

ORESTES IN MOSUL

EN

MILO RAU & ENSEMBLE

Based on the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus

Duration of the performance: 1h 40 min

Language: Dutch, Arabic and English

Subtitles: Dutch and English

Premiere: 17.04.2019 at NTGent

Pre-premiere: 27.03.2019 at Qantara Cultural Café Mosul

German premiere: 17.05.2019 at Schauspielhaus Bochum

Please switch off your mobile phone during the performance.
It is not allowed to make audiovisual recordings.

NTGent





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Set	ruimtevaarders
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Production: NTGent & Schauspielhaus Bochum
Co-production: Tandem Arras Douai
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MILO RAU

Critics called him ‘the most influential’ (*DIE ZEIT*), ‘most awarded’ (*Le Soir*), ‘most interesting’ (*De Standaard*) or ‘most ambitious’ (*The Guardian*) artist of our time: The Swiss director and author Milo Rau (1977). From the beginning of the season 2018/19 on, he is the artistic director of NTGent.

Rau studied sociology, German and Romance languages and literature in Paris, Berlin and Zurich under Pierre Bourdieu and Tzvetan Todorov, among others. Since 2002, he has put out over 50 plays, films, books and actions. His productions have appeared at all major international festivals, including the Berlin Theatertreffen, the Festival d'Avignon, the Venice Biennale Teatro, the Wiener Festwochen and the Brussels Kunstenfestivaldesarts, and have toured more than 30 countries worldwide.

Rau has received many honours, most recently the Peter-Weiss-Prize 2017, the 3sat-Prize 2017, the 2017 Saarbrücken Poetry Lectureship for Drama and, in 2016, the prestigious World Theatre Day ITI Prize, as youngest artist ever after Frank Castorf and Pina Bausch. In 2017, Milo Rau was elected ‘Acting Director of the Year’ in the critics’ survey conducted by the Deutsche Bühne. In 2018 he received the European Theatre Prize, and in 2019 he was awarded the first honorary doctorate by the Theatre Department of Lunds Universitet (Sweden). Rau is also a television critic, lecturer and a very productive writer.

WHY ORESTES IN MOSUL?

How does one go about staging the oldest – and perhaps most violent – tragic trilogy in European literature in Mosul, the former Iraqi capital of ISIS? And, above all: What's the point?

An essay by Milo Rau

In March 2019, I was in Mosul in order to stage an adaptation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the oldest preserved Greek tragedy, with Belgian and Iraqi actors. Mosul, a city with three million inhabitants in northern Iraq, became famous in 2014 when the self-proclaimed 'Caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the terrorist organisation ISIS, declared the 'Caliphate' in one of the largest mosques of the city. The attack on Mosul began two years later and cost thousands of human lives as the terror regime of ISIS before.

I travelled to northern Iraq for the first time in 2016. We travelled the classical refugee's route backwards, from Germany back to Syria, during the preparations for the theatre piece *Empire*. The offensive around Mosul had just begun, and if someone from Erbil, in northern Iraq, wanted to reach the Syrian border, he would have to make a large detour around the city. Crossing over the Yessidi metropolis of Sindschar, that was completely destroyed in 2014, we finally arrived at Quamishli, in the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava in northern Syria on the Turkish border.

Since that time, the situation in the region has improved as well as deteriorated. The Turkish army had overrun the Kurdish region of Afrin and is now preparing for marching into Rojava as well, in conjunction with Islamic militias. Mosul, on the contrary, was liberated from ISIS, at the cost of the total annihilation of one of the most important cities of human history. In the middle of Mosul lay the ruins of Nineveh, which was already a thriving city at the time when the Greece of Aeschylus was not even really populated. 'If Mosul was founded today,' says the Iraqi actress Susana AbdulMajid at the beginning of our theatre piece, 'then Aeschylus would live in the year 7000.' When the Greek tragedy writers talk about 'Troy' and moreover, the pre-history of European civilisation, then they are talking about this region.

A trip to Mosul is not merely a trip into the heart of televised images. It is also a trip back in time, from historically young Western Europe into what could be called the Antiquity of Antiquity. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, later Alexander the Great, the Ottomans, the Turks, the British, Saddam

Hussein and in the 21st century then a series of militias: all of them ruled here in one of the oil-richest regions of the world. Already since 2006, when Al-Quaida came to Mosul, and since 2011, when the 'Islamic State' was proclaimed, it made the citizens of the city with three million inhabitants not even nervous. Previously so many various rulers had already ruled the 'Door to Iraq', as Mosul is called. For the first time in 2014 the true face of the self-proclaimed moral guardians of the 'Islamic State' was shown. The Jihadists began to carry out mass executions, killing 'Unbelievers'. Homosexuals for example were thrown from the roof of a former luxury store in the middle of the city.

