

INTRODUCTION

To characterize Saʿdallah Wannous as an Arab writer is, at the same time, to say something essential about his identity and his oeuvre and assert something potentially misleading for many English-language readers, who probably know few writers from the Arab world except perhaps the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, the Syrian-Lebanese poet Adonis, or Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist who won the Nobel Prize in 1988. The confusion evoked by characterizing Wannous as an Arab writer is likely to be compounded by the fact that he is Syrian, and the little that well-read English speakers probably know about Syria's history and culture has been filtered through the narrow lens of the Western media's coverage of the brutal civil war that began there in 2011. Moreover, Wannous is known principally as a playwright even in the Arab world, and few literate people, with the exception of specialists and theater artists, read plays—as opposed to seeing them performed—with the possible exception of those of Shakespeare. The current volume, which is the first widely distributed English-language anthology devoted to Wannous's plays and writings about theater, is, however, likely to change more than a few minds about the pleasures of reading plays, especially since Wannous clearly intended that his works should be read simultaneously as cultural critiques, political and philosophical treatises, and innovative rewritings of traditional storytelling and performance modes, as well as serious dramas to be staged.

Wannous was born in 1941 into a peasant family in a small village above the Syrian port of Tartous, which, it is worth noting, has housed a Soviet, and later Russian, naval facility since the early 1970s.

Although Wannous became an atheist, a Marxist, and a committed secularist, his family and he were nominally ‘Alawites, a small heterodox Islamic sect to which President Bashar al-Assad also belongs, as did his father, President Hafez al-Assad, who preceded him. In 1959, after completing his baccalaureate degree, Wannous moved to Cairo, which was then the cultural and political center of the Arab world. This was the so-called golden age of Egyptian cinema, the era of the celebrated diva Umm Kulthoum and of Egypt’s charismatic leader and former military officer Gamal Abdel Nasser, who led a coup in July 1952 to overthrow the spectacularly corrupt King Farouq. In 1956, Nasser became the most revered leader in the Arab world when he was given credit for facing down the British, the French, and the Israelis, who had tried to seize control of the Suez Canal. This victory—which, along with the 1958–1961 union of Syria and Egypt into a single political entity, the United Arab Republic, constituted the apex of Arab nationalism—was the Arabs’ only success before a string of devastating military and diplomatic defeats during the remainder of the century.

While in Egypt, Wannous, who at this time was an ardent Arab nationalist and admirer of Nasser, studied journalism at Cairo University and, according to ‘Ali al-Anezi, “became a regular reader of *al-Adab (Belles Lettres)*, the most influential Arab literary journal, which translated and published works by Camus and Sartre.”¹ Wannous also wrote an essay, which has subsequently been lost, about the renowned Egyptian absurdist playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim, perhaps the most celebrated dramatist from the Arab world in the first half of the twentieth century.² In 1963, after Wannous returned to Syria, which was now ruled by the nominally socialist Ba’th Party, he became the theater editor for the state-controlled cultural publication *al-Ma‘rifa (Knowledge)* and wrote a series of philosophical plays—dramatic treatises composed more for the page than the stage, largely based on al-Hakim’s model. At the age of twenty-five, in 1966, Wannous moved to Paris to study theater at the Sorbonne, where he

continued his career as a cultural journalist, interviewing over the years artists such as his own professor, the theater director Jean-Marie Serreau, Jean Genet, and the renowned theater actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault, best known to English-speaking audiences for his role in the film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*). He also continued his apprenticeship as an aspiring playwright, attending performances at the Comédie-Française and by foreign troupes such as Judith Molina and Julian Beck's Living Theater and artists such as Peter Brook and Peter Weiss. Brook, one of the premier theater directors of the twentieth century, had just created the innovative theatrical "happening" entitled *US*, an improvised performance opposing U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, produced in London in 1966. One can see clear formal echoes of *US* in Wannous's first theatrical success, the equally innovative and revolutionary *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*, the play that opens this volume, which is a scathing critique of the deceit and betrayal of peasants, soldiers, and the Palestinians by Nasser and the Arab regimes during the June 1967 War. During this same period, when Wannous was first living in France, the Living Theater performed their adaptation of Brecht's version of *Antigone* and their own *Paradise Now*, a work replete with nudity and audience participation, which at the urging of company members spilled into streets during the 1968 Avignon Theater Festival. Like *US* and *An Evening's Entertainment*, both of these works obliterated what Bertolt Brecht has referred to as the fourth wall between audience and performers and attempted to destroy the distinction between theatrical performance and revolutionary political action. Peter Weiss, best known for his groundbreaking 1963 play *Marat/Sade*—a work strongly influenced by Brecht and Antonin Artaud that lays bare the failure of the French Revolution—and his 1965 documentary play *The Investigation*, about the Frankfurt-Auschwitz war crime trials, also became a theatrical model and mentor for the budding Syrian playwright and theater theoretician. Wannous met Weiss in Paris in 1968, the same year he wrote *An*

Evening's Entertainment and attended a conference in East Berlin devoted to Brecht.

