

Interview with Martha Loader: Feb 24th 2024

Martha Loader is our 2024 commissioned playwright who has been working closely with the Menagerie team to develop her piece of work - Albatross.

Martha also led one of our Young Writers' Workshops in February. After which, she sat down to speak with Sarah Saxby about the project, its themes, and her writing in general.

This interview was done based on Martha's first draft of Albatross, therefore themes and plot points may change by the time the play is previewed.

S: So, I'll start with a short question - describe your writing style in three words or less describe

M: My writing style?

S: Yeah, your voice, your tone.

M: ...

S: (laughing) These were meant to be the quick questions!

M: Just..I don't want to say... and I maybe I'd say... investigative? Probably political and I think...human.

S: And, why playwriting over other forms of writing?

M: I think because of the liveness. I think it definitely does something to me that other forms of fiction don't. I think there's really something wonderful about sitting in a room full of strangers in the dark all experiencing the same thing at the same time that's really beautiful.

Simon McBurney talked about how audiences' hearts synchronise in the theatre and I think that's a kind of very powerful experience. I think I've always wanted to try and capture that because I have been so influenced by watching that experience.

S: How did your experience acting come about? Is that in part because of writing?

M: I started as an actor and always thought i'd be an actor but the lifestyle of it, I found too hard! I'm very in awe of people that can sustain themselves as an actor and actually I found that writing kind of gave me everything I wanted from being an actor in terms like creating stories, but it was less terrifying.

It's terrifying in a different way but yeah maybe it's part of that live buzz like when you feel sick watching something on stage for the first time! I think acting has really fed into my

writing being able to understand dialogue and how people speak and what it actually sounds like. It's something that probably does feed a lot of my writing

S: I know you mentioned the idea of a central question in your session earlier, what is the question of Albatross and can you expand on it a bit for me?

M: What I'm hoping the question might be, at the moment, is 'what does each generation owe to the next?'. And that's in terms of climate change and responsibility and partly about what we owe to former generations when it comes to feminism and... (laughs) that's not a very clear question is it? I think the bit I'm trying to wrangle is, yeah, about an intergenerational responsibility.

S: Do you see a link between feminism and Climate Change?

M: Yeah, you can't have one without the other really. It's always going to be the most oppressed people who are hit hardest, when it comes to both climate change and feminist issues. I think they're so linked, there's no way around it really. And I think that there's still a sense of responsibility given to women about children too.

S: Where did the idea for climate to be the focus of the piece come from?

M: It's kind of inescapable, sadly. I think a lot of what dominates my thinking at the moment is climate and I wanted to find a way of writing about it that's complicated that asks the knotty questions and that is also looking at it from a different angle.

(Paul Bourne enters the room, searching for biscuits)

PB: Are you talking about having climate anxiety?

M: Yeah! I think it's climate grief as well, sometimes you get almost over the hump of the anxiety and into this despair which is even more scary.

PB: We used to just worry about our own little worlds and now it's the whole world...

M: And how do you plan for a future if you don't think a future is going to exist? How do you consider having children when you think that?

(Paul Bourne leaves the office, with Biscoff Biscuits)

S: Would you consider yourself an activist?

M: It feels like quite a lot of responsibility and also that I feel a lot of paralysis around the idea of activism. I think a lot of the thoughts about this play were about how far are we willing to go for the things we believe in and what are we willing to sacrifice for the environment. For me, I really don't want to go to prison! (laughs) That's kind of what I'm scared of - the ramifications. I feel that there are people much braver than I am in terms of that kind of activism.

We all have different strengths in how we can approach this. Maybe it's arrogant and not a very useful strength, but by writing about it hopefully there's a way of capturing, with theatre, a conversation that's harder to have in another form.

S: It's like you say, theatre can create that unified heart, and that collective experience can really fill you with a momentum.

M: And even with the climate conscious community that you might expect to come to a show like this, it's continuing to ask these hard and uncomfortable questions: are we willing to sacrifice our way of life? Are we willing to sacrifice whether we have children or not? Or how we live in the world at all?

And I suppose that's the question [Albatross] is trying to work out. Is it better to sort of, quote unquote, abandon your child in order to save your child?

