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١٩٨٨/٤/١ قصاصة من صحيفة الإندبندنت، "الحكاية الهائمة"،

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

THEATRE / Drama of dispossession from the West Bank. Plus Paul Robeson sings

The Story Of Kufur Shamma is a kind of Palestinian *Roots*. Performed by the El-Hakawati Theatre Group from the West Bank, it's a drama — put together by Jackie Lubeck and FrancXois Abu Salem — about dispossessed people trying to get back to their origins. When it opens, its hero and narrator, Walid — engagingly played by Nabil El-Hajjar — has just returned, after years of wandering, to his native village, Kufur Shamma, only to find it razed to the ground. In an attempt to reconstruct his past and keep it alive, he tells — and enacts with five companions — the history of the place and its inhabitants from 1948 to the present day.

Devised for performance in villages and refugee camps, the play mixes folk drama, burlesque, parables and pantomime. Costumes and plots are thrifty but used imaginatively. Black sheets sombrely rise to become refugee tents. White veiling settles over the rubble of the devastated Kufur Shamma like years of dust. In particular, it's noticeable, this nomadic theatre makes far more frequent and inventive use of the stage floor than is usual here. Turning a desert into a rich man's house, sand is kicked and brushed

The wandering storyline

**El-Hakawati
Almeida Theatre
Peter Kemp**

aside to reveal elegant tiles. Rugs convert a wasteland into a seductive bedroom.

Performed in a mixture of English and Arabic, it uses captions projected onto sidescreens to elucidate the latter. Often, though, these summaries are scarcely less mystifying than the guttural and fricative dialogues they're supposedly explaining. And the play's habit of abruptly changing direction make it difficult, at times, even to guess what's going on.

Its story starts with the departure of Walid, brother of the village chieftain, to study in Cairo. Typically, though considerable at-

tention is focused on the poetry-writing fiancée he is leaving behind, she almost immediately disappears into one of the many crevasses in the play's narrative and is never seen again. Interest switches to Walid's brother — whose hookah-pipe-puffing regime is first genially spoofed, then suddenly truncated by a bewildering stabbing.

After Walid comes back with his BA to discover Kufur Shamma is a ghost town, the play seems to settle on course as the story of his search, though devastated territories and refugee camps, for survivors. But even this direction isn't maintained steadily. Continually, the storyline gets sidetracked into interludes of jovial buffoonery or anecdotes that seem to have little connection with Walid's quest.

Via a confused shooting episode in Kuwait, the play eventually sprawls its way across the Atlantic to Massachusetts for a sequence wryly mocking Palestinian emigrés: as Frank Sinatra croons "Yesterday" in the background, a bunch of awkwardly Americanised former inhabitants of Kufur Shamma briefly relax into swooping nicknames and stories about their village, but recoil in panic from the idea of returning. After a scene in which its six central characters manage to regain admittance to their homeland on fake passports as Greek pilgrims — one of the surprisingly few episodes in this drama to quiver with political tension — the play ends, as it began, on the site of the vanished village.

In a way, perhaps, there's an aptness in drama about dislocated people being itself a sometimes disorientating experience. But it seems a pity that the author haven't given the El-Hakawati cast — who show unflagging energy and resourcefulness throughout the play's meanderings — a more purposeful path to follow.

Continues at the Almeida (01 359 1666) until 16 April