Wannous developed a close relationship with his teacher Jean-Marie Serreau, a comedian turned theater director who also became a mentor for the revolutionary Algerian playwright Kateb Yacine and the renowned Caribbean writer and political theorist Aimé Césaire. It is clear in Wannous's plays from the late 1960s and the 1970s, however, that the principal theatrical influence during this period was Bertolt Brecht, as playwright, theatrical theoretician, and political thinker. During this period, Brecht's vision of drama as an instrument of social critique and revolutionary change offered an aesthetic and political model for a number of other theater artists from the so-called developing world, among them Augusto Boal, Wole Soyinka, and Athol Fugard.

On June 5, 1967, when Israel attacked Egypt, Wannous was living and studying in Paris. In less than a week the decimated armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria had capitulated, with the political landscape in the Middle East having radically changed and Israel having occupied the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights in Syria. As Wannous recounts, Nasser's acknowledgment of the truth and scale of the Arabs' defeat left the young Syrian playwright feeling as if he were "suffocating."³ He returned briefly to Damascus and then went back to Paris where he dropped the project he was working on and began writing the bitterly ironic *An Evening's Entertainment*. Thus much of the play, which is itself a clarion call for revolution, was composed in Paris during the period leading up to and including the mass demonstrations at the Sorbonne and elsewhere in France in May 1968.

The play, unlike anything that had ever been staged in the Arab world, is a highly original metatheatrical hybrid that draws on both Brecht's teaching plays and his technique of breaking the fourth wall, although in Wannous's case he shatters even the semblance of a demarcation between performers and audience by placing throughout

the playing arena actors who comment upon the action, offer choral counterpoints to stage dialogue, and enter the main action by walking up onto the stage. The “play” itself is little more than the sketch of a second-rate, socialist-realist, peasant drama dreamed up by the apparatchik director of the theater who has had no personal experience of the recent defeat and who has hired a playwright to expand upon the facile piece of propaganda that he, the director, has cooked up. However, the playwright, who has decided that the words in his text smell like a “prostitute’s vagina,” has refused to allow the play to go forward, and when the theater director attempts to dramatize the scene of his refusal with an actor, the “actual” playwright comes up out of the audience to join the fray and play himself. This dramatic ruse, which in the hands of a less adroit playwright might fall completely flat, is but one of a seemingly endless series of sly theatrical tricks that Wannous employs as he simultaneously enacts the gruesome truth of the recent war, questions the ability of any theatrical rendering to dramatize war’s actual horrors, and repeatedly skewers the terrifying regime of the Ba’th Party and its cultural toadies for the Orwellian lies they have perpetrated. Wannous brilliantly frames all of these theatrical proceedings about a catastrophic defeat under the saccharine title of a *haflat samar* (literally, “an evening of entertainment”), a *soirée* or traditional evening of song and dance and other light entertainment in the Arab world. Wannous says he hoped that the play, which ends with a literal call to arms, would spill into the streets and spark an insurrection. He was bitterly disappointed when it was first produced in Damascus in 1969 and met with tepid approval and mixed reviews. He should not have been surprised, since many of those in the audience were themselves very similar to the compromised Eastern bloc cultural bureaucrats he so successfully satirizes in the play, and the regime—though it did not punish him and would itself be overthrown by Hafez al-Assad two years later—was notorious for vicious retribution against its perceived political opponents.

