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Festival Review

Entertainment from the front line

Iris Bahr was an Israeli agent. Now she spies a different way forward, she tells *Jackie McGlone*

WHO IS Iris Bahr and what is she? Not so much a puzzle as a mysterious enigma, because the slender, sloe-eyed woman I'm breakfasting with has many faces.

Los Angeles-based Bahr - she's somewhere in her thirties, but refuses to say where exactly - has been a sergeant in the Israeli army and worked for Israeli intelligence. After studying neuropsychology and religion at Brown University, she's become a stand-up comic, clown, and stage and screen performer, appearing in American TV shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Friends* and *The Drew Carey Show*.

In the final series of *Star Trek Voyager*, she had a two-line role and became a cult - there are websites dedicated to Bahr, who wrote a memoir about, among many other things, her attempts to lose her virginity. And she writes solo shows for herself. Her latest, *Dai* (Hebrew for enough), is at the Fringe, after an unprecedented open-ended run at New York's Culture Project and a performance at the United Nations.

Set in a cafe in Tel Aviv, *Dai* has Bahr playing nine characters, all of whom become victims of terrorism. The men and women she plays so skilfully, with emotional depth and physical grace, range from a young American in the Israeli army to an Israeli expatriate living in Manhattan, a young Russian prostitute, a Palestinian professor and a snooty British reporter "exploring the Israeli plight". Each becomes the victim of suicide bombers.

Bahr's views on the bloody situation in the Middle East are mixed. She says: "I'm full of conflicted opinions and emotions that encompass not only Israeli specific issues of national and religious identity, Zionism and post-Zionism, but the fact that our very legitimacy and existence as a nation is constantly questioned and under threat. Then there are issues that plague all of us as human beings - those of love, loss, family, heartbreak.

"What I hope *Dai* shares with audiences is the human manifestation of the splintered Israeli psyche as I've come to know it and live it, as embodied by the vast spectrum of people and beliefs that



make up Israeli society and its critics. I hope their stories will entertain, illuminate and humanise - and, of course, every character has a piece of me in them."

Born in the Bronx, she grew up in Israel. She was 12 years old when she moved there with her mother after her parents divorced - clues are dropped in her memoir, *Dork Whore: My Travels Through Asia As A Twenty-Year-Old Pseudo-Virgin*, that the break-up involved a mistress and was not pleasant.

Bahr stayed until she had completed her two-year military service. "Intelli-

gence - can't really tell you any more about it," she whispers, adding that it involved some boring office work rather than the adrenalin of frontline action.

On her "release", she backpacked through Asia for six months then studied neuropsychology at university. Acting was a natural progression from lab experiments, she says. So she began studying at the Actors Centre Conservatory in New York. On her way to her clown class one day, she was hit by a truck and knocked off her bicycle. While recovering from her injuries in hospital, she plotted her move to LA, where she's been acting as well as directing short films. All this and nationwide tours as a stand-up too.

Bahr hopes *Dai* is a serious contribution to the debate about the situation in the Middle East, insisting that she's not one of those people who hungers to discuss politics since, in her experience, such discussions invariably turn into slanging matches between people whose minds are already made up, "especially in LA".

"Listening is non-existent, food is flung and historical facts are tossed about like ego-filled 'I'm right!' confetti. The minute people hear I'm Israeli, I'm immediately barraged with accusations regarding human rights abuses, land grabbing and aggression. However, the liberal-minded artist in me exudes compassion over the Palestinian plight, objectively criticising my country's policies and occupation," she says.

"Then the loyal Israeli in me points out the world's double standards of judgment regarding Israel's conduct, our extremely cautious military and our legitimate unwillingness to engage in peace talks with people who want to see us obliterated.

"Usually, though, I try to change the subject to something much more fascinating, such as my highly lauded performances. But then I'm usually forced to return to the 'discussion' at hand, hoping that this time the food will stay on the plates." ♦

Dai (Enough), Pleasance Courtyard, until August 27, 4pm

www.pleasance.co.uk