

**Irish Playwright Marina Carr on Theatre, Myth, War and Palestine:
An Interview**

Rania Khalil *

This online interview with award-winning Irish playwright Marina Carr, was held from Cairo on May 28, 2024. The date resonates with the timing of Ireland, Norway, and Spain formally acknowledging Palestine as a state. Ireland has a history of suffering under occupation and the memory of the war and bloodshed remain to this day. In this interview, Carr shares her thoughts about Ireland, Palestine, myths and art in relation to her work and the war in the Arab region and Gaza. As an Irish citizen, Carr comments on what the formal acknowledgement of Palestine as a state means to her and what that has meant for Ireland as a young Republic. She contests with the idea of the artist as a change maker amidst global crisis and shares her thoughts on the unimaginable violence that human history has witnessed over the centuries and continues to witness to this day. As a playwright, Carr is acclaimed for her mastery in writing about tragedy; her version of *Hecuba*, has been described as an honest portrayal of war. The play originally written by Euripides, resonates with the current horrors of the war on Gaza. Marina Carr introduces herself as playwright, a mother of four children, and a wife. Carr is also an academic who teaches at Dublin City University in Ireland. She has won multiple awards which include the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Macaulay Fellowship, the E.M. Forster Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Windham Campbell Prize.

RANIA: Congratulations on your newest play *Audrey or Sorrow*. What inspired you to write the play?

MARINA: Writing is in me; I write all the time, before I sleep, when I wake up, after a swim, on holiday before lunch, after dinner. I write what I experience in the world around me and sometimes what I write is so dark because the world we live in is dark; it comes out through me. How did you hear about my play in Egypt?

RANIA: Technology plays a tremendous role in connecting the world; so, I heard about the astounding success of your play from digital media.

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RANIA: You being Irish, it is not possible for me not to pass this question on to you at this critical time in world affairs: Ireland has announced that it will formally acknowledge Palestine as a state today, 28th May 2024; what does that mean to you as an Irish citizen?

MARINA: It means an awful lot! I am very proud of our government for doing the right thing; for standing up for the Palestinians because they are really suffering. Recognizing them is incredibly important. The Irish know exactly what that means. Ireland is a young Republic; and our recognition meant so much to us in terms of identity and shaping our own future, our land, our laws, or culture. These are crucial things that influence who we are as individuals and our place in the world. So, for that to be in dispute and for that to be threatened is horrific. We, the Irish, have a very traumatic colonial past as you are aware; and that is in our DNA; we carry that. So, we particularly feel what the Palestinians are going through! You feel complacent in watching this as you watch the children suffer when they have done nothing. I don't want to get emotional! The suffering I cannot speak about; I am not there! But I cannot imagine how they can breathe! How they can stand-up...what it is even like amidst the silence of most of the world! It is shocking to me!... the lies they have been told, the jostling of power, the subverting of the narratives! But then you look at the history of the world, you realize that our history is all about invasions; we have been invaded; *lebor gabála éirenn* (The Book of Invasions) is our history! Human history is about war, appropriation of territories; it is about savagery, the taking of the land! Unfortunately, it seems everybody gets their turn; that is not to justify what is happening presently; it doesn't make it easier for the people who are suffering.

RANIA: As an award-winning playwright who has managed to capture the attention of audiences beyond the borders of Ireland and Europe, how do you see the role of the artist in relation to world affairs?

MARINA: Mmmm, powerless to be honest. I don't see how artists figure in world affairs! Our funding is cut to ribbons! I don't think we are at the table! Art and our cultural institutes, the galleries, the museums, the theatres are important for one's identity. How they influence world affairs, I don't know. I do know their absence impacts negatively; because one of the tools of war is to destroy the culture of the people, their art, their galleries, the things that they are proud of, so they must have some value. But the living artist, I don't think we have any sway whatsoever. We are laughable compared to those power mongers; we don't matter.

RANIA: Crisis and war bring with them suffering and survival; as a playwright, how have you dealt with these experiences by depicting them in a number of your works?

MARINA: Well, *Hecuba* is one of the plays; it is a play about war. Its inspiration comes from Euripides' *Hecuba*. I always felt that in his play Hecuba as a queen has been given a fairly shoddy treatment. So, I try to redeem that by depicting what it

must have been like for her to lose her husband and her children who are sacrificed at the altar and killed by the enemy amidst a war. I imagine, of course! How can I know! I can only imagine. I wanted to present a more complex image of this Mythic queen. I wanted to portray the war through her lens and the lens of the other women as well. It is a portrayal of what she was and what is left, *what is left* after everything that has been taken.

RANIA: How do you see your version of the play, *Hecuba*, in relation to the current events in the region, and the war on Gaza?

MARINA: Well in a sense, (it's) the level of savagery in the war, the Trojan War. Hecuba in the play says this is not war! In war there are rules; this is genocide, a wiping out of a nation, a termination of a civilization. How do I see war? Well, it is a jostling for power. In war, those who have a seat at the table, they all know each other. There are conversations in back rooms; they are trading, trading us so to speak. They have no consideration for the lives of the women or children; but you can be sure that they have consideration for their own lives. It is a chessboard; I will give you this if you give me that. I won't invade here, if you don't invade there, which leads to a pack of lies.

