

**AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE THEATRE OF THE SYRIAN
PLAYWRIGHT SAADALLAH WANNOUS, WITH PARTICULAR
EMPHASIS ON THE PLAYS WRITTEN AFTER THE 1967 WAR**

A thesis submitted by

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This work is dedicated to my father, Ali al-Naji al-Anezi, who died before I was born, and whom I came to know and love through the words of others; and to my uncle, 'Assaf al-Naji al-Anezi who raised me as a son.

ABSTRACT

An Analytical Study of the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous, With Particular Emphasis on the Plays Written after the 1967 War

This study is an examination of the life and work of the Syrian dramatist Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997). Wannous's name is virtually unknown in the West; only two academic studies of any significance have appeared in English on this eminent and challenging writer, who was honoured by UNESCO at the end of his life. Even in the Arab world his standing rests largely upon his celebrity as a cultural icon, since professional performances of his plays are rare due to the decline of the theatre in the region, and little attention has been devoted to theatre studies by Arab academics. The two studies in English do not attempt to be comprehensive but focus on particular stages of Wannous's career. This study is, therefore, the first to encompass the full range of Wannous's work. To do so it combines an account of his life which seeks to comprehend the various forces that shaped his thinking with an analysis of his dramatic works. The study concentrates on the plays written in the years following the trauma inflicted on the Arab world by the catastrophe of their defeat in the Arab – Israeli war of June, 1967.

Wannous's career can be divided into three phases: the immature plays of his young manhood which are influenced by European models and generally focus on the social condition of the individual; his middle period – the 'theatre of politicisation', when his Marxist politics were the main factor shaping his drama; and his late works, which are characterised by an extraordinary freedom of thought and expression.

The introduction places Wannous in his historical and sociocultural context and provides a brief background explaining the literary and theatrical traditions of the Arab world that influenced his activity as a dramatist. Each phase is then examined in turn and the plays are analysed in accordance with the focus of the study. This means that emphasis is given to the middle period, but no significant work is neglected.

The study aims to trace the trajectory of Wannous's development using a variety of sources: the plays themselves, Wannous's own journalism and critical writings, interviews with his widow, his friends and colleagues, and numerous journals, books and articles, some of which contain important interviews with Wannous that shed light on his thought and ways of working. Use is also made of the two studies mentioned above. The study shows that Wannous's theatre was influenced by the key political, social and cultural developments of his time, and that he constantly sought to find forms that would express those transformations in dramatic terms.

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Brief Chronology

PLAYS

EVENTS

1941

Saadallah Wannous
born in Huseen Albahr,
Syria.

1959

Wannous begins
studies in journalism at
Cairo University.

1961

UAR dissolved.

1963

Wannous obtains
degree in journalism.

*Corpse on the
Pavement*

1964

*Gush of Blood
The Tragedy of the
Poor Seller of
Molasses*

1965

*The Unknown
Messenger at
Antigone's Funeral
Ceremony
The Game of Pins
The Locusts
The Glass Café*

1966

Wannous begins
studies at the Sorbonne,
Paris.

1967

Six-Day War.

1968

*Evening Party for the
Fifth of June*

May events in Paris.
Wannous interviews
Bernard Dort and Jean-
Marie Serrault.

1969

The King's Elephant

Damascus Festival of
Theatre Arts.

1970

Essay, Manifestos for a
New Arab Theatre.

	1971	
<i>The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head</i>		
	1972	
<i>Soirée with Abu Abu Khaleel al-Qabani</i>		
	1973	October War. Wannous interviews Jean Genet, Jean-Louis Barrault.
	1977	Wannous attempts suicide following Sadat's visit to Israel.
<i>The King's the King</i>		
	1986	Wannous interviewed by Nabil al-Hafar.
	1989	
<i>The Rape</i>		
	1992	Wannous diagnosed with cancer
<i>Historical Miniatures</i>		
	1993	
<i>A Day of Our Time</i>		
	1994	
<i>Miserable Dreams Rituals of signs and Transformations</i>		
	1995	
<i>The Mirage Epic The Drunken Days</i>		
	1996	Wannous delivers UNESCO address.
<i>About Memory and Death</i>		
	1997	Wannous dies.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The name of the Syrian dramatist Saadallah Wannous is virtually unknown to Western readers and theatregoers despite his reputation among his own people; only one of his major works has been translated into English, as part of an anthology intended for students and academics.¹ It must also be admitted that even in the Arab world Wannous's fame rests not so much on his plays as on his well-documented struggle with cancer and on the honour bestowed upon him by UNESCO towards the end of his life. This contradiction is attributable to two factors: as the scholar Ali al Souleman points out,² theatre in the Arab world and elsewhere has lost its dominance as an art form as film, television and computers have gained in status; and surprisingly little attention is devoted to theatre studies by Arab academics. Thus Wannous the dramatist has been eclipsed by Wannous the celebrity. Given this situation, it is not surprising that Wannous's fame has not spread beyond the Arab world. Moreover, it is not only Arabic drama that has failed to penetrate the West; even though the complex politics of the Middle East have become a matter of universal concern after the events of 11 September 2001, the literature of the Arabs has received scant attention outside the Arab and Muslim worlds - the two great exceptions being the collection of tales known as the *Thousand and One Nights*, and the Holy Quran, Islam's sacred text and the Arabs' cultural yardstick. As M. M. Badawi has noted, this neglect is particularly true of modern practitioners: 'Despite the fact that the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz in 1988, modern Arabic literature is hardly known outside a narrow circle of academic specialists'.³ It is the aim of this study to contribute to the understanding of Arabic literature and modern Arabic drama in particular, by presenting the entirety of Wannous's career as a dramatist and analysing the most important works in detail, though concentrating on the plays written in the years following the June War of 1967; that is, from 1968 to 1977; and this chapter will

attempt to provide a background, necessarily brief, to Wannous' theatre. First, Wannous's life and work will be discussed in the context of the social, political and cultural developments that helped shape his thought; second, the development of Arabic drama will be briefly described; third, the study's aims, methods, and sources will be discussed, and the organisation of the thesis will be outlined.

Saadallah Wannous

Huseen Albahr is a tranquil village in the north of Tartous province, situated on a plateau in the mountains with a commanding view of the Mediterranean coast. It was here that Wannous was born on 19 February 1941; Wannous's generation was the first to be able to benefit from the new educational opportunities and his parents encouraged his studies. Although Wannous's parents were by no means destitute, it should be remembered that they, and all the other peasants in Huseen Albahr and beyond, were living under a feudal system inherited from the Ottoman Empire and which France had done nothing to reform. The excesses of the feudal landlords were recorded in living memory, and Wannous' grandfathers would apparently tell him tales of their cruelty.⁴ The lords of Huseen Albahr owned over 100 square kilometers of land and had ruled the district for more than two hundred years, a period characterised by oppression, injustice and legalised murder. When the landlord made the rounds of his properties, men from each village would be forced to carry him on a litter over rough tracks from place to place, and his arrival would be celebrated with drums and flutes, and his pronouncements greeted with enthusiasm. Any peasant who refused to comply would be severely punished.⁵ It seems that Wannous himself never witnessed any such incidents, but his elders' bitter stories seem to have made an indelible impression on him.⁶ The power of the feudal dynasties would not be broken until 1958, the first year of the United Arab Republic (UAR), which marked the first real attempt at land reform in Syria. Wannous certainly did witness how hard the life of the peasants could be, and he also witnessed the ways in which they alleviated the harshness of their existence. One of these was the evening meeting, at which the farmers would enact impromptu dramas full of black humour and striking characters, which commented on the difficulties of their lives and their daily concerns. Wannous later explained that these spontaneous satirical performances and the characters they

generated were a source of the drama he was to produce: 'I have studied my people, and they have, unknowingly, participated in my theatre'.⁷

