**Sa`d Allah** **Wannūs (1941-1997)**

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Wannūs Sa`d Allah, 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 either banned for a period of time or their production had been delayed under the regime of Hafiz. However, his fame insured their wide dissemination and shortly before his death from cancer his complete works were published in Syria in three volumes. His plays are still well-known in the Arab world; many of them are performed in various Arab countries, including Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait. Several of his plays have also been translated into French, German, and other European languages.

Life

Wannūs was born in 1941 to a poor family in a Syrian village called Ḥuṣain al-Baḥr, which is also the birthplace of the Syrian novelist Ḥaidar Ḥaidar (1936-). In the village that overlooks the Mediterranean, Wannūs completed primary level education before moving to the port city [Ṭ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E1%B9%AC)arṭūs to attend his secondary school, which he completed in 1959. He was awarded a scholarship (for being the top Syrian student in the secondary school) to obtain a journalism degree from Cairo University. While still a university student, he wrote his first play, *Life Forever* (1961), which he never published. When he returned to Syria in 1963, he started working for the Ministry of Culture and wrote *Medusa Staring at Life,* and also began writing short stories and critical essays. In 1965, he joined the leading government newspaper, *al-Ba*`*th,* as its cultural editor; during this time, he resided in Damascus, where he started to explore its cultural and social fabric. Between the years 1966-1968 and 1973-1974, Wannūs received other government grants to study in France, where he attended the Theater of Nations in Paris. The June 1967 war brought an undeniable defeat to Arab intellectuals, and Wannus, whose stay in Paris was interrupted, tried to analyze the symptoms of this setback, composing as a result one of his most recognized and powerful plays, *Soirée for the 5th of June (1968).* Dejected by political events in the late 1970s, Wannūs gave up playwriting for thirteen years, but returned with al-ightisab (*The Rape*) in 1989. Wannous published his last play, *The Mirage Epic* in 1995. He was chosen by the UNESCO’s International Theater Institute in Paris to deliver an address on World Theater Day. On March 27, 1996, he delivered his address, entitled “Theater and the Thirst for Dialogue.” on May 15, 1997, Wannous died (at age 56) in Damascus after a courageous 6 year struggle with cancer.

Career

Scholars divide Wannūs’s output into three periods.

First Period

This period represents Wannūs’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 Wannūs 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 Wannūs ’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.

Second Period

Wannūs 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.

Third Period

*The Rape* (1989) is the first play of the third phase. Wannūs 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*, Wannūs 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.

Wannūs was an exemplar of social and political critique through politicized plays and writings. His death was considered by many as the loss of a daring and creative playwright and a free intellectual. He can be seen as the founding father of ‘politicizing theater,’ or a politically mobilizing theater where such essential issues as oppression, tyranny, lack of dialogue, and the impotence of both Arab rulers and citizens are raised.

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

Allen, Roger. “Arabic Drama in Theory and Practice: The Writings of Saadallah Wannūs ” Journal of Arabic Literature 15(1984) 94-113.

Alqam, Sabhah Ahmad. Al-masrah al-siyasi ‘inda Saadallah Wannūs . Amman: S.A. Alqam, 2000.

paratextual material



Wikipedia, French

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