In November 2018, when I first came to the liberated Mosul with my small camera team for castings and research, it seemed as if the Jihadists were still in power. Checkpoint after checkpoint, enormous black flags on the main streets: the aesthetic of the Shiah militias, who since they took back the city control Mosul along with the Iraqi army, shows little distinction at first glance from that of the 'Caliphate'. Other than the university library and the art academy, both completely destroyed by ISIS, the eastern side of the city is in good shape. The old city west of the Tigris, however, is demolished at its very foundations. The ruins are littered with booby-traps, and we found skulls and bodily remains on rubbish piles. The pulpit of Al-Nuri Mosque, from which Al-Baghdadi declared his 'Caliphate', was blown up by ISIS. They thought that the leaning prayer tower, which is bent over according to tradition for the Prophet's ascension to heaven, was too tied to aesthetics rather than function, and therefore *haram*, unclean.

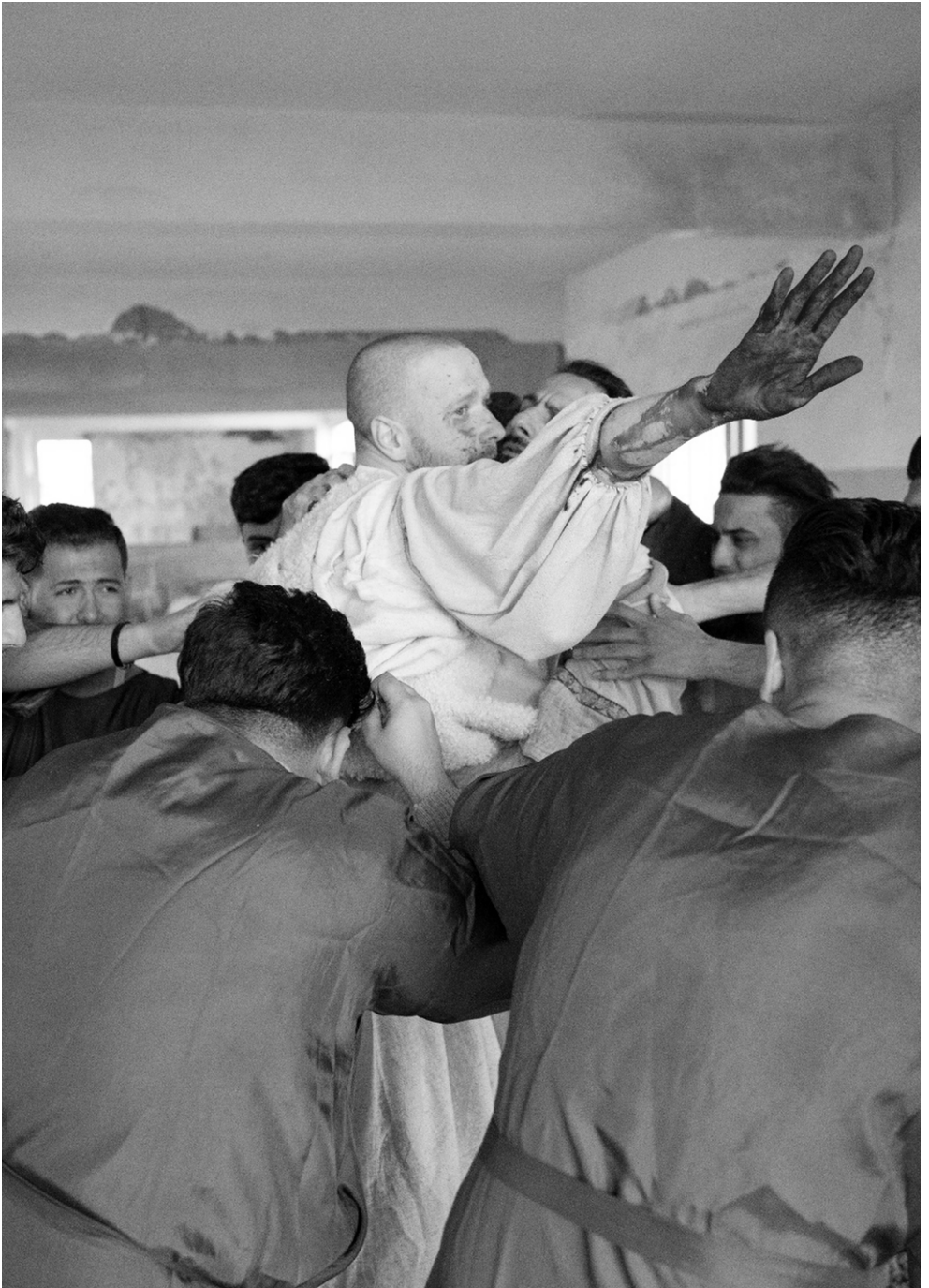
When I returned in March with the ensemble of NTGent, in order to begin the rehearsals for 'Orestes', the streets of the old city were cleared, nearly half empty. A new bridge spanned the Tigris, the reconstruction works on the Al-Nuri Mosque had begun. On the first day of rehearsals, the musicians and actors of the Iraqi ensemble part played the first public concert at the university since Saddam's fall in 2003. Yet, beneath the surface the civil war continues. In Mosul an estimated 3000 'Sleepers' of the former Islamic States are still hidden, the families of the Jihadists are incarcerated in warehouses, and are now victims themselves. Shortly before we arrived, a car bomb exploded in the street in front of the art academy, in which we were rehearsing, killing eight people. Two further attacks followed, the instigators remained unknown. Unfinished business that all leads back to the civil war.