Thus Wannous' childhood was spent not only in academic study but, perhaps more importantly, in the study of his own people. He later spoke of the purity of the peasants' community, far removed from the contamination of modern civilisation and its materialistic complexities: 'The distinctive thing is how those people lived, helping each other in the face of life's hardships. The richest people were the poorest because of the extent of the support and charity they offered. The rich would give the poor families crops from their fields. So there was a spirit of love and solidarity among them'.⁸ His primary school teacher recalled that even as a boy Wannous was concerned with the plight of the people of his village. He remarked that he was 'a serious nationalist and brighter than the other children of his age'.⁹ As well as attending the evening meetings, Wannous and his young friends would sit among his elders as they discussed their affairs, and he also began to acquire a little knowledge of his heritage. Guests of his parents would tell the children stories, sometimes from the folk tradition; religious men would discourse on the Quran; and there might be readings from the '*Antarah*, the pre-Islamic epic of heroism and valiant deeds. These early experiences were to bear fruit in his work, particularly in his incorporation of folk elements into the plays of his middle and late periods. However, once he had distanced himself from his home village and experienced life in Cairo, Paris and Damascus, his attitudes to the world of the peasantry became problematic. In 1959, having gained his Baccalaureate, he decided to pursue his studies in the virtual capital of the Arab world. The UAR had been in existence for over a year and Syria and Egypt were officially one country. Wannous chose to study in Cairo, but as yet he had no intention of becoming a dramatist; he travelled to the Egyptian capital and took up a scholarship in journalism at the faculty of literature at Cairo University.

It was during his stay in Egypt, however, that he became increasingly interested in theatre, devouring works by European and American playwrights, including the Existentialists and practitioners of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'; he was also drawn to read critical literature on the theatre. It was at this time that Wannous became a regular reader of *Al-Adab*, the most influential Arab literary journal, which translated and published works by Camus and Sartre. In the early 1960s, the magazine had a great impact on Wannous' approach to theatre, and the influence of Existentialism is apparent in some of his early plays.¹⁰ It should also be noted that

Tawfiq al-Hakim, the pioneer of modern Arab drama, wrote a number of plays that bear witness to his interest in absurdist drama, and that Wannous wrote an essay on Hakim when he was in Cairo (now unfortunately lost). As al Souleman points out,¹¹ however, the case of Wannous and other Arab 'Existentialists' is a complex one, and he argues that Wannous was also influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd and that his work contains Expressionist and Symbolist elements. While the early plays no doubt contain elements of all these, Manal Swairjo is surely right to adopt a simpler view of these works: 'Though often said to have been influenced by Existentialist and Anarchist European theatre, these early works are focussed on the "social condition" of the individual, rather than the issues of the 'self' that mark existentialist literature'.¹²

After gaining his degree in 1963, Wannous moved to Damascus, where he served in the Ministry of Culture and became head of the drama division of *Al-Ma'rafah* magazine. He had begun while a student in Cairo to write plays somewhat on the model of Hakim's 'theatre of mind', and he continued to do so in Damascus. He became a contributor to *Al-Adab*, which published two of his early plays: *Gush of Blood*, and *The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses*, written in 1963 and 1964 respectively. In 1966 he left for France and the Sorbonne, where he pursued his study of theatre, broadening his reading and acquainting himself with various schools.¹³ He wrote no plays in France, but returned to journalism, conducting a number of interviews with academics at the Sorbonne, which were subsequently published in various Arab magazines and newspapers. Of particular interest is his interview with his professor, Jean-Marie Serrault. Asked to advise Arab dramatists on creating an Arab theatre in the absence of a strong indigenous modern tradition, Serrault, according to Wannous's account, replied that the attack on the abuse of authority could be based on the implied criticism of the feudal system found in the folkloric tradition. He suggested it would be a mistake to attempt to create theatre on the European models, which were inflexible and stifled spontaneity. Arab dramatists should therefore seek to make a fresh start, inspired by a collective enthusiasm.¹⁴

Serrault's advice was to bear fruit in the following years; but Wannous' studies were suddenly and rudely interrupted by the catastrophe of the Six-Day War of June 1967. The defeat was for him, as for most Arabs, a profound shock. It was 'a turning point in every respect, a disaster that destroyed established ways of thinking, especially ideas about the theatre. The defeat had a clear impact on the public in

general, and on educated men in particular, as to their beliefs, behaviour and thinking [...] only when the storm subsided was reason able to contemplate the disaster'.¹⁵ As for Wannous himself, the memory of the shock was still vivid even as he approached death. In a documentary film made by his friend and collaborator Omar Amiralay, he recalled:

When Nasser acknowledged the 1967 defeat and we knew for certain it was true, I felt that I was going to die. I was suffocating! I cried and cried! I felt that this was the end; history and time had stopped. Everything connecting me to life, to being itself, had collapsed. I'd have to enshroud and bury the past if I wanted to continue the journey – but what could tomorrow hold for me? I didn't know.¹⁶

The catastrophe of June 1967 marked a turning-point in Wannous's life and work, and led directly to the writing of *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, which as well as being written expressly for the stage (the early plays had been written to be read rather than performed), was his first overtly 'political' play, and his first notable success. It will be useful here to provide a brief account of the developments that had led to the defeat. As a child Wannous had imbibed tales of colonial misrule and the cruelty of feudal landlords, as a young adult he had witnessed the founding and dissolution of the UAR, and like all Arabs he was dismayed by the continuing existence and growing strength of Israel. It seems right, therefore, to give some account of the world he had grown up in.

The last two major attempts of Britain and France, the two former colonial powers, to reassert their position in Arab countries were the Suez crisis of 1956 and the Algerian war (the 'War of a Million Martyrs') of 1954-62. British withdrawal from Palestine had led to the creation of the State of Israel, a major defeat for the Arabs. Arab societies were in the process of rapid change, and the dominant idea of the 1940s and 1950s was that of a nationalism not of individual countries but of the Arab peoples as a whole. This idea was embodied for a time in the personality of Nasser, the ruler of Egypt, whose major achievements, such as the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956 and the establishment of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria (1958-61), were seen as triumphs in the Arab world and led to significant changes in local and international alignments.¹⁷ The defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan at the hands of Israel in 1967, however, halted the advance of Arab

nationalism and opened a period of disunity and increasing dependency on one or another of the superpowers, with the USA in the ascendant.¹⁸

Wannous bitterly resented the USA's support of Israel and its interference in the region generally. He had been an admirer of Nasser and believed that the dissolution of the UAR had not been good for Syria. This attitude is dramatised and criticised in *Miserable Dreams*, first drafted and abandoned in the early 1960s, and revised in the 1990s. Wannous was not only deeply antipathetic to the USA, and remained so until his death, but was also an admirer of the USSR and of its support for struggles of national liberation. The theme of Arab-Israel relations obsessed Wannous throughout his life, finding expression in early works such as *Gush of Blood* and occupying him in his last years. The work with which he returned to drama in the late 1980s after a silence of more than ten years, *The Rape* (1989), deals explicitly with this issue. *Historical Miniatures*, written in 1992, is an oblique comment on Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Although Wannous had been too young to appreciate the disaster that the creation of the State of Israel represented for the Arab world in 1948 – and he does not mention its having been discussed in his village – as a young man he understood its effects and implications. After the new state had gained the upper hand against forces from Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, Israeli army policy led to the mass emigration of two-thirds of the Arab population; 75 per cent of Palestine was included within Israel's frontiers; and Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan. These events led directly to the war of June 1967, which had such a devastating effect on opinion in the Arab world and on Wannous himself; their effects continue to shape politics in the region.