I am not a politician, I am not a historian, and I am not an expert on current affairs. So, what I have to say comes from a simple woman observer who reads newspapers or watches a bit of the news. I find it difficult to believe the words that come out of anyone's mouth right now! There are lies everywhere; we are just saturated with lies and double speak and double take.

RANIA: When we look at Hecuba as a character, she is a woman who defies many challenges, and perhaps brings to mind the parallels between her and the Palestinian woman who has lost her son, her children, and her family. You have said, and correct me if I am wrong, that "history is written by the winners".

MARINA: Well, that is a well-known phrase, isn't it? My point was history, yes, written by the winners; but I think myths are too. If you look at the Greek myths, I think we are living that out, the male aggression; they reflect the ideals of a male dominated society, the ideals of truth and beauty.

RANIA: In the past, historians documented history and it was in favor of the winners; but in the digital age where history is documented live with footage giving prominence and voice to the oppressed, who is the winner now?

MARINA: Well certainly not the oppressed! If they were the winners, they would not be in the situation they are in. Yes, we have a visual record; we have an oral record; but we have had that before and it didn't change; it didn't change how people

thought or behaved. We have been doing war for a long time. It seems it is in us; this hyper-aggression is in us, in our blood; and I don't know what would eradicate it. I find this whole thing incredibly confusing!! I don't do any of that social media! I don't know really how to answer this question!

RANIA: Well, what if I told you that citizens here in the region believe that technology has given them an advantage over the oppressor. Yes, they are still suffering; but the world is changing against those who are oppressing the Palestinians. We saw at the Cannes Festival women walking down the red carpet using their bodies clothed in the Palestinian flag to show solidarity and support. So, from the perspective of the Middle Eastern, technology has had a tremendous impact on subverting the myths, deconstructing the lies, and opening the eyes of the international community at the atrocities which have been left unspoken about for 75 years of occupation.

MARINA: Yes, that is interesting. Yes, it is documenting history; but it is not making any difference! The oppressor is still oppressing! The politics are not being altered, really. Ireland, Spain, and Norway! That is all! It is shocking to me!! I can't imagine what it must be like living with the silence of the world. Nothing has changed!! They are in Rafah! They are still there, unless something has happened as we speak that I have not read about! Actually, I think we are saturated with the digital world. We have been desensitized; every time you open the newspaper, watch the news, there is a war zone! It is the same narrative; the pictures are almost the same, just a different part of the world. It is the same thing; someone wants the territory; someone wants the oil, and the rest of us will watch and say "that is terrible, that is awful!" Nothing is going to change; the stronger will beat down the weaker. They will move on, and it will happen again. Yes, you can wear your dress down the red carpet; yes, you can document it; but it is something so ancient in our nature! That is what has to change!

RANIA: You include myths in your work; what do you think is the role of myths in knowledge production?

MARINA: I know that I love myths; they are a part of us too since time began. They are stories that describe what it is to be human, I suppose. One other thing I love about myths is the different versions. Myths have different versions; they can contradict the same story with three different endings; you can choose one ending over another. They are touch stones for all of us. Myths help us understand what it is we are feeling or thinking.

RANIA: What about the imagination and its impact on the spectator? For example, *Hecuba* has at this time come to the forefront in the mind of many scholars here in Egypt and they have associated it with the war in Gaza. How do you see the role of imagination in relation to the spectator and your version of the play *Hecuba* with the current events of war in Gaza as we see a whole nation being wiped out?

MARINA: At the time when I wrote *Hecuba*, the commentary about it was how it identified with the war in Syria; but it wasn't about Syria; it was about Troy. But there is something universal, a war situation. The same things happen: the young men are the first to suffer, next are the children, and then third are the women; and then it is everyone else. Because the war in Troy is like a blueprint, it is easy to say the play is about Syria, or about Ukraine, or about Gaza, which was never my intention obviously; I can't tell the future. These are tropes, and things that happen in war.

RANIA: Well, you have already said you cannot tell the future, but I will still ask you this: How do you imagine the future as an artist, as a playwright, who often critiques society?

MARINA: I think there is a lot of fear, a lot of suffering in the world right now. I think the digital age has increased their capacity of immediate cruelty to one another. There is this urge to criticize, this urge to not listen, this urge to state one's opinion strongly and not to care or consider its opposite. So, I have no idea about the future; but it is worrying, but was it not ever thus?!

RANIA: If we go back to colonialism and imperialism, how do you see them falling at the juncture of the mythical and the real?

MARINA: Well, these myths are very hierarchical and there is a pecking order in their stories. There are the kings and the queens; and then there are the slaves. Then, there are those who are given more precedence than others, and more respect. It is a really broad question, I really don't know how to answer that, sorry.

