

Values in Public Life: an Interview with Hannah Khalil

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The Center for Arab and Islamic Studies hosts the “Values in Public Life” series exploring the views and experiences of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and careers whose public lives exemplify their values. Here, **Hannah Khalil**, an Irish-Palestinian playwright, talks about understanding how our values shape our human relations.

The term “values” is used a lot in American public life, and it often refers to religiously-informed moral judgement, but of course not all values are religiously derived, and even devout people sometimes disagree about important values or how to express them. What would you say have been the most important sources of your values and beliefs about how we should live together in society?

My values definitely stem from a religious upbringing: my mom is a Catholic and I grew up in a Muslim country and the positive values of respect and kindness definitely influenced me and the way I think and approach the world. I also think my parents’ divorce when I was a teenager really affected the way I look at the world and the values that I think are important: going from a more affluent life with two middle-class parents to suddenly having a single mom who’s a nurse struggling to make ends meet gives you a perspective on what’s important. The other values that were perhaps missing when I was growing up, but that I’m trying very hard to instil in my child, are a love and respect for the natural world and a sense of responsibility towards it.

Where do you see your values most reflected in your life?

My values play out in everything I do and how I conduct myself in the world and how I interact with other people. Also in the plays that I write which are always political - even when they are set in domestic environments they always ask lots of questions about our responsibilities as human beings in the world to one another and to the planet. I hope by asking questions through my plays to encourage people who watch those play or interact with them to evaluate their own behaviour and social responsibility.

Has your thinking about the place of values in public life – in your own or in society generally – changed over the course of your life?

I have had a growing understanding that, despite having a very clear value system in my life, not everyone does have that and that it’s my responsibility to not just be disappointed or angry about that but to try and bring about more positive outcome by putting good into the world as much as I can.

Can you tell us about a time the issue of “values and public life” presented an opportunity or a source of satisfaction?

As a playwright watching audience members encountering my work and being moved by it or thoughtful because of it is a constant source of satisfaction. Sometimes if people don't connect with work or missed the point then that can be disappointing, but it's a life's work and I will keep trying!

Can you talk about your role as an artist, and how values are communicated or represented in the arts? It seems like such issues might come up differently or more directly for artists whose work is meant for an audience than, for example, people who work in fields like medicine or law.

Although my plays can be about very different subject matters and stylistically very different I always approach them in the same way initially: they always start with a question or frustration about the world and then through the writing of the play I try to understand the world and people's motivations and behaviours a little better. So whether I'm writing about the injustices of life under occupation in Palestine or the mistreatment of asylum-seekers in detention centers or about the return of artifacts to a museum after they've been looted in a war, I'm always seeking to understand people's motivations and to reveal truths about human existence: why we do the things we do. I really believe in better understanding the really difficult things and continuing to interrogate them we can help create a more harmonious way of living and actually bring about change to make the world a little better.

Hannah Khalil was the recipient of the Arab British Centre's Award for Culture in 2017. Her stage plays include *A Museum in Baghdad* which ran at the Swan Theatre at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2019/2020 and marked the first play by a woman of Arab heritage on the main stage at the RSC, *The Scar Test* at Soho Theatre, the acclaimed *Scenes from 68* Years* - shortlisted for the James Tait Black award and *Interference* for National Theatre of Scotland. Hannah's radio plays include *The Unwelcome*, *Last of the Pearl Fishers* and *The Deportation Room* for BBC Radio 4. She was named the Heimbold Chair at Villanova University in Philadelphia 2021 and is a Creative Fellow of the Samuel Beckett Institute at the University of Reading 2021/22.