Wannous placed a high value on Arab unity, and like many Arabs in general and Syrians in particular, he welcomed the establishment of the UAR. Nasser's attempt to rule Syria as he ruled Egypt antagonised the Syrians, however, and the UAR was dissolved in 1961 after a military coup in Syria. Wannous detested the new Syrian regime and all its successors without exception. He attacked the Arab dictatorships in play after play, sometimes managing to avoid the censors. He appears never to have been in personal danger for a variety of reasons, but several of his plays were banned, mostly because of their political stance. The real beneficiary of the triumph of nationalism, however, was not the Arab peoples, but the state – those who controlled the government and those in the military and civil service through whom its power was exercised. The most spectacular example of state intervention, however,

was given not by industry but by reform of the system of landownership. This had the greatest political and social importance, because most of the population of the Arab countries still lived in the countryside and also because almost everywhere the large landowners formed the most powerful class, possessing the most influence over the government and the most capital. Land reform in Syria took place under the UAR. The process was retarded by the political power of the big landowners but eventually their power was broken. This is a major reason for Wannous's disappointment that the UAR was dissolved so soon. However, the lot of the peasants was not greatly improved, and in the early 1970s Wannous and Omar Amiralay made a documentary film on the misery of peasant life; it was promptly banned by the authorities. As for oil, Wannous was always concerned that oil wealth was not used to benefit the people or as a weapon against the Arab nation's enemies. His attitude to the oil-rich state is expressed (somewhat obscurely, it must be admitted) in the extraordinary imagery of the central scene of *Miserable Dreams* (1994) where a male character grows a breast that issues a black, poisonous substance. Everywhere cities grew, especially Cairo, Baghdad and Amman, which was swollen by Palestinian refugees (from 30,000 in 1948 to 250,000 in 1960). Many other Palestinians ended up in camps or slums elsewhere in Jordan, and in Syria and in Lebanon. The camps on the outskirts of Beirut, Damascus and Amman became virtual quarters of those cities.¹⁹ These refugees appear, either huddled and passive or actively defiant, in Wannous's early play *Gush of Blood* (1963).

In most cities there was a great gulf between rich and poor, particularly the destitute people who migrated from the countryside in search of a meagre living. The plight of such people is dramatised through the character of Khaddour in *The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses* (1964). This gap became wider than ever, giving rise to popular movements and mass demonstrations in which students and workers figured prominently. 'With the failure of the social democratic experiment the populace looked for salvation either to the extreme Right (Muslim Brotherhood) or the extreme Left (Marxism)'.²⁰ Islam remained a powerful force, and there were modernist attempts to reform the faith that were influential among the educated elite and reflected the discontent many Arabs felt with themselves and their world. Perhaps the writer 'who best expressed the problems and hopes of his generation'²¹ was Taha Hussein (1889-1973), a blind scholar, historian, novelist and critic, who was committed to the cause of social justice. Hussein is unquestionably one of the most

significant intellectual and moral figures of the twentieth century in the Arab world, and was a great influence on Wannous in his later years.²² With the rise of the Islamists in the Middle East, Hussein has become the object of attack by conservative religious thinkers.²³ Wannous himself, though an atheist and committed secularist, always refrained from attacking Islam itself, reserving his scorn for narrow-minded or power-hungry clerics, who appear in abundance in his dramatic work and are heavily criticised in his other writings.

Leftist politics took two main forms: on the one hand, the Ba'th (Resurrection) party, which had been founded in Syria, and which in the mid-1950s amalgamated with a more explicitly socialist party, and, on the other, Nasserism in Egypt. Ba'thism was at first an ideological force only, pursuing intellectual debates about the national identity of the Syrians and their relations with other Arabic-speaking communities; by 1966 the party was in full control of Syria. The regime was run on the Soviet model, with an emphasis on official ideology and a growing personality cult centred on the leader, whose power was consolidated by the orchestration of praise from the official media.²⁴ Wannous, as we have noted, detested the Syrian Ba'th party and its leadership and attacked it vigorously if not always directly in plays such as *The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses*, *Miserable Dreams*, and *The King's Elephant* (1969). Wannous's criticism, of course, was not limited to the Syrian regime but was directed at all Arab dictatorships. The state's orchestration of the media is satirised in *Evening Party for the Fifth of June* and *Gush of Blood*, while the sacrosanct person of the ruler is ridiculed in *The King's the King* and *A Day of Our Time* (1993). Nasserism essentially appealed to Arab nationalism and unity. It was a form of 'Arab socialism' whose top-down initiatives involved the public ownership of key sectors including banks and the encouragement of equality of opportunity. Although accused by the Muslim Brothers of implementing secular policies with a veneer of Islam, and by Marxists of an 'unscientific' analysis of social relations, Nasserism had a great influence on the morale of Arabs outside Egypt, partly through the skilful use of press and radio; 'The Voice of the Arabs' was by far the most influential in the Arab world. Until 1967, public life in the Arab countries continued to be dominated by this idea of a socialist, neutralist form of Arab nationalism with Nasser as its leader and symbol. There were ominous signs, however, that Nasserism's claims and pretensions could not be sustained. Nasser's leadership had been called into question by the failure of the UAR, and there were clear limits to the common interests of the Arab states. The

central problems of relations with Israel was the major focus of unity among most of those states, and after 1964 Nasser, as the self-proclaimed leader of an Arab bloc, came under increasing pressure to act on the Palestinian question. The Palestinians themselves were leaderless and scattered among a number of states and could not act independently; although the PLO had been created by the Arab League in 1964 it was under Egyptian control.²⁵ But by the mid-1960s more radical Palestinian groups had emerged: Fatah was committed to preserving its independence from the Arab regimes and to direct military confrontation with Israel, and a number of smaller groups based in Beirut with pro-Nasserist ideas had adopted a Marxist analysis of society and the belief that Palestine could only be recovered through a fundamental revolution in the Arab countries.²⁶ Wannous was to be influenced by these ideas in his overtly political middle period. By 1965, such groups were beginning to take direct action inside Israel, which in turn began to retaliate against the Syrian Ba'th and Jordan; by 1967 Israel was strong both economically and militarily thanks to aid from the USA and other sources, and its air force in particular was more than a match for that of any Arab state. It considered itself politically stronger than its Arab neighbours, and hoped by defeating them to conquer the rest of Palestine and end the unfinished war of 1948. Neither side was prepared to compromise. Nasser, alerted by Soviet and Syrian intelligence reports, believed that Israel was about to attack Syria and arranged for the UN to withdraw its forces from the frontier with Israel; they had been there since the Suez crises of 1956. He then closed the straits of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. As tension mounted, Jordan and Syria entered into military agreements with Egypt on the ground that aggression against any Arab country would be considered aggression against Egypt.²⁷