The *Oresteia* is a play about exactly that: the endless cycle of violence. Aeschylus's plot is as simple as it is effective. The war criminal Agamemnon returns from the annihilated Troy to Greece. Ten years earlier he sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, in order for favourable winds, to sail to Troy for his armada. His wife, Clytemnestra, kills him. Orestes, his son, avenges his father and kills his mother. In the third part, Orestes ultimately arrives in Athens, pursued by the Furies. He is released by the patron goddess Athena, who ends the bloody familial strife. The Eumenides emerge from the Furies, being the guardian deities of the now liberated community.

In Mosul, some biographical parallels point to the characters of Aeschylus's tragedy. The Watchman, who searches the night sky for signs signalling Agamemnon's return in the opening monologue of Aeschylus, is played by a photographer. Every image that he shot – massacres, bomb attacks, the demolition of antiquities – could mean his death during the ruling of ISIS. Nevertheless, he continued to make them – just like the musicians who played their instruments in the basement – risking severe punishments. All of our actors and actresses have lost at least one family member since the American offensive sixteen years prior. The husband of the woman who played Athena, was executed by Al-Quaida, because he did not want to pay protection money. The best friend of our Iphigenia – who played the part veiled, so that she cannot be recognised – was abducted and forced to marry.

Others lost their mother, their brothers, their children ... Anyone here could fill a whole movie', our bandleader tells me during rehearsals, which take place all over the city and were repeatedly subjected to checks by the police and militias. We play on the rooftops from which homosexuals were thrown to death, we play in our hotel complex, the only one in Mosul, where also militia leaders stay, and we play in the completely destroyed art academy. During the rehearsals a war reporter shows us an enormous database with photos and videos of executions that took place daily in the pedestrian zone of Mosul. These are images you can never forget. Like the one of those three young men, soldiers of the Iraqi army, who line up and are killed with a shot in the neck.

It is extraordinary and frightening, to stage all of the crimes, for which the ISIS became notorious, with local actors and actresses amongst the ruins of Mosul. The *Oresteia* is an orgy of violence, a sort of post-traumatic



phantasm, composed shortly after the beginning of the introduction of democracy in Athens: a nearly pornographic look back into the bloody pre-history. The Iraqi actors are perplexingly detailed: they showed exactly where a pistol is placed for shooting someone to the neck, which movements are allowed at the execution of a wife. Iphigenia is consequently ritually strangled in our *Orestes*, our Cassandra dies by a shot to the head.

Only the kiss between Orestes and his friend Pylades lead to week-long debates. We ultimately agreed upon a brotherly kiss on the cheek. Nevertheless, the hall was frozen in paralysing shock. In order to not endanger anyone, we asked the TV stations that were present to not make any images public.

