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978-1-108-83856-6 — The Theatre of Sa'dallah Wannous
Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, Robert Myers
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The Theatre of Sa'dallah Wannous

The Theatre of Sa'dallah Wannous is the first book in English to provide a clear sense of the significance and complexity of Wannous' life and work. It is unique in bringing cross-disciplinary scholarship on Wannous together and aligning it with cultural practice and memory by including contributions from leading academics as well as renowned cultural figures from the Arab world. This volume should be of interest to literary and theatre studies scholars, cultural historians, theatre practitioners, and anyone who cares about contemporary theatre, Syria, and the Arab world. Collectively, the contributions demonstrate the role of cultural production – especially dramatic literature – in providing a portrait of and shaping a culture in the throes of profound transformation.

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi is an associate professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature in the Department of English at the American University of Beirut. Her research centers on modern Arabic literature, writers' biographies and libraries, book culture, archival and museum studies, cultural history and memory, and aesthetics and politics. Her publications include *Rafa Nasiri: Artist Books* (2016; ed. with May Muzaffar), *Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art* (2012), *Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (2012; ed. with John Pedro Schwartz), *Writing a "Tool for Change": 'Abd al-Rahman Munif Remembered* (2007; ed.), and *Geschichten über Geschichten: Erinnerung im Romanwerk von Elias Khoury* (2001).

Robert Myers is Professor of English and Director of the Alwaleed Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut. He is the author of over fifteen plays, including *Atwater: Fixin' to Die*, *Mesopotamia* and *Unmanned* (adapted as *Drone Pilots* for BBC Radio 4), which have been produced at major theatres in New York, Chicago, Washington and Los Angeles. He is co-editor/co-translator with Nada Saab of *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant* (2018) and *Sentence to Hope: A Sa'dallah Wannous Reader* (2019). He has received grants from the MacArthur Foundation and the Mellon Foundation and two Fulbright awards.

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The Theatre of Sa'dallah Wannous

*A Critical Study of the Syrian Playwright
and Public Intellectual*

Edited by

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi

American University of Beirut

Robert Myers

American University of Beirut



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Acknowledgments

This volume is the manifestation of a long journey that began for each of us when we became aware of the singular significance of the work of Sa'dallah Wannous as a playwright and public intellectual in Syria and throughout the Arab world. Although his name and legacy have accompanied our personal and professional lives in manifold ways for many years, the study of his life and work has taken on a renewed sense of urgency for us and many others in the wake of the Arab uprisings that began in 2011. We are profoundly grateful to Wannous' widow, Fayza Shawish, and his daughter, Dima Wannous, for having expressed interest in and support for both this book and the translations and productions of Wannous' plays produced by the Theater Initiative at the American University of Beirut. We owe them a special debt of gratitude for having chosen to donate Wannous' personal library to Jafet Library at AUB. Not coincidentally, this volume ends with a testimony by Dima Wannous, herself an award-winning fiction writer, recalling the world of books that her father and his works magically opened up for her and for future generations. She concludes her chapter by inviting readers to explore this world for themselves.

We thank our contributors, some of whom are renowned theatre and literary scholars and others distinguished writers and intellectuals, for their insightful chapters situating, reading, staging, and remembering Wannous: Sahar Assaf, Mohammad Al Attar, Marvin Carlson, Zeina G. Halabi, Elias Khoury, Margaret Litvin, Farouk Mardam-Bey, Friederike Pannewick, Nada Saab, and Edward Ziter. Obviously, without their contributions this volume would not have been possible. Moreover, we wish to thank the translators who rendered some of these chapters from Arabic into English: Rula Baalbaki, Rana Issa, Iman Al Kaisy, and Suneela Mubayi.