On 5 June, Israel attacked Egypt, destroying its air force, and in the next few days occupied Sinai as far as the Suez Canal, the Palestinian part of Jordan and part of southern Syria (the 'Golan Heights'), and took Jerusalem, before a cease-fire agreed on at the UN ended the fighting.²⁸ The defeat of the Arab forces, in what became known as the Six-Day War or the June War of 1967, was a decisive turning-point in the history of the Middle East, and has continued to affect regional and global politics. As the eminent historian Albert Hourani notes, 'At a very deep level, the war left its mark on everyone in the world who identified himself as either Jew or Arab, and what had been a local conflict became a worldwide one'.²⁹ Many subsequent developments had their roots in the catastrophe: the arson attack on the al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969 and

Saudi Arabia's consequent call for a *jihad* against Israel; the October War of 1973, which ended in stalemate; Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982; and the eruption of the first *intifada* in 1987, to name only few. The failure of the Palestinian leadership to achieve a just settlement led to the increased influence of political Islam, which was further enhanced by the aborted peace process at 1991 Madrid conference.³⁰

The war humiliated the Arabs and, by extension, all Muslims in the region and beyond. Jerusalem and its Holy Places, both Christian and Muslim, were now under Jewish control, and the balance of forces had been changed. It was evident that Israel was militarily stronger than any combination of Arab states, and this made it a more desirable ally in the eyes of the USA. The Israeli occupation of what remained of Arab Palestine drove more Palestinians to become refugees, and more came under Israeli rule. Several burning questions were raised in the aftermath of the war. Should Israel continue to occupy the conquered territories or trade 'land for peace'? Should some kind of political entity be created for the Palestinians? How could the Arab states win back their lost lands? How could the great powers achieve a settlement that would not result in another war which might draw them in? Initiatives, however, were lacking on all sides, and the parties quickly entrenched themselves in their new positions.³¹

In the Arab world the defeat led in 1970 to the overthrow of the Ba'thist regime in Syria and its replacement by a more cautious group of Army officers led by Hafiz al-Assad. Some regimes remained stable; others, as in Iraq and Libya, collapsed. Nasser died and was replaced by Anwar Sadat, whose direct negotiations with Israel in 1977 was a factor in his assassination in 1981. The Arab world opened itself to Western investment and influence under the *infitah* (open door) policy, initiated in 1974. The Arab states drew closer together, a process intensified by the Iranian revolution of 1978-79, but neither the defeat of 1967 nor the stalemate of 1973 brought about a greater union. On the contrary; the trend was towards disunity and instability. As Hourani remarks, 'Military weakness, the growth of separate interests and economic dependence all led to the disintegration of whatever common front had seemed to exist until the war of 1973'.³² The division was most obvious between those states that inclined towards the USA, political compromise with Israel, and a free capitalist economy, and those, including Syria, that espoused a policy of neutralism. In practice, however, the lines were not so clearly drawn, and after the

collapse of the Soviet Union the influence of the global economy became all-pervasive, a development Wannous deplored.

The Israelis began to administer the conquered lands as virtually parts of Israel. The Palestinians realised that from now on they would have to rely on their own strength. Nasser tried to resign after the defeat but protests in Egypt and elsewhere persuaded him to stay on. His death in 1970 was the end of an era of hope for an Arab world united and made new.³³ It must be understood, then, that the June War was the Arab world's greatest disaster, and changed the balance of forces in the Middle East. It was in every sense a defeat for the Arab states, revealing the limits of their military and political capacity. The defeat, however, had deeper implications. It was clear throughout the Arab world that during the initial days of the conflict the leaders had lied to their peoples. The pretensions of previous decades were swept away, and there ensued a moral crisis on the broadest scale.³⁴ The defeat was widely regarded as being not merely a military disaster but a kind of moral judgement on the rotten regimes of the Arab world.³⁵ The attempts to diminish the June catastrophe by calling it a 'setback' could not disguise the fact that many countries in the Middle East had been confiscated by a handful of conspirators, usually military men. In Wannous' homeland, it became apparent to the disillusioned populace that they had been 'the plaything of a handful of military officers engaged in deadly rivalries and murderous struggles'.³⁶ It was against such arbitrary and oppressive regimes that Wannous deployed his gifts as a playwright. Greatly perturbed by the news of the defeat, Wannous went back to Damascus, returning after a few months to Paris in order to complete his studies. His mind, however, was preoccupied by one overriding and urgent question: how was he to respond to the disaster that had befallen the Arab world? He came to the conclusion, as had so many others, that socialism was the solution to the problems afflicting his people.³⁷ It was clear to him that the new situation demanded a new response, and that the kind of play he had been writing could not serve the interests of his people, who were demoralised and insecure. Wannous was shocked to discover that in Syria the defeat seemed to have had no effect on politics or society. He spent four months in 'misery and a state of semi-coma'.³⁸ Revived by the 'rich cultural and intellectual life'³⁹ of the French capital, Wannous began to put his feelings down on paper.

In May 1968 France, and especially Paris, were shaken by upheavals known as 'les Événements de Mai' (the 'May events'). Student riots took place in the capital's

universities and these soon spread throughout the country, accompanied and supported by mass strikes. Normal life was paralysed and violent confrontations with the authorities brought the country to the brink of revolution. Demands were made for university reform, worker participation in management, and improved civil rights. Feminists agitated for women's liberation. Wannous was caught up in this ferment of anti-authoritarian action and participated in it. Together with some friends, he sought to bring the Palestinian problem to the attention of the French people through speeches and leaflets. He also became a member of a radical, probably Marxist, political group, whose identity he never revealed. It is clear, however, that he now distanced himself from Nasser's 'unscientific' socialism.⁴⁰ While the May events were to have a profound impact on Wannous's thinking, he was also influenced by productions of French and foreign works at the Comédie-Francaise, by the experiments of Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, and by conversations with Jean-Marie Serrault and Bernard Dort, a leading expert in the theatre of Brecht. He also attended the Brecht-Dialog held in Berlin in 1968.⁴¹ These experiences helped to transform Wannous's dramaturgy, ridding it of those elements, imported more or less uncritically from European drama, that had given the early plays their eclectic character. Brecht was now Wannous's model, influencing his new play *Evening Party for the Fifth of June* (1968).⁴² The play is one of the most prominent examples of the *Adab al-Naksa* (literature of the setback), or *Adab al-Huzairan* (June literature) which sought to analyse the causes of the defeat and discuss its effects, both psychological and social, on the Arab world with a view to learning lessons for the future.⁴³

