

# Theater

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VIA DOLOROSA

by David Hare

2.5 MINUTE RIDE

by Lisa Kron

**A**utobiographical solo shows are as various as the people who perform them, but in one way they're all alike: The subjects under discussion—the travels, adventures, memories or stories—are really secondary to the manner in which the performer is implicated in them. One can imagine, for instance, that Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* attracted a few naive spectators curious about the Far East, but even they surely understood soon enough that Gray's "swimming"—his process of thinking and coping with his experiences—was much more important than his destinations. Similarly, Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*, which was constructed from interviews concerning the Crown Heights riots, was powerful in performance not primarily because of the "fires" per se—the documentary information about Brooklyn—but because of "the mirror": Smith's extraordinarily revealing impressions of her interviewees. Information for its own sake is best gleaned in the lecture hall, or on the page; in the theater we want to know the relationship of the teller to the tale.

Nothing in recent memory has driven this point more effectively home for me than the difference between two solo shows opened recently in New York. David Hare's *Via Dolorosa* and Lisa Kron's *2.5 Minute Ride*. Both these pieces deal with Judaism, both are based on travels by the author-performers and both are honest, insightful and witty. As it happens, though, *2.5 Minute Ride*, which contains the more personal material, is vastly more powerful, not merely because of Kron's confidence and talent as a performer (*Via Dolorosa* is the 51-year-old Hare's professional stage debut whereas Kron has been a celebrated comic actor for many years, both as part of the Five Lesbian Brothers and on her own), but also because of her pervasive awareness that she is the piece's real subject. Hare—currently the most bankable West End playwright, with three plays on Broadway this season—talks frequently about having such awareness, but for all his self-consciousness and seasoned experience, he never proves he truly understands what's at stake. No one should ever leave a theater piece wondering why its author didn't just publish it as an essay.

*Via Dolorosa* is drawn from Hare's experiences during a trip to Israel in 1997. According to the program, he was originally commissioned to write about the period of British Mandate rule but found after arriving that "he was more interested to write a play which would inform Western audiences about the current situation in the region." The resulting 90-minute monologue thus strings together pieces of conversation with people he met on his trip, touring through the views of a fascinating array of figures from Israeli and Palestinian artists and politicians to West Bank settlers to "handlers" from the British Council to an interpreter and a border guard. Directed by Stephen Daldry on a set designed by Ian MacNeil (the pair that did *An Inspector Calls* in London and New York), Hare performs on a platform of raw planks whose upstage edge drops off into a large pit spanned by a narrow bridge; the implied danger and earthiness of this environment is undercut by smart little tables with chairs and water glasses to either side.

Dressed in neat black slacks and a plain white shirt that seem to make him uncomfortable, he mentions his excitement at traveling from the West where "nobody believes in anything anymore" to a place where people fight for their beliefs ("I realize...that for some time my subject as a playwright has been faith"). Then he repeatedly emphasizes his own "ignorance" and "clumsiness" while describing a journey in which he principally learned that what he'd always presumed was a conflict between Arabs and Israelis was more fundamentally a set of internal conflicts between different sorts of Israelis and different sorts of Arabs. This is the work's main content, and though it will not be news to anyone with even modest knowledge of the issues, I have no doubt that innumerable New Yorkers are precisely as ignorant as Hare was to begin with, and for that reason alone the piece has documentary value.

Hare quotes the director Eran Danel, for instance, codirector of a notorious *Romeo and Juliet* in which Palestinians played the Capulets and Jews played the Montagues, on the "un-Jewish" and "obscene" spectacle of water allocation in the territories: "Israelis sitting by their swimming pools while Palestinians carry their

drinking water round in jerry cans." Then he quotes Americans living as settlers, who speak darkly of government conspiracies and blame Rabin for his own assassination: "Hey, why didn't he just buy himself a cross and put himself on it?" The popular Gaza politician Haider Abdel Shafi, who mistakes Hare for the journalist David Hirst, is quoted frankly on the issue of corruption in the Palestinian leadership: "Hundreds of millions of dollars have simply disappeared... Our most urgent task is to reform ourselves." But Hare is less successful at locating an equally broad range of Palestinian opinion, ultimately letting the words of a British government adviser hang heavily in the air: "If the Israelis were really clever, they would give the Palestinians every inch of land they want, and then stand by and watch them fuck it up."