'All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,' so begins Tolstoy's famous novel *Anna Karenina*. With regards to the conflict regions, in which I have worked, whether in the East Congo or northern Iraq, this does not apply: They are alike precisely in their misfortune. A wealth of raw materials, tribal structures and colonial past produce a mixture gave birth to a world of biblical cruelty. Perhaps it was the right preparation, perhaps the protection by the Iraqi military, perhaps it was just luck, that no one from our European-Iraqi team became involved in one of the attacks. The worst accident of all, however, happened on the first day of Spring, in the middle of the rehearsal period. On 21 March, the New Year's festival of Newroz and Mother's Day were being celebrated at the same time in northern Iraq. Close to our hotel, a ferryboat, that brings people to a resort island on the Tigris, sunk and hundred people perished. Over the next few days the casualties slowly rose in number – primarily children, who could not swim, and their mothers, who did not dare to learn. After the first, severe shock, which lasted for one day, the city broke out into a revolt. 'We will avenge our martyrs with our blood.' The military seized the city, another chapter in the cycle of violence started.

To perform the *Oresteia* precisely in Mosul made sense in a terrible way. Other than the work from Euripides and the Roman tragedy writers, who construct their plays around insoluble antagonisms, Aeschylus's work is a tragedy against tragedy. For Athens at the beginning of the fifth century, shortly after the end of their civil wars, peace is a value in and of itself. In the third part of the trilogy, the nation, embodied by Athena, takes possession of the monopoly of violence. The citizens and their need for revenge are reconciled in a rhetorical tribunal with the promise of prosperity. The

core of the *Oresteia* is thus that paradox of forgiving: for Aeschylus only extremes exist, thus total impunity, or compensating revenge; consequently peace can only follow at the cost of justice – and therewith the cost of the victims.

In Mosul, Aeschylus's dream of forgiving appears as a dramaturgical device. The immense oil fields and refineries are as before in the hands of a few families, who are in turn in collusion with western concerns. Furthermore, there is a militia-based system on top of that, in which the nation is merely one of numerous players, which are seeking to profit from the wealth of the country. When we arrived in Mosul, we visited the city commander first. He lives in a villa built by Saddam Hussein, a castle in a neo-Assyrian style. The former officer of the Presidential Guard had no illusions: the war was not to come to an end, at any rate, not so long as Mosul produces oil. 'I dream of the day, on which there is no drop of oil left here,' he says.

During our time in Mosul, we arranged the tribunal at the end of the *Oresteia* two times, once at the beginning and once at the end of the rehearsals: a pardon or death penalty for the murderer of the families of the actors and actresses? The question is very concrete – and thus very problematic. Because, it is unthinkable to forgive a former ISIS fighter. It is just as impossible, however, to sentence him to death. Nobody trusts the Iraqi courts of law. And, what will happen with the European Jihadists? What will happen with their families? First every one is in favour of the death penalty. On the day before the departure, the entire ensemble reveals the vote. A verdict is impossible. It is 'tragic' as one of the actors declares.

The real tragedy, the actual truth of *Orestes in Mosul*, however, reveals itself in the moment in which we return to Europe again. It took months of preparations, in order for the European ensemble to procure the necessary visas, but it is impossible for our partners in Mosul to tour in Europe. So great is the governments' fear that they might apply for asylum or go underground. And so it remains with the one-time performance in Mosul and the 'Making Of' in the West, by which the Iraqis are to be seen on video.

'I hesitate, and moreover I am afraid' said one of our Belgian actors before the departure. 'However, the alternative is indeed: not to travel to Mosul'. And, in fact: How can we now consume the Iraqi oil and the media images, with the help of cheap labour force, without creating a direct, human contact? A global economy also needs a global artistic solidarity, as problematic

and questionable as it may be. The organiser of the Mosul Premier, a small cultural cafe, wrote on Twitter: 'This performance was something, that had not happened for decades. Everyone should therefore ensure that such a production becomes possible again.'

That goes for all of Europe as well. *Orestes in Mosul* and what is to be seen of it in Europe: It is just a beginning. I dream of the moment in which we will tour the entire ensemble throughout Europe. And, I hope that our Iraqi ensemble will be able to soon stage an *Orestes in Ghent*.

Translation: Robert Fulton

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IT WAS SO HARD NOT TO PLAY MUSIC

Suleik Salim Al-Khabbaz (musician)

I am both an actor and a musician. During the ISIS occupation, I used my acting experience to cope with the situation and ISIS members. I was told I needed a long beard, so I grew one, and because they said it was obligatory to go to the mosque, I went. But during my prayers, the only words I kept repeating were: 'Fuck you!'