Assad seized power in 1971 shortly before Wannous's next play, *The Adventure of the Head of Mamlouk Jabir*, the second in this volume, was set to be staged. Like a number of Wannous's plays, *Mamlouk Jabir* draws on a significant historical event in the Arab world, in this case the sack of Baghdad by Hulagu Khan in the thirteenth century with the connivance of the chief Arab minister, who betrays his caliph. Assad's censors, who no doubt perceived the allegory of betrayal as too reminiscent of the treacherous political atmosphere of contemporary Syria, refused to allow the play to be performed. Ironically, Assad's government, as it frequently did, promoted the play as an example of Syrian culture elsewhere in the Eastern bloc, where it was unlikely to be read as a denunciation of Assad for betraying his superiors. The play was first staged in East Berlin and later in Moscow and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. In one of the two interviews included in this volume, Wannous talks about the reception of his play in the Soviet Union, and his discussion, among other things, reminds the reader that not only did Brecht spend the final years of his career working for the state theater in the German Democratic Republic, but also that theater in Syria, which was effectively an Eastern bloc country, was inevitably deeply influenced by Russian theater. In fact, when one comes to understand how profound the influence of the Moscow Art Theatre, Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, and Chekhov was in places like Damascus, the notion of Wannous as an "Arab" writer—in the sense that contemporary parlance about Islamism, the Middle East, and the Syrian civil war in the Western media might suggest—is particularly fatuous. Not only was Wannous, like almost all of the artists of his generation in the Arab world at this time, a committed Marxist, he was a cosmopolitan, postcolonial writer who read and studied a wide range of literary, theatrical, and philosophical traditions and repeatedly compared his country's predicament and struggle—and that of the Palestinians against the United States's only ally in the region, Israel—to that of the Vietcong in Vietnam, who were fighting the American military directly.

Although *Mamlouk Jabir* may be read as a Brechtian allegory, it, like *An Evening's Entertainment*, is another extraordinarily innovative hybrid. Wannous's work is another play-within-a-play, but in this case he frames the drama by setting it in the most traditional of settings in the Arab world, a coffeehouse, and by utilizing the most traditional of Arab performative figures, the *hakawati*, or storyteller. Wannous continues his preoccupation with the audience—one that is central to the aesthetic of his earlier works and elaborated in his essay "It All Begins with the Audience," also included here—but in this case instead of bringing audience members onto the stage to join the drama, they are central to its dynamic from the play's inception. As Mu'nis, the storyteller, tells the tale of the Mamlouk Jabir, a slave who works for the vizier, the minister who is conniving to betray the caliph to the general of the army encircling Baghdad, the figures whom Mu'nis is describing appear onstage in front of the patrons. Throughout the action the coffeehouse patrons serve as an unruly audience onstage, alternately commenting on the characters' actions, requesting that another story be told, ordering additional cups of coffee from the waiter, and expressing their dismay at how different this tale is from the lighthearted fare to which they are accustomed. In another striking departure from traditional modern plays from the Arab world and elsewhere during this period and earlier, *Mamlouk Jabir*, like Brecht's *Mother Courage*, offers the story of a significant historical event from below, from the point of view of servants and slaves. Not only do these characters offer novel interpretations of political events and the behavior of their better-known superiors, their perspectives inevitably foreground concerns that had heretofore been largely excluded from respectable bourgeois drama such as heightened consciousness of class and a necessary preoccupation with the basic necessities of life such as bread. Arguably Wannous's most significant innovation in *Mamlouk Jabir* is his creation of the title character, a charming slave who, out of necessity, has learned to live by his wits and charm. It is he who, in a moment of acute politi-

cal crisis, seizes an opportunity, contriving a brilliant solution for how to smuggle a message through the heavily guarded checkpoints surrounding the city to the general of the besieging army. Taking what he sees as his one chance to rise in social status and win the hand of the servant girl who has caught his eye, he offers up his own body as a textual medium. In an interview included here that was conducted after the performances of the play in what was then the USSR, Wannous discusses his pleasure at the production's emphasis on the work's comic aspects. Nevertheless, the text as written, as is so often the case in Wannous's work, begins as a seemingly lighthearted and humorous tale but abruptly takes a darkly ironic turn that is reminiscent of the story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*.