One doesn't expect perfect fairness, however. One expects real and substantial self-awareness on the part of the observing character, and that's just what Hare fails to achieve in the end. His self-revelations concerning "faith" and "homeland" are few, shallow and inscrutably detached: a remark by an Israeli novelist that the air near Hare's home in Hampstead makes him "happy," for instance; a laugh by a girl at Gatwick airport upon learning Hare's destination is Tel Aviv; and the cheesy discovery of a scale model of the Dome of the Rock

upstage as he tells of feeling a "sense of loss" while walking Christ's Via Dolorosa because Christianity is a mere "sideshow" in Jerusalem. Still more important, though, the consequence of his amateurish acting is that one never fully forgives him his "ignorance" and "clumsiness" in the name of self-discovery, as he obviously intends. His shockingly wooden gestures, badly strained voice and utter inability to characterize the people he quotes homogenize the show's emotions and make one wonder on what level he is aware that he occasionally comes off as, say, a colonialist snob (mocking a settler's ignorance of Trevor Nunn, for instance), an egotist (scoffing at a woman's ignorance that he wrote *Plenty*) and a phrasemaker ("Myself, I would like Jerusalem more if it were less important").

Lisa Kron, for her part, makes clear within the first 2.5 minutes of *2.5 Minute Ride* that she devoted long hours to finding and owning up to every unflattering implication about herself in her text and rooting out the real reasons she wanted others to know her story, with the result that her audience comes to trust her enormously and looks for flattering implications that may or may not even be explicitly there. As a Jewish American lesbian comedian, of course, Kron is naturally less susceptible than Hare to misguided notions of British understatement and reserve, but the irony is that what often looks like relaxed casualness in her performance is clearly the product of a strict discipline of which he seems incapable.

Directed by the shrewd Mark Brokaw on a bare stage with an upstage scrim, a chair and a stool with a water glass, *2.5 Minute Ride* begins as a slide show in which all the slides are blank. Kron enters dressed in a comfortably loose brown shirt and pants, and begins indicating details in the "pictures" with a laser point-

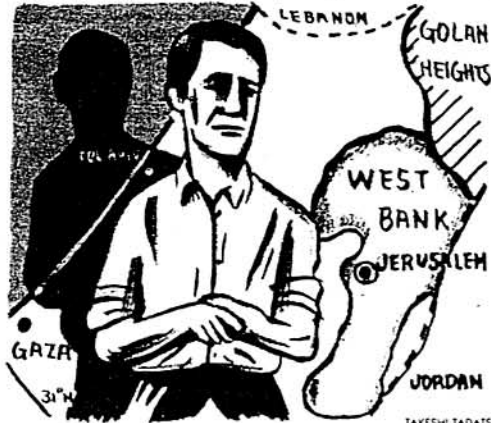
er: "These are my grandparents. My father's parents. This, as you can see, is their wedding picture. I never knew them, of course." For the next 70 minutes, Kron describes an elaborate attempt to come to know her aging father—"hold his world in my head," as she puts it at one point—by switching back and forth between stories about her brother's wedding in Canarsie, her family's annual trip to Cedar Point amusement park in Ohio and her trip with her father to Auschwitz, where his parents were murdered. The ride referred to in the title is, on the literal level, a roller coaster with a terrifying three-story drop that her father ("a 74-year-old, blind, diabetic Holocaust survivor with a heart condition") insists on trying out with her.

The blank slides are a marvelously amusing means of engaging the audience's imagination quickly and deeply, and Kron's impeccable comic timing draws big laughs from dumb gags (judging someone's character based on facial features the audience can't see, for instance). The piece is never dependent on such gags, though, because Kron's observations about the people and places in her life are funny and penetrating and her delivery makes ostensibly mundane details about, say, family members' cars and eating habits as compelling as the visit to Auschwitz, or her father's unforgettable (and possibly untrue—since it's hard to see how he would have been old enough) confession of empathy with a Nazi he interrogated when he was in the army during the war. ("There is no food in Poland. Well, maybe there is but they keep it a secret." "Health food in the Midwest is anything in a pita. Like a Big Mac in a pita would be considered health food in the Midwest.") This delivery—Kron's poise and timing while admitting to a longing for a mall in the middle of Eastern Europe, or her pauses and self-interruptions before admitting that "the sad truth is that my family comes to Cedar Point for the food," or her superb impressions—this is the skill and coloration that generates the trust I spoke of before.

Kron is rivetingly present-tense, pulling you right in to the whirl of emotion behind her literal and figurative "ride": The amusing terror that can be borne juxtaposed with the unamusing terror that can't be. One could say that the standing question in *2.5 Minute Ride* has to do with the occasion for the "family news event" that frames it, and Kron offers an answer of sorts by suggesting she has lately been fulfilling a long-standing promise to make a video about her father (her mother having refused to be photographed for 30 years). The point is, the show is a recording of a possibly failed recording process, conceived on the one hand as a bulwark against the losses of memory (the experiences of the father she knows, who will soon be gone) and on the other as a net cast for memories never formed whose absence she struggles to accept (the experiences of the grandparents she never knew). Her triumph in the end is to have us eagerly filling in her slides.

*Via Dolorosa*, the Booth Theater, 222 W. 45th St.  
(betw. B'way & 8th Ave.), 239-6200.

*2.5 Minute Ride*, the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St.  
(betw. E. 4th St. & Astor Pl.), 239-6200.



Hare, as a performer, can't pull it off.