Evening Party for the Fifth of June was a huge success in Damascus and Beirut and helped to raise the profile of drama in the Arab world. It had a similar effect on Arab writers and artists. It also brought Wannous into confrontation with the authorities in Damascus, who did not harm him personally but barred the printing of the play and banned performances for two years. The strength of *Evening Party* was its immediate contemporary relevance; it is 'a searing criticism of the attitudes of Arab society that were so cruelly exposed by the June War'.⁴⁴ Wannous called for the politicisation of drama and attempted, in *Evening Party*, to use drama as a means of politically educating the theatre audience.⁴⁵ *Evening Party* marks the beginning of Wannous's concern with some of the theoretical dimensions of modern drama, most notably the relationship between the actors in the play and the audience. But this group of plays, culminating in *al-malik howa al-malik* (*The King's the King*, 1977),

while carrying overt political messages and embodying his concept of *masrah al-tasyis*, or *theatre of politicisation*, did not have the effect on his audiences he hoped it would have, either as incitement to revolutionary action or vehicles for interaction between actors and audience. Generally speaking, Wannous's audiences were looking for stimulating entertainment rather than political enlightenment, and were too inhibited to participate in the performances, let alone to take to the streets in revolutionary demonstrations. Nevertheless, these are bold experiments which do not mechanically reproduce European ideas and methods. Wannous was concerned to produce a theatre that reflected the peculiar needs of an Arab audience and that would play an important role in society. He believed that theatre could not be effective as an agent of social transformation if it avoided social, political and economic questions.⁴⁶ In this phase of his career Wannous was intent on forging a close relationship with his audience, and this does much to explain his great concern with the social, economic, educational and even personal needs of the theatregoing public. The message and form is determined after deciding who the audience is; only such an approach can ensure the maximum interaction between performance and audience. Believing that the theatre should make people think and change, Wannous concentrated on devising techniques that would lead the audience to react to the events and the message.

In 1969 Wannous and a group of fellow playwrights called for an Arab Festival of Theatre Arts to be held in Damascus. At the festival, which was attended by dramatists from all over the Arab world, he introduced his 'theatre of politicisation' project, which he hoped might politicise popular culture to the extent of achieving political victory. The theatre was to be a battleground, and its forces might yet succeed where conventional politics had failed. This, too was to prove a vain hope. Wannous was greatly interested in the work of Brecht, although his influence can be overstated. 'Experimental theatre' for Wannous meant a theatre that would fulfil society's needs, and he recognised that his society was different from the one Brecht was writing for. In *Evening Party* he had abolished the curtain and had simplified stage mechanisms – both characteristic of Brecht's experimentalism – to convey the intimate atmosphere of early Syrian theatre gatherings. Here also was to be found the figure of the *hakawati* or storyteller, who appears on stage to challenge the 'official' narration and present his own.

From Brecht, Wannous took two key points: first, a clearly defined mission for theatre that seeks to change the world rather than simply to explain it, and that asks

the audience to think as well as to feel; second, a vision of the role of history in determining fate. But Wannous realised that in order to be socially and politically effective his theatre needed to avoid too great a reliance on Brecht's artistic and technical forms. Instead he sought to reinvigorate the technique of the early pioneers of Syrian theatre, al-Naqqash and al-Qabani.⁴⁷ But he did not believe in shunning Western influences altogether, as Hakim had sometimes chosen to do; indeed he criticised attempts to create what might be called a nationalist – parochial school.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in this second phase of his career, from *Evening Party* to *The King's the King*, he sought, through his 'theatre of politicisation', to create a synthesis of the epic and Arab theatres, and to make extensive use of the Arab folk heritage. However, reservations should be entered here; *Evening Party*, while it is Wannous's first 'political play, does not strictly belong to the canon of the 'theatre of politicisation', since it was written before he had formulated the concept. Second, while the source material of *The King's the King* is to be found in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the play makes no use of the Arab heritage in its technique. Apart from the short didactic play *The King's Elephant* (1969), the canon of the 'theatre of politicisation' consists of three large-scale works: *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head* (1970), *Soirée with Abu Khaleel al-Qabani* (1972) and, appearing after a gap of five years, *The King's the King*.

In the introduction to *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, Wannous elaborates the concept of *masrah al-tasyis*,⁴⁹ and informs his readers that the script is to be regarded as merely a blueprint for performance; the text should be translated into the colloquial dialect of whatever region is to be the location of performance, and the appropriate local music is to be incorporated within the intervals between scenes and acts. The actors are also instructed to come out on stage and engage the audience in dialogue before the performance begins. The *hakawati* orchestrates the events of the play, the actors serving as the café 'audience' (a café is the setting for the performance), and others playing parts in the inner story. In this play, and others written at this time, Wannous strives to give his audience the chance to make moral judgments and openly take sides on issues both during and after the performance, and he intended their participation to be evaluative and critical.⁵⁰ But the structural complexity of some of these works (*Jabir* has three interlocking planes of reality) and the demands made on the audience constituted a challenge to the theatrical tradition in the Arab world. Although the aim is to galvanise the audience out of its passivity,

comments on the productions make it clear, as we shall see later, that the kind of interaction for which Wannous was searching did not occur.⁵¹

In *Soirée with Abu Khalil al-Qabani* (1972) and *The King's the King*, Wannous makes use of material from the *Thousand and One Nights*. The first is a play within a play: the other play concerns the struggle of al-Qabani, whom Wannous considered an important precursor, to produce a play in the teeth of conservative opposition. The inner play consists of al-Qabani's piece about Haroun al-Rashid, taken from the *Thousand and One Nights*. A third level is included: Wannous's political commentary. The result is, according to some, a sprawling work which idealises al-Qabani's career in Syria and 'which lacks the necessary dramatic concentration';⁵² Wannous himself suggests in his preface that the play might benefit from abridgment. *The King's the King* is based on the *Thousand and One Nights* tale of Abu al-Hasan, dramatised by al-Naqqash in 1849, but, as we shall see in chapter five, the old tale is transformed and given a new and disturbing twist, since the caliph's jest goes disastrously awry and, while he is humiliated and stripped of power, the 'simpleton' enthusiastically and ruthlessly supplants him and is accepted as ruler by the entire court. This is perhaps the most Brechtian – in the senses described above – of all Wannous' plays, and also incorporates some of the Marxist dramatist's techniques: the chorus formed by the actors destroys the dramatic illusion 'in the true Brechtian manner'.⁵³

In the five years that elapsed between *Al-Qabani* and *The King's the King*, Wannous grew ever more despondent and disillusioned. During those years he had come to be regarded as a creative figure of some importance in Syria and the Arab world generally, but it was clear that his work was having no discernible political effect, and was even being used by the Syrian regime to enhance its reputation abroad as a liberal supporter of creative dissent. The October War of 1973 between Israel and the forces of Egypt and Syria proved inconclusive, largely because of the disagreements between the Arab allies and the intervention of the two global superpowers, neither of whom wished to be drawn into an escalating conflict.⁵⁴ The October War was generally viewed as a victory in the Arab world, or at least – and justifiably so – certainly not as a defeat. The war produced no literature of any lasting interest, and very few plays, in marked contrast to the Six-Day War of 1967. As the Syrian critic Ghassan Ghuneim has remarked, 'victory' led to an increase in confidence but also to a lack of engagement with the problems confronting the Arab

world: 'after the victory of 1973, theatre became commercial; that is, lacking in seriousness. Politics were treated comically on stage. Instead of rousing the people to act, theatre became a means of discharging emotions'.⁵⁵