Critics generally divide Wannous's work into plays written before and after 1977. Not only are the works from the two periods starkly different, the year 1977, for a number of reasons, constitutes much more than an arbitrary demarcation in Wannous's oeuvre. For many in the West, Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the ensuing thaw in Egyptian-Israeli relations that led to the Camp David Accords constitute two of the few bright spots in a seemingly interminable and intractable conflict between Israel, the Palestinians, and the larger Arab world. For Wannous and many Arab intellectuals of his generation, however, Sadat's gesture represented not a realistic accommodation to an implacable and determined foe that had humiliated Arab armies twice in the space of seven years, but a complete capitulation to a colonial oppressor and U.S. proxy. Whereas many African states had recently succeeded in shedding their colonial masters, and just two years prior the United States had abandoned Saigon to the Vietcong, who had soundly defeated two imperial powers in two decades, Arab nationalism had, in the same span of twenty years, been obliterated and, in the eyes of Wannous and others, its leaders reduced to pathetic figures groveling before their tormentors. Moreover, as the architect of the accord, former President Jimmy Carter, has subsequently admitted, the agreement left unresolved the thorniest and

the most emotional issue between Israel and the Arabs, the continuing occupation of Palestinian territory. For supporters of Palestine like Wannous, Sadat's failure to insist on a resolution on the status of the Palestinians in the accord and his willingness to make a separate peace with Israel must have seemed a rank betrayal.

In an interview for *There Are So Many Things Still to Say*, a documentary about Wannous by Syrian filmmaker Omar Amiralay made shortly before the playwright's death in 1997, Wannous says that, although Sadat's visit to Jerusalem did not take him completely by surprise, it left him emotionally and artistically shattered. The event became the catalyst for a complete nervous breakdown and an unsuccessful suicide attempt that left him unable or unwilling to write plays for a dozen years. During this period Wannous did not completely abandon Brecht as an aesthetic and political model, nor did he immediately repudiate his previous engagé approach to playwriting that viewed theater as a tool for civic and political transformation. In fact, when he did finally compose another play, *The Rape*, published in 1989, it was an adaptation of *The Double Life of Dr. Valmy*, a work about torture in Franco's Spain by the Spanish playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo, transplanted to the West Bank and set during the first Intifada in 1987. The play contains a ferocious condemnation of the use of rape by Israel's internal security service, Shin Bet, as a tool of interrogation and humiliation for the purpose of suppressing the uprising, and several Israeli Zionist characters are portrayed as unremittingly repugnant. However, the work also contains a Palestinian who collaborates with the Israelis so he can be reunited with his family, and it offers nuanced and sympathetic portraits of both a conflicted and repentant Shin Bet interrogator and his Israeli psychiatrist, who abhors Zionism. A character named Sa'dallah Wannous appears at the end of the play to engage in dialogue with the psychiatrist and to denounce Arab demagogues and what he describes as "Arab Zionism." Not surprisingly, the play's multifaceted rendering of Israeli characters garnered him few plaudits in the Arab world, and accord-

ing to an interview Wannous granted to the *New York Times*, not only was the production of the play banned by Syrian censors, the appearance of Wannous's name in party-controlled newspapers in Syria was also forbidden.⁴ The play was first produced in Beirut in 1991 by the Iraqi director Jawad al-Assadi, who removed the storyline related to the Palestinians. Wannous condemned the changes when an integral version was later published in his collected works. Nonetheless, al-Assadi's production received awards and excellent reviews when it was staged in Cairo and in other Arab countries.⁵

As is clear in Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab's study *Contemporary Arab Thought*, Wannous was as much a social and political theorist as playwright. Like most Arab intellectuals of his generation, he was—at least in his early career—a Marxist, Arab nationalist, and anticolonialist who had in substantial measure been shaped by the creation of Israel in 1948, the wars between Israel and the Arab states, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both politically and artistically he had absorbed a wide range of influences from France, elsewhere in Europe, and the Eastern bloc. As he engaged in the process of interrogating his own programmatic Marxist and anti-Zionist worldview that presupposed an eventual socialist revolution of which committed art was an essential component, he increasingly turned his attention to a group of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arab intellectuals associated with the *Nahda*, or “enlightenment,” whose project was to critique and modernize the Arab world. Although he never abandoned Marxism, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, and he frequently expressed repulsion at what he saw as the devastation to culture, especially Arab folk culture, wrought by globalization and the rampant spread of consumerism, he became increasingly preoccupied with the internal reasons for the failures in Arab and Islamic societies.