S: I was thinking about the idea that principles can't be principles if you don't have to sacrifice anything for them; if it fits with your world view and everything you're doing already, then it's just a belief that's convenient.

Your character that goes to Antarctica, Alice, although she believes in the work she's doing, do you believe there is something convenient to her in her work as it allows her to run away from the responsibilities of motherhood?

M: I think she thinks it's more simplistic than it is. I think she's almost sort of forgotten the nuance of what it means to have a child. She can't just forget this child, it doesn't work like that because when she cries out in the night she has to go to her. And that's part of her struggle and coping with the reality that, as much as she wants to reject motherhood, she can't.

S: And it's currently set in the kitchen - is it set in the kitchen all throughout?

M: (Nods)

S: What was the thought process behind that because I think that's quite interesting?

M: Well, because the first version of this was hugely sweeping and multi-location multi-narrative with lots of characters, actors doubling all over the place and I felt that actually what I really needed to do with this was just strip it back.

There's something really lovely and difficult about one location and about close spaces and close time. It becomes that kind of boiling pot narrative! And there's also something about that domestic experience, but also being in the middle of the night, and what a kitchen means in relation to women. And, what it means for these *particular* women who sort of are and aren't comfortable in that space.

S: Does the play being at night have any significance also, was that purposeful?

M: Dramatically I think it's a really interesting time when you might be a bit more vulnerable - tired, drunk, jet lagged, and all of those things that sort of add fuel to the fire.

But I think [Albatross] is also a kind of haunting as well, particularly for Alice, of her daughter upstairs that we never see. There's Antarctica that exists on the other side of the world that we never see. And for Alice, she's in a completely different time zone, in a way her body at the moment will be in Antarctica. Her body *clock* is in Antarctica, so the middle of the night suddenly becomes this different thing for her.

S: I've noticed you use the word knotty a lot, what does knotty mean for you?

M: Knotty is a great catch all word for meaning incredibly complicated and there being no direct answer to anything! I think plays are there to be really knotty and to ask big questions and grapple with them and not necessarily answer them and I think that knotty-ness is a huge part of all writing and all good theatre asks those knotty questions

S: When did you start writing?

M: So, I wrote the school play as my friend recently reminded me! But I really wrote my *first* play once I'd graduated, and then I showed it for the first time in Melbourne. I was out there for like 9 months and the first play I'd ever done was performed when I'd got back to the UK so I never saw it. So... probably 2013/14.

S: Best thing you've seen tv or film this year?

M: (gasps) I went to see American Fiction last night and it was brilliant! Really really worth a watch. Again, I feel it asked a really knotty question and was very funny and self aware and almost felt like a piece of theatre with the heart of its question.

S: Favourite biscuit?

M: (groans) I'm gluten intolerant now so...

S: ...favourite biscuit you used to love?

M: (laughs) I used to love a ginger nut!

S: Last one, most common typo?

M: Well I can tell you my vocal typo - it's 'in-ves-tig-a-tive' I find that word almost impossible to say, I tried really hard there and I even used it as one of my three words

S: (laughs) you did!

M: hmmm... Diarrhoea! Don't know how to spell that.

(they laugh)

S: Best thing you've read?

M: I re-read Ordinary People recently - not Normal People, Ordinary People. It was brilliant!

S: Play? Novel?

M: Novel! By Diana Evans uh yeah it's a really lovely study of marriage but also it has a semi supernatural element as well that's not my normal taste. But it's almost like a straight fiction book that has a sort of haunting to it. There's a story called the yellow wallpaper and it sort of references that, which is cool.

S: Is there anything else you'd like to tell our readers?

M: Ah, please come and see [Albatross]! Um what else would I like to tell the readers...

S: the readers, the watchers, the listeners! (this conversation was recorded)

M: I think it's just been a really lovely opportunity to work with Menagerie and a number of really lovely scientists and academics across this whole process, and I continue to rely on them ... quite considerably!

And it's just nice to be sort of immersed in a world that is entirely different to anything I know. I find myself almost wanting to go to Antarctica which is both beautiful and...

S: Terrifying?

M: Yeah, yeah it's a whole new world to explore!

Martha will be previewing Albatross at this year's Hotbed Festival, July 19th - 21st 2024.

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