**Wannus, Saadallah** (1941-1997), Syria’s best known and most respected contemporary playwright, was born in Tartous province. His plays were deeply critical of Arab power structures and several of these plays were censored in Syria. However his fame insured their wide dissemination and shortly before his death from cancer his complete works were published in Syria in three volumes. Several scholars divide Wannus’s output into three periods. The first period represents Wannus’s experimentations with European modernism, especially Expressionism and Symbolism. Typical of these movements, these plays are attentive to the stultifying social (and economic) conditions that oppress characters. The second period is often referred to as that of “Politicizing Theatre,” a phrase that Wannus discussed in the introduction to this play, mughamarat ras al-mamluk jabir (*The Adventure of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk* 1970). The period is marked by the use of indigenous tales and performance forms that directly engage audience members. Usually allegorical, these works draw audience attention to their own responsibility in creating and perpetuating the existing power structures. This period also marks Wannus’s engagement with Brecht. The late works feature a new attention to psychological complexity, specifically exploring how these psychologies are shaped by and help shape oppressive power structures in the family and the state in specific historical moments.

Wannus came to prominence with haflat samar min ajl khamsah haziran (*Soriee for the Fifth of June* 1968), the first play of his Politicizing Theatre period. The play, written immediately following Arab defeat in the June War, featured actors posing as audience members who contest depictions of the war on the stage and start an impromptu debate over the causes of defeat and the effects of an oppressive state on national identity. His next play, mughamarat ras al-mamluk jabir (*The Adventures of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk* 1970) was censored on opening night but then went on to successful productions in international festivals. Dejected by political events in the late 1970s, Wannus gave up playwriting for thirteen years, but returned with al-ightisab (*The Rape* 1989), the first play of the third phase. Wannus adapted the play from Antonio Burero Vallerjo’s La doble historia del doctor Valmy (*The Double Case-History of Dr. Valmy* 1968) and like its source *The Rape* depicts the psychological trauma experienced by a torturer of political prisoners who finds himself incapable of protecting his family life from the violence of his working life. Set in Israel, the play sparked controversy for its depiction of a sympathetic and anti-Zionist Israeli. After completing *The Rape*, Wannus was diagnosed with cancer and then, in a flurry of playwriting, wrote six full-length plays and a one-act between 1992 and his death in 1997—several of which are widely considered his very best. Of special note in this later period are: munamnaamat tarikhiyah (*Historical Miniatures* 1993), which explores the meaning of history in the aftermath of George Bush’s New World Order speech by depicting the Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun’s calculated response to Tamerlane’s invasion of Damascus in the fourteenth century; tuqus al-isharat wa-al-tahawwulat (*Rituals of Signs and Transformation*, 1994), which explores prostitution and homosexuality in Ottoman era Damascus; and ahlam shaqqiyah (*Wretched Dreams* 1994), which examines domestic abuse and the rise of the Baath security apparatus as linked phenomena in 1960s Damascus. In 1996 UNESCO selected Wannus to deliver the World Theatre Day address.

List of Works

haflat samar min ajl khamsah haziran (*Soriee for the Fifth of June* 1968)

mughamarat ras al-mamluk jabir (*The Adventure of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk* 1970)

al-malik huwa al-malik (*The King is the King*, 1977)

al-ightisab (*The Rape* 1989)

munamnaamat tarikhiyah (*Historical Miniatures* 1993)

tuqus al-isharat wa-al-tahawwulat (*Rituals of Signs and Transformation*, 1994),

ahlam shaqqiyah (*Wretched Dreams* 1994)

References and Further Reading

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paratextual material



Wikipedia, French

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