We also thank Syrian artist *Azza Abo Rebieh* for her drawing of Wannous that appears on the book's cover. Her lines connect nicely with Wannous' writing as they bring him to life with metal brush and ink on paper, not as the celebrated playwright who wrote his last most impactful plays as he faced death, but as a young man "sentenced to hope" as he embarked on his theatrical work. In addition, we thank

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Kuwaiti playwright and theatre director Sulayman Al Bassam and German set designer and artist Hans Brosch for granting us permission to reproduce their works. We extend our thanks to the Bertolt Brecht Archive of the Academy of Arts in Berlin for kindly putting us in touch with Brosch.

Special thanks are due to Miriam Ayres who spent long hours editing and crafting several of the pieces in this volume. She also utilized her profound knowledge of Wannous' theatre to create useful summaries for readers not familiar with the content of some of his principal plays that are repeatedly referred to in this book. We thank Iman Al Kaisy for assisting in compiling the chronology of Wannous' life, plays, and selected writings, as well as the book's index. We wish to thank Mohammad Ali Atassi for his continuous feedback and helpful suggestions, and David Jacobson for his invaluable editorial contributions.

We would like to thank the American University of Beirut, particularly President Fadlo Khuri and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Nadia El Cheikh, for their generous support of AUB's Theater Initiative and the scholarly events celebrating the donation of Wannous' personal library to Jafet Library at AUB. We are grateful to the Mellon Foundation, which provided funding for translations and productions of Wannous' works and the creation of this groundbreaking study, and to the Alwaleed Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at AUB, which supported this volume, productions of Wannous' plays and events about the playwright's life and work. In addition, we thank AUB's fabulous team of librarians, especially Lokman Meho, Mariette Atallah, and Samar Mikati, for having provided a new home for Wannous' personal library and for having facilitated our research. We also acknowledge the kind support of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin/Institute for Advanced Study where we were able to significantly advance our work on this volume in spring 2018.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the editors of the Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre series, Maria Delgado and Simon Williams, who have accompanied every step of the creation of this volume with careful attention and useful suggestions. It is worth noting that Wannous is the first Arab playwright to be included in the Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre. We are grateful to Emily Hockley, Commissioning Editor for Theatre and Performance at Cambridge University Press, and her fabulous team, in particular Judy Napper for her thorough copy-editing, and to the three anonymous readers of this volume for their incisive critiques and their support for this study introducing Wannous to the global readership he so richly deserves.

Beirut, February 2021

Notes on Transliteration and Translation

The transliteration from Arabic follows the format of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Arabic personal names, however, are written according to how the individuals themselves spell their names in English, or they follow the most conventional spelling. Arabic names can be spelled in various ways in English. In this book, they are spelled consistently in all contributions in accordance with the index, but the spelling in cited works may differ, e.g., we write Sa'dallah Wannous but other cited works spell his name Saadallah Wannous, Sadallah Wannus, or, in transliteration, Sa'dallāh Wannūs. The Arabic letter 'ain is represented by an apostrophe, as in Sa'dallah Wannous.

The translations of Wannous' plays and other writings vary. Throughout this book, we use the translations given in the chronology of his life, plays, and selected writings which correspond to the translations in *Sentence to Hope: A Sa'dallah Wannous Reader*, edited and translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab (Yale University Press, 2019). Other cited works may use different translations. Wannous' famous play *Ḥaflat samar min ajli khamisa ḥuzayrān*, for instance, is translated as *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June* but it has also been translated as *Soirée for the Fifth of June*.

