

## What's it all about?

by Francis Clark-Lowes

Reviewing a review of a play I haven't seen is an uncertain business, but I can't let Lyn Gardner's nauseating piece on the Israeli entry to the London International Festival of Theatre, *Va Yomer, Va Yelech (He Said. He Walked)* (*Guardian*, 24 June, G2 10-11) pass without comment.

Gardner writes eulogistically: 'Three-and-a-half hours based entirely on the first five books of the Old Testament might sound more penance than pleasure. But this daring enterprise rivets the eye and the ear from start to finish.' We recognise an action-packed *genre* which leaves little time for critical thought about the message. Gardner soon confirms our suspicions: 'During the performance it suddenly dawns that while these people may be speaking millenia-old text, they are telling their own stories. We are witnessing the children of Israel in transit on their way to the Promised Land.' The list in Genesis of the ten generations from Adam to Noah naturally becomes a list of Jewish victims of the Nazis.

Not surprisingly, a common feature of such Israeli productions is an assumption that what has happened in Palestine is, at least on balance, 'right'. This is often coupled with an emphasis on intra-Jewish diversity as if this exonerated Israelis from the accusation of prejudice towards non-Jews. Rina Yerushalmi, the director argues: 'The whole culture of Israel is based on argument. I wanted this piece to create a sense that there is no right or wrong, to get away from the drama of conflict and the idea that only one person on stage could be right.' If you are not even on stage, however, you'll presumably miss even a slice of 'right'.

Admittedly Gardner is aware that 'the ending - God's exhortation to Abraham to "get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house unto a land that I will show thee: and I will make thee a great nation" - sounds suspiciously like a justification of Israeli actions against the Palestinians.' But she avoids being branded an 'anti-Semite' by allowing Yerushalmi, quite predictably, to deny the charge and speak soothingly of 'the ongoing, cyclical nature of this 3,000-year old story'. While admitting the current inequality of Arabs and Israelis (read 'non-Jews' and 'Jews') the director links this with her justification for the 'agonising' decision to exclude 'Arab' performers: 'if you are going to a family consultation about a problem, you can't take the neighbour along.'

But Surely you cannot both say that the play is about private family problems and then invite a non-Jewish audience to watch it. And in any case, if it is family problem shouldn't we at least include the Palestinian Israelis (not to speak of all the Semites). No, it simply would have been too embarrassing to have had (non-Jewish) Arab actors. And what about this convenient idea of the unchanging nature of history and the absence of right and wrong? Are, then, the Germans to be absolved from guilt for their recent crimes or, for that matter, the Arabs for their involvement in a vicious slave trade?

The problem is that both Yerushalmi and Gardner are unconsciously locked into a rhetoric which is cleverly sculpted to deflect all criticism, not least by admitting in a throw-

away line or two the very arguments you wish to bring against them. I'll be returning to this subject!