Other developments disturbed Wannous: the Arab unity evident in the support given to Egypt and Syria collapsed almost immediately and the Arab states grew militarily weaker and became disunited, particularly with regard to the Palestinian problem. The gap between rich and poor was growing, and increasing oil wealth led to dependence on external investment. The power and influence of the USA in the region increased, and the *infitah* opened Arab economies to the West, led to a consumer boom and encouraged the rapid development of the private sector.⁵⁶ Wannous later satirised these developments in his late play *The Mirage Epic* (1995). Wannous became profoundly depressed, and *The King's the King* is a work born of despair. Shortly after Wannous completed the play, President Sadat of Egypt visited Menachem Begin in Israel with a view to opening direct negotiations for peace. The betrayal was too much for Wannous, and he attempted suicide. After this crisis, Wannous seems to have decided that, for the foreseeable future, he would have to abandon his calling as a dramatist. Instead, in the late 1970s, he helped establish and later taught at The High Institute for Theatre Arts in Damascus. He also founded *Theatre Life* magazine and remained as editor-in-chief for many years. But his career as a dramatist seemed to be over, and he withdrew into a silence that was to last for more than a decade. His mood was further darkened by the shock of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and seizure of Beirut in 1982, events which were to give rise to *Historical Miniatures* (1992). His silence throughout the 80s was part of a process of re-reading and contemplating history and of coming to terms with the defeats he and his generation of dramatists had suffered.⁵⁷

As the decade progressed, Wannous began to entertain the hope that he might find it possible to return to drama, as he reflected on what he had achieved and failed to achieve. It was necessary to revise his opinions, to reconsider his earlier responses to events and to discard his broken dreams. When he returned to writing drama he attempted - without abandoning history or politics - to free himself from his earlier illusions and turned away from larger political questions to deal with personal courage, integrity and responsibility. For the first time he gave himself the freedom to liberate himself from the duty to write only about issues of national or international importance. He turned instead to creating a theatre that explored more intimately the

relationship between the individual and society. Abandoning the grand narrative of modernisation and focusing on the personal and private, Wannous brought the individual character to centre stage.⁵⁸ Though still a Marxist, he came to see that his consciously held programme of writing in the service of a revolution that had proved a vain dream had constrained his potential as a dramatist. Moreover, the focus on collective action had made him neglect the struggles and sufferings of individuals, which he had considered unworthy of serious attention.

In the last phase of his career he produced seven plays, beginning with *al-Ightisab (The Rape, 1989)* which focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict. This play is a transitional work, looking back in some respects to the plays of the 1960s and 1970s, and forward in others to the plays of the 1990s. It was highly topical and extremely controversial: the Palestinian *intifada* had erupted in 1987 in the West Bank and Gaza, revealing the existence of a united Palestinian people and reestablishing the division between the occupied territories and Israel itself;⁵⁹ and Wannous took the bold step of presenting on stage a sympathetic Israeli character, thus drawing attention to the deep divisions within Israeli society.

In 1992 Wannous was diagnosed with the cancer that was to end his life five years later; the prospect of imminent death impelled him to create works that challenged convention and taboos in ways unprecedented in his writing. In the plays of the 1990s Wannous discovered and gave expression to an extraordinary freedom from constraints, most notably in *Rituals of Signs and Transformations (1994)*, in which the sympathetic treatment of homosexuality remains profoundly shocking to many Arabs; even today performances are heavily censored. Wannous's experiments with form were no less adventurous: in *Historical Miniatures (1992)* he employs a complex structure of intersecting voices and narratives, creating a polyphony of different discourses.⁶⁰ The play is based on the fall of Damascus to the invading Mongol armies in 1403, using this event to comment on the Israeli forces' invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It is critical of the great scholar and historian Abdulrahman ibn-Khaldun (1332-1406) and offers qualified praise to the authoritarian cleric Sheikh al-Tathli, who fought and died as a martyr. The contradictions in the characters and the tensions in their motivations are the substance of the drama and are intended to prompt critical thought in the audience, which is presented with the argument that individuals take no less responsibility in the making of history than nations and governments.⁶¹ The plays of this last phase are very varied, ranging from savage satire

on global capital and the consumer culture (*The Mirage Epic*, 1995) to meditations on family history, memory and the relativity of truth (*Drunken Days*, 1995). As al Souleman notes, these works are politically and humanly richer and more significant than anything he had written before.⁶² Death is a constant theme in these plays, and also dominates his collection of autobiographical prose pieces, *About Memory and Death* (1996), which includes the remarkable *A Journey Through the Obscurities of a Passing Death*. In this work Wannous, eschewing all religious or philosophical comfort, confronts his own death in its naked reality.

In 1996 Wannous was selected by UNESCO and the International Institute of Theatre to address the world theatre community on 27 March. He was the first Arab writer to be so honoured, and just as Mahfouz had become a celebrity on winning the Nobel Prize in 1988, his fame now spread throughout the Arab world. He took as his theme 'The Hunger for Dialogue'. Claiming an essential social role for theatre as an ideal forum which allows the audience to examine the human condition in a collective context and thus to become increasingly conscious of the communality of all the members of the society to whom the theatre speaks, he then goes on to lament the current theatrical decline. He sees the theatre marginalised, besieged by trivialities, and in dire economic and moral need. He attacks globalisation, which is producing isolated, depressed individuals by ruthlessly destroying all forms of solidarity. In the face of increasing global inequalities, he argues that there is no vision of the future, and humanity has stopped daring to dream. Against this bleak picture Wannous sets an optimism of the will, proclaims himself a humanist, and calls on culture generally and theatre in particular to accomplish the necessary critical and creative tasks. Theatre must take seriously its role in helping to heal divisions and revive dialogue.

Wannous died the following year, secure in his reputation. As one western critic claims, 'In confronting questions of language, of theatre semiotics, of acting technique, and of production through both his plays and critical writings, Wannous fulfilled an invaluable role in the continuing process of developing an Arabic drama that is both lively and relevant. No other dramatist in Syria and Lebanon has managed to match the comprehensive nature of his contribution to the Arabic theatre tradition'.⁶³

He had known youthful idealism, noble enthusiasm, disillusionment and despair, and had finally been able to assert, at the end of his UNESCO address, 'We are doomed to hope, and what is happening today cannot be the end of history'.⁶⁴

The Literary and Theatrical Background

The Arabic word for literature is *adab* (literally, manners) and more or less covers the field denoted by the European term 'belles-letters', though including biography and travel writing. Modern Arabic literature began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which disrupted 'the inward-looking and exhausted complacency into which Arab culture had fallen during the decline of the Ottoman Empire',⁶⁵ and which paved the way for future developments. It is clear that modernisation was marked by both the encounter with the West and by a revival of the heritage of the past, and that drama was particularly slow to develop.⁶⁶ The two aspects of modernisation can be seen in the work of most Arab dramatists and are present, in varying degrees, in Wannous's plays. Large parts of the heritage, however, were considered unworthy of inclusion in the realm of *adab* by the guardians of culture; in particular, folk and popular narrative, whose most celebrated example is the *Thousand and One Nights*, was ignored by most Arab critics until relatively recent times. However, from the beginnings of modern Arabic drama, playwrights have used folk narratives as source material, and Wannous drew on this 'low' material on several occasions, perhaps most notably in *The King's the King* (1977). It was not until 1814 that an Arabic printed edition of the *Thousand and One Nights* appeared, in Calcutta, a century after the first European translation. The tales would have been performed by a *hakawati* (storyteller) and were thus part of the oral tradition, couched in colloquial Arabic and quite different from the elaborate literary style of *adab*. But while Arab intellectuals generally rejected the oral narrative as an object of study, its plots and themes are shared in many instances by more elite literature, and these collections of tales gained a central place in the 'collective unconscious' of the Arab world.⁶⁷