Chronology of Wannous' Life, Plays, and Selected Writings

- 1941 Sa'dallah Wannous is born in the village of Husayn al-Bahr in Tartous, Syria.
- 1943 Independence of Lebanon.
- 1945 End of Second World War.
- 1946 Independence of Syria and Jordan.
- 1948 Foundation of the State of Israel, First Arab-Israeli War (until 1949).
- 1952 Egyptian revolution led by Gamal Abdel Nasser.
- 1954 Algerian War of Independence (until 1962).
- 1956 Suez Crisis.
- 1958 United Arab Republic. Iraq Revolution. Lebanon Crisis.
- 1959 Earns high school diploma then travels to Egypt to study journalism at Cairo University.
- 1961 The United Arab Republic is dissolved. Writes *al-Ḥayāt abadan* (Life forever).
- 1962 Publishes articles in the Damascus newspaper *al-Naṣr*.
- 1963 Ba'th Party seizes power in Syria and Iraq. Receives BA from Cairo University. Returns to Damascus. Works at the Ministry of Culture. Writes *Midūzā tuḥaddiq fī al-ḥayāt* (Medusa gazes at life). Publishes *Ḥuththa 'alā al-raṣīf* (Corpse on the pavement).
- 1964 Publishes *Faṣd al-dam* (Bloodletting). *Ma'sāt bā'i' al-dibs al-faqīr* (The tragedy of the poor molasses seller). Publishes two studies about "Theatre in Egypt" and "Tawfiq al-Hakim and the Theatre of the Absurd" in the cultural journal *al-Ma'rifa*.
- 1965 Becomes the editor of the arts and culture section of *al-Ba'th* newspaper. Publishes a collection of short plays, *Ḥakāyā jawqat al-tamāthīl* (Tales of the chorus of statues), including *al-Rasūl al-majhūl fī ma'tam Antūjūnā* (The unknown messenger at Antigone's funeral ceremony), *al-ḥarād* (The locust), *Lu'bat al-dabābīs* (The game of pins), and *al-Maqhā al-zujājī* (The glass café).

- 1966 Travels to Paris to study at the Institute of Theatre Studies at the Sorbonne. Writes several critiques about cultural life in Europe.
- 1967 The 1967 War. Arab defeat. Returns to Damascus. Travels to Paris again.
- 1968 Publishes *Haflat samar min ajli khamsa huzayrān* (*An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*) in the cultural journal *Mawāqif* and *'Indamā yal'ab al-rijāl* (When men play). Returns to Damascus at the end of the year.
- 1969 Premiere of *al-Fil yā malik al-zamān* (The king's elephant) and *Ma'sāt bā'i' al-dibs al-faqīr* in Damascus.
- 1970 Black September; PLO is driven out of Jordan. Coup d'état in Syria by Hafez al-Assad. Publishes *Mughāmarat ra's al-mamlūk Jābir* (*The Adventure of the Head of Mamlouk Jābir*). Publishes his interviews with Bernard Dort, Jean-Louis Barrault, and Jean-Marie Serreau.
- 1971 Premiere of *Haflat samar min ajli khamsa huzayrān* in Damascus. Works with Omar Amiralay on a documentary film *al-Hayāt al-yawmiyya fī qarya sūriyya* (Everyday life in a Syrian village).
- 1972 Publishes *Sahra ma'a Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī* (An evening with Abu Khalil al-Qabbani).
- 1973 October War. Travels to Paris, then to Weimar, East Germany. Supervises the rehearsals for the premiere of *Mughāmarat ra's al-mamlūk Jābir* at the German National Theatre Weimar.
- 1974 Returns to Damascus. Publishes several articles about cultural trends in Paris in the Lebanese journal *al-Balāgh*.
- 1975 Lebanese Civil War (until 1990). Works as culture editor of the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safīr*.
- 1976 Translates *Hawla al-taqā'id al-masrahiyya* (*De la tradition théâtrale*) by French theatre director and actor, Jean Vilar. Finds the experimental al-Qabbani Theatre in Damascus.
- 1977 Publishes *al-Malik huwa al-malik* (The king's the king). Cofounds the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus and finds and edits *al-Hayāt al-masrahiyya* (Theatre life) journal.
- 1978 Attempts suicide on the night the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty signed by Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. Publishes *Rihlat Ḥanzāla min al-ghafla ilā al-yaqaḥa* (Handhala's voyage from indifference to awareness), "Anā al-janāza wal-mushayyi'ūn" (I am the funeral and the bereaved). Writes "Ḥawla al-ṣamt wa-mas'ūliyyat al-muthaqqafin" (On silence and the responsibility of intellectuals).
- 1979 Iranian Revolution.