Two especially illuminating examples of Wannous's social, political, and philosophical reconsiderations in the late 1980s and 1990s can be found in his writings during that period about Sayyid Qutb

and Taha Hussein. Qutb, who was hanged in 1965 after supposedly plotting along with his cohorts in the Muslim Brotherhood to assassinate Nasser, was one of the principal intellectual architects of the modern Muslim Brotherhood, which briefly came to power in Egypt in 2012 via elections after Hosni Mubarak was deposed, and one of the most significant spiritual and political influences on Ayman al-Zawahri, the spiritual and operational leader of al Qaeda. As Kasab outlines, Wannous unequivocally rejected Qutb's resort in his thinking to the idea of *turath* (heritage or civilizational culture) as an ahistorical talismanic concept suggesting that all Arabs are united through the glorious Islamic past. Conversely, Wannous pointed to Taha Hussein, a twentieth-century Egyptian literary scholar, translator, and educator, who, like Wannous, studied at the Sorbonne, as a model of the modern Arab thinker. Hussein had written historically about literature, including Islamic literature, rejected religious education and rote learning, acknowledged the extent of Greek and Roman influence on Arab literature, and, like Wannous, viewed civil society in a secular, democratic state with guaranteed freedoms as a prerequisite for political and intellectual advancement.⁶ In addition to admiring various political and philosophical thinkers of the Nahda, Wannous continued to view two nineteenth-century theater artists from the Levant, the Syrian playwright Abou Khalil al-Qabbani and the Lebanese playwright Maroun al-Naqqash, as precursors and political models. Al-Naqqash was the first writer to introduce European-style drama to the region with his adaptation of Molière's *The Miser*, staged in Beirut in 1848. Al-Qabbani, whose life and theater were subjects of a 1972 play by Wannous in which he interrogates the concepts of heritage and cultural authenticity, ran afoul of the religious authorities in Damascus in the 1880s, who shut down his theater for subverting public morals by, among other things, using female actors. As Wannous told Mary Ilyas in a 1994 interview included here entitled "For the First Time Writing Is a Form of Freedom," he particularly admired the experimentation these playwrights undertook. "The

solutions they came up with to cultivate a particular kind of theater provoke awe,” he said. “These pioneers constitute the tradition that influenced me more than any other.”

Another key factor in Wannous’s reassessment of his artistic and intellectual projects was the fact that in 1992 he was diagnosed with cancer of the pharynx. After an initial remission, the disease spread to his liver, and his doctor told him he had only six months to live. As he said in his speech “Thirst for Dialogue,” also included in this volume, which he gave in 1996, the year before his death, after being selected by UNESCO to give an address on “World Theater Day” that was circulated to theaters worldwide, he was determined after the diagnosis to go on writing as long as possible to engender dialogue and defend theater, which he saw as besieged by commercialism. “Writing,” he said, “and specifically writing for the theater, has been one of the most important means I have had to fight [cancer].”

As a result of his reflections on the Arab Nahda, his intensive reconsideration of programmatic Marxism, his own attempts to transform an underdeveloped and authoritarian society through theater, and a medical diagnosis that amounted to a death sentence, Wannous’s writing underwent a profound transformation. As Wannous acknowledged in the 1994 interview with Mary Ilyas, he had previously believed that “individual strife or personal idiosyncrasies were unessential shallow bourgeois matters that should be set aside. My concern was all focused on the comprehension of history so I mistakenly thought that my consideration of the process of history must transcend individualities and the traps of bourgeois writing.” By his own admission, after his cancer diagnosis his works no longer portrayed individuals as forces and products of history and social conditions but as complex, contradictory, feeling beings whose weaknesses and tenacity in the face of the intractable forces arrayed against them often made them seem heroic. He suddenly expressed open admiration for the work of Chekhov, a political liberal whose tragicomedies about human foibles eschew programmatic solutions, and

of Shakespeare, whose depictions of human psychology at every level of society defy reductive ideological interpretations. In the 1990s, in chameleonlike fashion, Wannous rapidly produced plays in a variety of styles such as *Historical Miniatures*, a series of dramatizations of key episodes in Arab history that draws on the visual arts in a manner similar to that later used by Orhan Pamuk in his novel *My Name Is Red*; and *Drunken Days*, based on the life of the mother of his friend Omar Amiralay, which is the story of a Lebanese Christian woman in the 1930s who receives visitations from a jinn, or spirit, that clearly seems to be a manifestation of her suppressed erotic desires and who eventually abandons her husband and children for a Muslim man with whom she has fallen in love. In the 1990s, female characters began to figure much more prominently in Wannous's work, in part because, like Shaw at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, he recognized that the predicament of women—in this case in the Arab world at the end of the twentieth century—was the ideal subject for the stage. He also wished to use the stage as an arena for explicating the dilemmas of women and for imagining radically different futures for Arab women as his legacy to his own daughter, Dima, who herself ultimately became a writer.