RANIA: When you have to depict suffering in your work, do you experience a blur between the real and the imagined?

MARINA: It's all real to me. When you are writing, it's all very real. Of course when you are writing you are making up the character, but in the imagination they are real. They live; they breathe; if you get it in anyway right, they write themselves. I don't see a blur between the real and the imagination. We live as much in the imagination as in the real; we are a combination of both. We may be sitting in the real world, but we are thinking of all sorts of things; I am thinking, and you are thinking of all sorts of things talking to me...For me,... they are one; and we are all imagination; we are the imagination...I don't understand when people talk of liminal space; it is now a fashionable word in academia, as you would be well aware. Intellectually, of course, I understand liminal space; it is all real is what I am trying to say. We are creatures of imagination; we are a dream, a demon, a nightmare. We are flesh and blood; but we are also soul. We all have our belief systems; we have our belief system of how

we die, do we die? Do we go into the ground? Do we go up in smoke? Do we pass on to another world or dimension ... The idea of “we are”, the idea of saying “I”, is a massive feat of the imagination. “I am Marina; I am such and such; I am that... I did that yesterday.” Even in saying that, you are talking about the past! What is the past? Did it happen? Did yesterday even happen? Is it gone? What do we remember about yesterday today? Even as I am remembering, it’s gone. It’s become the past; then, there is tomorrow; what becomes tomorrow? The whole idea of time, it’s a mortal construct, it’s mythical, time being linear...as opposed to time being a gyre, like Yeats’s time, as in time folding in on itself...coming from the Nietzschean idea of Eternal return.

RANIA: Marina, you have talked about the negativity against art and artists during times of war where there is a deliberate attempt at eradicating cultural identity, but at times of crisis, artists have often played a key role in bringing hope. What can you say about that?

MARINA: I don’t believe that! I think in difficult situations people are desperate, or are too hungry, or wounded, or they are suffering too much to care about poetry or plays. Understandably, if you are starving, you are not going to care about the painting on the wall! I think art is superfluous; and that is the beautiful thing about it; that’s the beauty of life. It comes out of civilization; it comes out of the desire to create something. It comes out of something greater than the foraging around that we all do. Art is something that we all understand at some level; it is the striving for something beautiful. Sorry, I am not a very hopeful person [*Marina laughs*].

RANIA: Theatre has always been a place and space for the marginalized, a stage for the voiceless to speak up. As a dramatist and an award-winning playwright, what can you say about that?

MARINA: Before we were a Republic, look at the history of our Abbey theatre, it was a real call for galvanizing our fledging years of coming out of the whole colonial experience. It is now our National Theatre, our Irish language, our oral culture, our storytelling, our legends. It gave us the chance to express ourselves with pride again, for example, Yeats and Lady Gregory. And no doubt, that has shaped our obsession here with the National Theatre. We all feel like we own it. It is a wonderful thing...very difficult for the people running the theatre [*Marina laughs*]. It feels like it is our right, which is great in one way. Every Irish person is a storyteller in this country; and the English language, we have molded it to suit ourselves! We speak Hiberno English, which is a very particular way in which the Irish people use the English language. The racial memory of Ireland is under it; we are great with metaphors and all that is vanishing now. But, up until now we use metaphors; we love metaphors. In terms of hope, the making of art is therapeutic; but as an artist you are talking before a war or after a war; you are not addressing matters. During a war, there is no hope. I think it would be arrogant and presumptuous to think that art

is going to help a woman who has just lost five children! It is not going to make any difference. It is her play, the play in her mind... the grief; the house is gone; the husband is gone; the child is gone. Nothing anyone could write or make a film, or poem or painting about is going to be able to approximate what that sorrow is! I'm told my work can be very dark, but I don't think I could write anything that could match the darkness of this world; I could not. I don't consciously try and express what is going on in the world; it seeps into your writing! And if my work is dark, it is because the world is dark; it is coming out; it is coming through me; I am not seeking it.

Rania invites Marina Carr to read an excerpt from her work.

MARINA: I could read something from *Hecuba*, but it is not very uplifting. Carr chooses to read from her play *iGirl* about myth and imagination and the underworld:

A girl's life
Involves going down
To the underworld
For half of every year
This is what I said
To my wailing mother Demeter
When she was railing Against Plouton
...
...
I've grown used
To being Plouton's Queen
I know he's my
Uncle
But he loves
The darkness
I'll put a curse
On your children
And your children's
Children
I'll constrict
The wombs of your women and shrivel
The seed of your men
...
...
Some stranger
Some archaeologist

Say a million years hence
Excavating a doomed
Silent
Earth
Will lift our bones
Carefully
...
...
So Anthropocene
So perfect
And the pea
Brains
And the hyper
Aggression
In the males
And the somnambulist
Women
And write in his report
It was all
So
Predictable.
They were Plouton's
From the start
Never had a chance
All roads lead
To Hades
You can't beat
Back the night.
...
End.

MARINA: We are myths.

End of Interview.