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- 1980 Iran-Iraq War (until 1988).
- 1981 Marries the actor Fayza al-Shawish.
- 1982 Lebanon War; Israeli invasion of Beirut; PLO is driven out of Lebanon; Sabra and Shatila Massacre. Hama Massacre, Syria. Publishes his interview with Jean Genet, "Wulidtu fi al-ṭarīq wa sa' amūtu fi al-ṭarīq" (I was born on the streets, and I will die on the streets), in *al-Karmil* journal. Birth of his daughter Dima Wannous.
- 1985 Presents a series of lectures under the title "Fī al-baḥṭh 'an masraḥ 'arabī" (In search for an Arab theatre) at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus.
- 1986 Publishes his interview with Nabil Haffar in *al-Ṭarīq* journal: "Ḥiwār ḥawla tajribatī wal-masraḥ al-'arabī" (A conversation about my experience and theatre).
- 1987 *Intifada*, Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories.
- 1988 Publishes *Bayānāt li-masraḥ 'arabī jadīd* (*Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre*), which includes "Ma'ziq al-masraḥ wa qaḍyā ukhrā" (Theatrical crisis and other issues), "Muqaddima: al-masraḥ mir'āt" ("Theatre as Mirror"), and "Khātima: Al-ḥulm yatadā'a" ("The Dream Falls Apart").
- 1990 Gulf War (until 1991). Publishes *al-Ighṭisāb* (*The Rape*) which is staged the same year. Co-edits *Qaḍyā wa-shahādāt*.
- 1991 Madrid Peace Conference.
- 1992 Diagnosed with cancer. Receives treatment in Damascus and Paris.
- 1993 Oslo I Accord. Israel and the PLO sign Declaration of Principles in Washington, DC.
- 1994 Publishes *Ṭuqūs al-ishārāt wal-taḥawwulāt* (*Rituals of Signs and Transformations*), *Aḥlām shaqiyya* (*Wretched Dreams*). Has a relapse of cancer. Starts a long period of cancer treatment in Damascus.
- 1995 Oslo II Accord. Writes *Malḥamat al-sarāb* (*The mirage epic*) and *al-Ayyām al-makhmūra* (*The Drunken Days*). Publishes *Munammamāt tārikhiyya* (*Historical Miniatures*). *Yawm min zamāninā* (A day of our time). Elected by UNESCO's International Theatre Institute to give the World Theatre Day message.
- 1996 Lebanon War. Gives the World Theatre Day message on March 27, "al-Jū' ilā al-ḥiwār" ("Thirst for Dialogue"). Publishes *al-A'māl al-kāmila* (Complete works) in three volumes and *An al-dhākira wal-mawt* (About memory and death), which includes "Rihla fi majāhil mawt 'ābir" (A journey into the

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wilderness of a fleeting death). Marie Elias publishes her interviews with Wannous in *al-Ṭarīq* journal, “Li-awwal marra ash‘ur bil-kitāba ka-ḥurriyya, li-awwal marra ash‘ur anna al-kitāba mut‘a” (“For the First Time Writing Is a Form of Freedom, for the First Time Writing Is a Pleasure”).

- 1997 Marie Elias publishes “Ma‘ālim wa-taḥawwulāt fī masīrat Sa’dallah Wannous” (Milestones and transformations in the journey of Sa’dallah Wannous) and “Ḥiwār: Mādhā ya’nī al-masraḥ al-yawn” (A dialogue: What does theatre mean today?) in *al-Ṭarīq* journal. Documentary film by Omar Amiralay: *Wahunāka ašyā’ kathīra kāna yumkin an yataḥaddatha ‘anhā al-mar’* (There are many things one can talk about). Nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature by the Arab Language Academy and UNESCO. Wannous dies of cancer on May 15.