuality of Israel that it is the sight of dust, sudden

dust, an unholy big brown storm of pure dirt, nothing else, which alerts you to the fact that you are about to enter a society where people earn precisely eight per cent of what their opposite numbers earn in Israel. (Hare 1998:24)

Putting forward the difficulties of being a Palestinian in the Middle East, the playwright tries to show what strong belief, patriotism and courage Palestinians have in spite of their rigid and unequal life conditions, in comparison with those on the other side of the holy land. The statement above also demonstrates Hare's extraordinary ability to form the background of his plays as both a social theorist and a political theatre master. He defines a political writer as "one who is likely to have an analysis as well as a view" (Fielding 2009:371), with a story including his purposes.

Being aware of the religious importance of the land, the playwright aims at telling about the historical and religious background of the Middle East. He reveals the views of a Palestinian historian, Albert Aghazerin, according to whom "in some terrible way [they are] both bound up in each other's unhappiness. [They] cannot be separated." (Hare 1998:31) Beyond the existing chaos in the area, Hare considers that the main problems of the land originated in the history of the human being:

I'm happy in Ramallah, it's less desperate, less disturbing than Gaza, but every night I travel back to Jerusalem, where not only half of the world's religions started but also – hardly by coincidence – where the world first started collecting crime statistics. Yes, Crime Number One. Cain killed Abel. It happened in Jerusalem. And ever since, the story is of massacre and of bloodshed. (Hare 1998:35)

It is clear that to survive in the Middle East has always been hard and fearful throughout the history. *Via Dolorosa* reflects the tragic and well-known story of the vigorous people who live in the Middle East. The people of two communities have strong aims to achieve, connected to what they believe in; they mean to stick to their principles throughout their lives. On the one hand, the Israelis, who were offered the holy land as an alternative to Uganda after the war, have owned the land thus far. On the other hand, the Palestinians "are willing to die for their beliefs," (Hare 2005:215) and for the holy land as well.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the play, Hare cannot hide his bewilderment at the motivation of the people who have strong beliefs to live on the same land. He implies that both Israelis and Palestinians have much more spiritual power than the western man. The playwright questions the western materialistic ideas, principles and faith, saying that "most of us, indeed, do have little idea of what we believe, and are also extremely confused on the subject of whether we would be willing to die for it" (Hare 2005:215). The playwright clarifies that "although you might feel the question of God's nature and existence *ought* to be obsessively important to each

and every one of us, the simple fact of the modern world is that it is not felt to be” (Hare 2005:216).

For Hare, the case is very different in the Middle East. He refers to the power of the religious feelings on the holy land, quoting from a Jewish poet, Yehudah Amichai: “The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams. It’s hard to breath” (Hare 1998:36). Though the playwright is aware that there is a certain amount of deterioration of the religious architecture in Jerusalem, he clearly indicates that it is meaningless to establish a parallelism with the stones and the air of belief in Jerusalem:

Nobody knows where the city walls were. Nobody agrees. Where was Calvary indeed? So for now – look, is anything certain? – let’s just do as the family next to me and drop alarmingly to our knees, on the working assumption – let’s just *assume* – X Marks the spot, and kiss the Stone. After all, does the literal truth of it matter? Does the literal truth matter? Aren’t we kissing an idea? Stones or ideas? Stones or ideas? (Hare 1998:37)

David Hare’s voyage ends in his returning home, feeling that most Israelis and Palestinians really ‘kiss’ ideas not stones, although his play “celebrates belief, even if no agreement is in sight on what belief is the one true faith” (Kuchwara 1999). According to Billington (1998), Hare overtly “shows he has been changed by his Middle Eastern experience” - most probably a type of intellectual enlightenment. While most Britons find themselves in mental emptiness, without any value system, David Hare cannot hide his excitement at the struggle of faith of those Israelis and Palestinians throughout his play. According to the playwright, the play is a “successful witness to the complexity of the hopes and beliefs of so many individuals who meanwhile wish to be allowed to get on with their lives” (Hare 2005:200).

Like a social analyst, the playwright, always stresses that his plays “argue that the main reform needed is moral; at present, people know that they are damaging themselves by their behaviour, and need to change” (Kerensky 1977:185). Therefore, *Via Dolorosa*, the little memory of the Middle East, is basically a piece of fascinating criticism of the western man who loses his faith. It is also a form of moral discourse, a play demonstrating the meaningless of life to its audience, asking them what they live for.

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