

قصاصة من صحيفة الغارديان، "أشباح الحرب"، ١٩٨٨/٤/١

كفر شما" لمسرح "قصاصة من جريدة الجارديان تتضمن مقال عن مسرحية الحكواتي في صحيفة الجارديان.

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Michael Billington is won over by a fable of wandering Palestinians at the Almeida

Ghosts of war

EL-HAKAWATI, the 11-year-old Palestinian theatre group which now has its centre in East Jerusalem, is back at the Almeida after a two-year gap with The Story of the Eye and the Youth. The group, which since its birth in 1976 has been a mix of Palestinian and English, has been on a quest and an exploration of its own identity and its role in the world. I found it took some getting into but its colour, charm and imaginative use of simple resources won me over. I was reminded periodically of Peter Brook's The Conference of the Birds. That dealt with a group of birds journeying through deserts and valleys in search of their true king only to be confronted at the last by their own reflections. Here we see Waleed returning to the mythical Palestinian village of Kufur Shamra, after getting his BA at Cairo University, only to find that the buildings have been razed and the population has fled in the wake of the 1948 war.

So, accompanied by a none-too-hot foot, he sets out on an epic quest in search of survivors. In the course of a 40-year journey the two men acquire many followers, including a young freedom-fighter and a middle-aged matchmaker and travel through deserts, canyons and refugee-camps. They eventually find the strains of

what sounds like Bernard Herrmann's score for Psycho) wind up in Massachusetts where an assimilated Palestinian family dreams of reclaiming Kufur Shamra and making it a model city.

But Waleed learns that reality can be as powerful as a dream and finally returns, with five devoted followers, to the ghost-village vowing to tell the story of his people.

Back home the show apparently ran for six hours at the Almeida it lasts just short of three. But it is clearly intended as a panoramic Palestinian history and a plea to local audiences to rebuild the future without disowning the past.

What is most surprising about El-Hakawati, however, is their lack of political rancour. They skirt over the circumstances surrounding the Arab exodus of 1948 (including both a fearful massacre by the Zionists and the riotous of the Arab League Secretary General), make no political capital out of current tensions and, in fact, end with a plea not to fight but to remember. As in their last show, The Story of the Eye and the Youth, they emerge as a liberal troupe out of love with all forms of military extremism.

Obviously some of the show's resonance is lost on an English audience that has never known occupation or exile. But there is

a lot to enjoy in the way the company tell the story and turn what is known as "poor theatre" to inventive advantage. They evoke a working quarry through the clashing of rocks, the beating of a drum, the sound of a hammer on a chisel. Villages come to life through birds and chickens suspended on rods and through the sight of veiled women rhythmically sewing. And to suggest aerial strutting all they need is a giant raffia-pole that describes a large semi-circular arc. Even music — the dread curse of art-theatre — here takes on a practical function enabling the six actors to play a multiplicity of roles.

In the production by Francois Abu Salem (joint author with Jackie Luback) everything is kept simple, proving yet again that an ounce of imagination is worth a ton of spectacle. And although the acting is unassessable, Waleed El-Hakawati plays Waleed with such dignity and Amar Khalil (looking like a slimmer Pavarotti) is regally likable as the exiled foot. Cloned palates may find it homely fare, but El-Hakawati emerges as a talented troupe with a strong pictorial sense and an important story to tell.

• The Story of Kufur Shamra plays at the Almeida Theatre, Jolington (01-539-4456) until April 26.



Village voices: Jackie Luback and Iman Aoun

PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS ALFORD