The *Thousand and One Nights* has played a significant part in the development of modern Arabic drama, and the *hakawati* has been used by a number of playwrights, including Wannous, to provide a Brechtian distancing mechanism; the *hakawati* is perhaps used to greatest effect in Wannous's *Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head* (1970). Although the modern tradition began in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century, theatre in the Arab world is much older than this, and it is worth mentioning two examples of dramatic form not linked to the Western tradition. The

first is the shadow play, the *Khayal al-Zill*, in which coloured figures are manipulated by means of wires behind a transparent screen. Scripts from the fourteenth century have survived, though the genre is older than this; they are bawdy to the point of obscenity.⁶⁸ The farcical and scabrous nature of the shadow play has had resonances in the work of modern Arab playwrights. In *Historical Miniatures* (1992) Wannous permits certain scenes to be performed as shadow plays. Second, there is the tradition of the *aragoz*, which developed in Egypt from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. This figure (the *aragoz* usually performs alone) is a kind of clown who comments on public affairs comically and satirically. Wannous makes use of this figure to comment on and demystify the events occurring on stage in *Drunken Days* (1995), his last play.

Returning to the roots of modern Arab drama, we find that Maroun al-Naqqash (1817-1855) drew upon the *Thousand and One Nights* as a source.⁶⁹ *Abu al-Hassan the Simpleton or Haroun al-Rashid* (1849-50) concerns the Abbasid Caliph and his vizier Ja'far, and the way in which they amuse themselves at the expense of the hapless Abu al-Hassan who, in an unguarded moment, wishes that he could escape his downtrodden existence and have real power. The plot provides much opportunity for comedy and some fairly unsubtle insights into the realities of authority.⁷⁰ This tale was adapted and subverted by Wannous when writing *The King's the King* (1977). Al-Naqqash had to obtain a decree from the Ottoman authorities allowing his productions, and soon realised that Egypt would offer a more propitious environment. The sensitivity of the situation can be gauged by looking at the career of the Syrian dramatist, actor and troupe manager Abu Khaleel al-Qabani (1833-1902). In the early 1870s he was encouraged by the Ottoman governor, Subhi Pasha, and later by the famous reformer Midhat Pasha, to put on plays – notably yet another piece inspired by the tales of Haroun al-Rashid to be found in the *Thousand and One Nights*. The conservative religious establishment in Damascus, already suspicious of this new medium and perturbed by the spontaneous, improvised and uncontrollable nature of the performances, was incensed by the representation on stage of the illustrious caliph, and obtained a decree from Istanbul ordering the theatre to close. This episode in al-Qabani's career was dramatised by Wannous in his *Soirée with Abu Khaleel al-Qabani* (1972).

In the early twentieth century, the theatre, even in Egypt, was not respectable, and it would be another thirty years before drama and acting were no longer thought disreputable.⁷¹ It was not until the 1960s that drama began to be taken seriously, and

it did not challenge the status of poetry and the novel until the 'literature of the setback' movement was initiated in the wake of the defeat of June 1967. In the last two decades its social importance has declined and it has become culturally and socially marginalised, a condition often lamented by Wannous in his critical writings; it is a key theme of his UNESCO address. The most significant figure in twentieth-century Arabic drama, and one of the most important in modern Arabic literature, was Tawfiq al-Hakim (1899-1987), the Egyptian playwright. He visited Paris in 1925 and steeped himself in Western culture. In his work he sought to replicate the European tradition by filling the void between popular farcical melodrama and performances of European dramatic masterpieces in translation. Hakim viewed his plays as a 'theatre of ideas', poetic dramas designed to be read not acted. His early plays were written in high classical language, but he later conducted a series of experiments with different levels of dramatic language, and was still writing in the 1960s. Hakim is acknowledged as a major pioneer, who founded an entire literary tradition single-handed.⁷² His approach to drama had a considerable influence on Wannous's early work.

In contrast to Hakim was what the historian Albert Hourani calls the 'drama of modern society', written in colloquial Arabic and designed to be acted in small theatres.⁷³ Such plays were popularised through the radio; as we have noted, Egyptian radio was the most influential in the Arab world. But the 1950s were also the era of the committed writers, and Cairo was the centre of Marxist interpretations of Arab history. Many leftist intellectuals considered bourgeois nationalism obsolete, and called for new writing to express the struggle with imperialism and mirror the life of the working class. Even among non-Marxists, commitment (*eltezam*) was the watchword in the early 1950s, espoused by intellectuals on the left who saw revolution as the answer to the Arabic world's many problems, and by nationalists of every stripe. The term was a loose one, covering Existentialism as well as Marxism, and it became part of the motto of the most widely circulated Arabic literary journal, *Al-Adab*, founded in Beirut in 1953 by Suhayl Idris (1923 -). This journal, more than any other, helped to determine the course of modern Arabic literature by publishing both creative work and the criticism and evolution of contemporary literature by Arab writers and the most important French existentialists.⁷⁴ It had a strong influence on the young Wannous, who became a contributor.

The committed writers could not expect to practice with impunity, however, and those who dared to explore the darker side of the image so meticulously constructed by the government-controlled media often found themselves imprisoned or worse. Many were forced into silence or chose exile.⁷⁵ Censorship plagued the dramatists of the 1960s, and even today restricts freedom of expression; indeed, modern Arabic drama cannot be understood without an understanding of the power of the censor. In the early part of Wannous's career censorship was imposed by governments for political rather than religious reasons, but, as Mostyn notes: 'Throughout the Arab world the secular nationalism and Marxism of the 1960s and 70s have given way to Islamic fundamentalism'.⁷⁶ This force has had a powerful impact on every aspect of life in the Arab world, drama included. Mostyn further remarks that the 1980s and 90s witnessed a dramatic growth in the influence of political Islam, which has at times become the equivalent of a shadow government, or even the actual government, as in Iran.⁷⁷ In the later part of his career Wannous became deeply concerned by this trend, seeing it as inimical to his most cherished principles. His championing of the thought of secularists such as Taha Hussein should be understood in this context. He was right to be concerned: even today his complete works are unavailable in Kuwait, and *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* cannot be performed in Syria without cuts. Nevertheless, political censorship continued; *The Rape* was banned because it contained a sympathetic and hopeful dialogue between Wannous and an anti-Zionist Israeli psychiatrist.⁷⁸

Modern Arabic drama was born in Egypt, but elsewhere its development was slow. The Syrian National Theatre Troupe was founded only in 1958, that of Lebanon two years later. These were official, state-sponsored companies whose freedom of action was severely restricted. The relative newness of the modern drama tradition in these countries was coupled with a lack of theatres. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the unsettled political and social environment proved not conducive to the development of a popular tradition of drama performance. Probably more surprising is the fact that one Syrian writer, Saadallah Wannous, 'managed to make a major contribution to the advancement of drama not only in his own country but also on a much broader scale'.⁷⁹

Sources, aims, organisation

This study aims to explore and present in its historical and political contexts, the entirety of Wannous's career as a dramatist, analysing his most important works in detail, while giving greater emphasis to the plays produced between 1968 and 1977, the period in which he developed his 'theatre of politicisation' in the aftermath of the defeat of June 1967. During these years the Arabic theatre became an important forum for intellectual debate on matters of national and international importance, and Wannous's work contributed significantly to that debate. The study's emphasis does not, however, detract from its attempt to explore Wannous's work and thought from broad perspectives.