Wretched Dreams, which is also included in this volume, appears on the surface to draw on some of the themes from Wannous's earliest works for the stage. The play takes place in the 1960s immediately after the Ba'athists have come to power and are attempting to tighten their grip on Syria through a network of low-level spies. The principal character, Mary, lives in a home in rural Syria with her feckless husband, Faris, whom we soon discover gave her a venereal disease years earlier, shortly after they were married, which left her sterile. They share the house, which Mary owns and which has an adjoining coffeehouse, with another couple, Kazim, who is a low-level intelligence officer and abusive husband, and his wife and cousin Ghada, who is Mary's friend. All but one of the scenes take place in the claustrophobic rooms in the house, which also contains a sophis-

ticated and mysterious lodger who, to Faris's profound distress, Mary claims is her long-lost son. The appearance of this ghost child, now decades older, at first brings the two women much closer but eventually wreaks havoc in the lives of both couples. In the play's most extraordinary and inventive scene, which may or may not be one or more characters' dreams, we see the lodger for the first and only time as he engages in a series of grotesque and deeply disturbing interactions with Mary and Faris. Although the solidarity that Mary and Ghada achieve as they admire the cultured lodger and conspire against their male tormentors is tragically thwarted, the theme of women directly challenging the authority of powerful men is central to Wannous's most accomplished later work, *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, which is the final play in this volume.

Written in 1994, the play is loosely based on a historical incident in Damascus in the 1880s when the two most powerful religious leaders in the city, the Mufti and the Naqib al-Ashraf, were involved in a feud and the Mufti arranged his rival's arrest for love-making in a private park with his female consort. From this thread, Wannous weaves a fictional story of female empowerment in which the Naqib's wife, Mu'mina, agrees to the Mufti's request to save her husband from complete humiliation by substituting herself for the consort who is sharing his jail cell in exchange for a divorce. Once free of the Naqib, she changes her name to Almasa, "the diamond," and embarks on a journey of self-discovery, sexual liberation, and spiritual transformation that upends the entire social and political order of the city. However, Almasa is but one of a number of characters who undergo radical metamorphoses in a play that deals overtly with male homosexuality, religious and legal corruption, prostitution, and pedophilia. Drawing on the ritual theatricality and promise of self-enlightenment inherent in Sufism and plot elements drawn from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *Twelfth Night*, Wannous has created another stunningly original theatrical hybrid that presaged many of the latent desires in Arab societies that began to emerge

during the so-called Arab Spring, which began more than a dozen years after Wannous's death in 1997. In fact, a production of the play in 2011 at the American University of Cairo was explicitly linked to the uprising in Syria. *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* was also translated into French and produced at the Comédie-Française in 2013, and the translation in this collection was the basis of the first English-language version, which was also produced in 2013 at Babel Theater in Beirut. Although Wannous wrote two more plays after *Rituals*, since his death it has become a sort of epic valedictory that has ensured his position as the most important playwright from the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century and one of its most important writers and thinkers.

Although shortly before he died Wannous spoke for himself in the often quoted line from his 1997 address on World Theater Day that gives this volume its title, one cannot help but also hear his voice in the words of Almasa, who near the end of *Rituals* tries to explain her desire for a new self and society to the Mufti. Almasa tells the clergyman, who has by now fallen hopelessly in love with her: "My approach to love is impossible in a place where everyone's either a slave or a prisoner . . . I don't want to own or be owned by anyone . . . I want to be free, to live without a brand. Around me I see nothing but trivialities. I've lost. It's possible I was unable to differentiate among my desires, but I won't retreat." As if he himself were a product of the magically contradictory logic of Sufism he employs in the play, Wannous was an Arab writer who embraced cosmopolitanism, an Arab nationalist who relentlessly explored defeat instead of celebrating victory, and a political playwright whose most powerful ideological statement was the creation of a female protagonist doomed by an almost erotic desire for a new kind of society. Nonetheless, within the dark vision of his own society that his plays dramatize, he offers his readers glints of the hope he claims we cannot live without.

Robert Myers and Nada Saab

NOTES

1. Ali Naji al-Anezi, *An Analytical Study of the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous, With Particular Emphasis on the Plays Written After the 1967 War* (University of Sheffield, UK, unpublished dissertation, 2006), 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 215.
5. Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 142.
6. Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).