On the 9th of June 2014, ISIS captured Mosul. At the time, they were not yet known as ISIS. Some called them the mujahedin, the revolutionists; others called them jihadis or simply radicals. They came in with brand-new cars and the latest motorcycles. It was impressive. In the beginning, they even didn't have this black flag, and there were only about 200 people. Altogether, the army consisted of 60,000 men: fighters, soldiers, policemen and so on. In the western part of the city, some battles started. A couple of months later, an explosion took place: a truck full of petrol exploded near the Mosul Hotel in the western part of the city. The army withdrew from the old town. After some more battles, ISIS also managed to capture the eastern part of Mosul, where our art academy is located. I still don't understand how such a big army was defeated by such a small group of extremists.

I carried a very small perfume bottle with me,
to cover the smell when I had been smoking.

In the beginning, they had many different flags. So, it was not just about ISIS, there were a lot of groups. Later, ISIS forced these groups to become part of ISIS; otherwise, they would be fought and killed. So, they chose to become part of ISIS. After they seized power, they began – little by little – to implement their rules. In the beginning, they were nice: 'Don't smoke, it's not good for your health.' They did it smoothly and politely like they were only giving us advice. But six months later, they shut down the mobile phone network: 'This is haram,' they said. And then the same happened for many things, such as art, music, television... Mosul used to have five theatres and twelve cinemas, but ISIS destroyed them all.

I play the oud, but, during the ISIS occupation, I had to hide my instrument in an iron box. I laid some books on the ground, placed the oud on top of

them, and then I covered it with some clothes. I put it at a place that was very visible and whoever came to my house noticed it immediately. So, he would go to the other boxes that were more hidden. The box with my oud in it was not even locked. I left it open so it would not attract any unwanted attention. Just like the secret letter of Edgar Allan Poe, the most obvious is the most hidden.

By the end of the occupation, the price for a single cigarette had inflated to around 20,000 Iraqi dollars or approximately 20 US dollars. So, we started to smoke like this: you would quickly inhale and then put the cigarette immediately out. After the smoke, I washed my mouth, using some perfume to cover the smell. I have this perfume bottle – a very small one – that I used to carry with me at all times. If they found out somebody was smoking, they brought him to a place which was known as ‘the teaching place’. There, they took a leather whip and gave him twenty lashes. They kept the accused there for four or five days and taught him about religion. If it happened a second time, they would give him forty lashes. By the third time, they put these people to work, digging tunnels for example. It was an extremely dangerous job because when the allied forces saw somebody digging tunnels, they just bombed that person.

ISIS implemented so many rules: women were no longer allowed to be seen, not even their eyes, their whole face had to be covered in black. When a woman showed her eyes, the fighters punished her husband and, if she had no husband, they would punish her brothers or father. If she had none of these, they took her to do something called ‘biting,’ which was a lady who would bite these women as punishment: sometimes their arms, sometimes their breasts. She would bite them really hard, there was blood and everything.

Luckily, drones were flying overhead, and they ran away.

In the last days before ISIS was driven out of the city, the fighters went from house to house and took half of whatever food they found there. However, I hid my food somewhere they couldn’t find it: I hung my bottles of oil with a piece of rope from the pipes in the shower, and the milk for my children was hidden in plastic bags between the door and the AC unit. When ISIS took over the art academy, they first sold everything of value. They asked people to come and take everything they found... even the lamps. They made good money from it. And after that, they burned the whole building

down and used what was left as a shelter. When the American Air Force liberated the city, they bombed the building and ruined the academy completely. At the same time, ISIS burned my red car. When I saw the car, I ran outside with a fire extinguisher. They shouted at me, they said: 'You are helping the kafars, the non-believers. We made this smoke to hide ourselves from the airplanes.' Then they started beating me and one of them punched me right in the face, but I hit back. Then, five or six more fighters got to me and began beating me in front of my daughter. Luckily, drones were flying overhead, and they ran away.

Throughout this period, it was so hard not to play and listen to music. So sometimes, I would take out my oud and play very softly in one of the rooms at the centre of the house, not sitting on a chair but on the ground. One of the houses in front of ours and one behind ours were inhabited by ISIS. My wife used to say: 'Stop, stop, they will come and kill all of us!' She kept me from playing music, and I guess she saved our lives.

I'VE NEVER KNOWN HATRED

Khitam Idris Gamil (Athena)

I live in Mosul, where I've worked in the education department for the past thirty years. I have five daughters and two sons. One of my sons was killed in a car accident when he was 16 years old.



My husband was a simple man. He was a building contractor as well as a businessman. But one day he went to work, and they told him that he would no longer be allowed to work unless he paid some people money... taxes. He tried to negotiate with the collectors, but in the end, he gave in and paid

them. But twenty days later another group of people came and again ordered him to pay them so he could continue working. He said, 'I don't have to pay any more money, I already paid.' They said, 'We aren't connected to that group, we aren't on the same side,' and he refused to pay them.

One day, he went out shopping to buy some necessities for our daughter's wedding. Some men took him, pretending to do a search. They took him and killed him somewhere far away from Mosul. They shot him twelve times. He died right there on the ground, it was only after lying there for thirty minutes that an ambulance came and collected his body. I thank God that he was killed in this way because it means that he died a martyr, and I strongly believe in fate.

Honestly, in the very beginning,
I was also with ISIS for six months.

All my daughters are educated and in university, my sons left school and learned their father's profession: construction work. But life goes on and we are still alive, thank God. I work from early in the morning until late in the evening.

I work at a school, I'm a university student completing my 4th degree, the director of an adult literacy institute, and an activist at the Red Cross in Nineveh. I also work in the asylum camps, a job that I'm very proud of. I work with women and children who used to be part of ISIS, deprogramming them.

Honestly, in the very beginning, I was also with ISIS for six months. During this time, my daughters were adults and feared for their lives. Rumours were being spread that, even though they were educated, they would be forced to wear certain clothes. But the Air Force circled in the sky above us and my daughters were afraid of the sound, they were afraid of the bullets. So, they forced me to smuggle them into Syria and then into Turkey. We lived in Turkey for more than two years.

Now my daughters, my son, and I are all volunteers for the Red Cross. We love helping the women and children – old and young alike – because we feel how much they've suffered. We were homesick ourselves. When we left, even though it was for our safety, it still felt strange. I love my country. It is the place where I was born and lived for so many years. I love it for all the memories I have of my children and husband there. So, when I came

back with my children, we were even more motivated to help the people of Mosul, because we know this feeling of loss, too.

Right now, I would help anybody, even if that person had harmed me in the past. Because I am a human being and God created a great sense of humanity in me. Our Islamic religion teaches us to believe in fate. When I lose someone close to my heart, I can blame God for it. It was all already written. Since the day of my birth, it was destined that my boy would die at that particular moment and that my husband would die at that particular place. So, I have to – for better or for worse – believe in fate. Humans do not last, only God endures.

I've never known hatred. Even if a person harmed me, I would still love him. This is my life motto. Even those people who killed my husband, even the person who killed my son and ran away, leaving him to bleed to death in the street... I am not God, and it's not my place to punish them or administer justice. There are special authorities for that.

No one can remain strong forever.

Islam teaches us that you reap what you sow. If you plant something good, you will harvest something good, but if you plant thistle than you will harvest thistle. No human can remain strong forever. Eventually one always becomes weak. I do good so that when I am weak, the good people will help me in return.

I now work with women from ISIS in the camps. When I meet a family, I first take their data and help them fill out their questionnaires. Once they feel secure and comfortable with me, they open up their hearts to me, and I can explore their scars. When a woman says that her husband was with IS and that he was killed, I wouldn't hate her, I would pity her. It wasn't her crime, it was her husband's crime. I have to help her. Even if it takes me six or seven months, I will help her return to a normal life and find Islam's values and traditions again. And I have – thank God – succeeded. I have conducted sessions to support these women and their children, and I have succeeded. People make mistakes, we are not infallible. Talking with you now, I feel like I am opening up myself to you, liberating me from all these emotions.

But, I want to make one last statement about your theatre performance... I saw two men kissing, and I have to say that this is haram. That this is not part of our culture, our tradition. You cannot do this here!

LIKE TO KNOW MORE?

Milo Rau has compiled a book about *Orestes in Mosul* with background interviews and other material from the production.

Buy the book after the performance or at Tickets Gent (€10), or in a bookshop (€12).

Picture Credits

1. Rehearsal: Clytemnestra killing Agamemnon © Stefan Bläske
2. Rehearsal: Risto Kübar as Orestes, pursued by the Furies © Khalid Rawi
3. Suleik Salim Al-Khabbaz playing the oud © Moritz von Dungern
4. Khitam Idress and Marijke Pinoy © Moritz von Dungern
5. The team after the pre-premiere in Qantara Cultural Club Mosul © Armin Smailovic





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