Considering Wannous's current reputation in the Arab world, surprisingly little has been written on his work either in the Arab world or in the English-speaking countries, and he is virtually unknown elsewhere, for reasons outlined at the beginning of this chapter. No comprehensive work that focuses on the texts exists in either Arabic or English. Wannous is mentioned briefly in M. M. Badawi's *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (1993) and in Roger Allen's *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (2000), but these are general surveys and concentrate on poetry and the novel. They have proved useful in providing background information. Only two PhD theses have so far appeared in the UK: Abdulaziz al-Abdulla's '*Western influences on the theatre of the Syrian playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*' (1989) and Ali al Souleman's '*From staging the world to staging the self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the question of theatre*' (2005).

The first of these is discursive rather than analytical, and other sources have proved more useful, but it provides a certain amount of interesting information on Wannous's early period, notably on his time in Paris during the May events of 1968. Al-Abdulla's study also benefits from its inclusion of interview material drawn from conversation between the researcher and Wannous himself, who had just completed *The Rape*. This material, however, adds nothing to what was already known from interviews conducted with Wannous and published in the Arab world. The main limitation of the study for our purpose is that it could not be comprehensive since the works of Wannous's late period had not yet been written.

Al Souleman's thesis is a most interesting study that considers Wannous's output in depth, but does not attempt to cover all the plays. Moreover, it approaches

its subject from the perspective of cultural studies, and makes extensive use of theorists and critics engaged in this field, but perhaps more reference could have been made to Wannous's own writings. While not neglecting Wannous's early and middle periods, al Souleman has chosen to focus on the late plays, analysing the impacts of the cultural and political transformations of the last two decades of the twentieth century on Wannous's drama. Even then, not every work of this period is discussed and there are important omissions. Thus its usefulness to this study is limited, but despite this it has provided valuable insights into Wannous's late work.

Other secondary sources used include Albert Hourani's magisterial *A History of the Arab Peoples* (1991), which has provided most of the historical material presented in this study; Trevor Mostyn's *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (2002), which is a valuable and thought-provoking overview; Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979: new edition 2000), a contentious but stimulating collection of essays by a pioneer of 'revolutionary theatre' in Latin America; and John Willett's *Brecht on Theatre* (2001), an anthology which has been an invaluable guide to Brecht's development as a dramatist and ideologue and to the contradictions and inconsistencies sometimes found between these two roles.

The primary sources used by the study are of course Wannous's plays and the many articles and interviews included in the collected works. Many short articles have been published in Arabic on various aspects of Wannous's theatre, some of which have appeared in translation, and extensive use has been made of these. Wannous's widow, Faiza al-Shawish, and his friend the scholar and critic Nadim Mua'ala have provided much important information in the interviews conducted during the course of this research. One or two brief monographs have also appeared in the Arab world, and the thesis has benefited from Isma'il Fahad Isma'il's short study and Salah Addin Abu Diab's Biographical sketch. However, no comprehensive study has appeared in either English or Arabic. Only one of Wannous's major works, *The King's the King*, has been translated into English. Two shorter and less important plays, *The Glass Café* (1965) – the last of his early plays – and *The King's Elephant* (1969) – the shortest and most didactic of the plays constituting the 'theatre of politicisation' – have also been translated. All quotations from these works are taken from the translations. The study also makes use of an English translation of Wannous's UNESCO address. Apart from these, all translations from Wannous's works are my own. In translating from Arabic into English throughout this study, an attempt has

been made, wherever possible, to convey the literary richness of the plays or critical works concerned, without sacrificing the literal meaning, which has been scrupulously followed unless doing so renders it unintelligible to the English reader.

The study's approach is expository and analytical and is based on a close reading of the texts. Attention will be paid to theatrical and performance aspects, particularly as they are found in the plays of the middle period, since it was in the 'theatre of politicisation' that Wannous was most concerned with the relationship between actors and audience. The analytical method will be based on internal textual evidence, which emerges from considering Wannous's texts both independently and in relation to each other. This requires the pursuit of Wannous's own views as explicitly stated in his journalism, interviews and critical writings.

I faced some difficulties in analysing theatrical performances, particularly those of texts originally performed in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it has been possible to compensate in some measure for this limitation by watching recorded television performances wherever possible; making every effort to meet directors and performers who participated in these productions, and referring to press interviews with them; and referring to critical articles and reviews.

This study aims to fill one of the many gaps in the study of Arabic drama and of Wannous in particular by attempting to examine every major play in depth, locating each in its contexts and describing its connections to the currents of Wannous's thought, and analysing its structure and significance; and in this way elucidating the trajectory of Wannous's career as a playwright. No study in English or Arabic has attempted to do this, and there is a clear need for such a work, which, it is hoped, will provide a valuable basis for further research and contribute to the understanding of Arabic dram in the English-speaking world.

The study does not attempt to prove a specific hypothesis, but the main aim, outlined above, is connected to a number of research questions which will be explored. These include: What were Wannous's main concerns as a dramatist? How did these change? To what extent did Wannous succeed in his aims as articulated in his writings on the 'theatre of politicisation'? How did his political thinking influence his drama? What were the main influences on Wannous's work and thought? What forces constrained his creativity? How was his work received by his contemporaries? How did he seek to serve his fellow Arabs?

The rest of the thesis consists of seven chapters. The second chapter examines seven of Wannous's early plays, which are eclectic experiments in writing drama, but not in writing for the theatre, since they were written to be read rather than performed, in the manner of Hakim's 'theatre of the mind'. The works of this early phase show Wannous attempting to come to grips with certain trends in Western theatre and struggling to find his voice as a dramatist. However, the influence of movements such as Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd is in most cases of lesser importance than Wannous's concern to attack the injustices of the political systems he saw as corrupting and oppressing the societies of the Arab world.

Chapter three discusses the plays Wannous wrote in response to the disastrous defeat of the Arab forces in the Six-Day War. *Evening Party for the Fifth of June* marks a radical departure from the works of Wannous's first phase, in that it employs Brechtian techniques in an attempt to create a theatre that might change the world and lead to the transformation of society through revolutionary action. The play is a product of a movement that sought to modernise Arab societies: theatre in this period became an important forum for debate on issues of national and international importance, and Wannous thought of his works as contributing to that debate and as a means of directly arousing his audience to challenge political authority and the dominant culture.

The fourth and fifth chapters examine the plays that make up Wannous's 'theatre of politicisation'. Chapter four considers those works in which Wannous attempted to continue the project begun by *Evening Party* by synthesising the Brechtian approach, as he saw it, with elements drawn from the Arab heritage in order to create a theatre that might engage his audience more effectively. Chapter five consists of an extensive analysis of the most celebrated example of the 'theatre of politicisation'. *The King's the King* is the culmination of Wannous's Brechtian plays, but, as I shall demonstrate, the mood is darker and the satire more savage. The qualified optimism that had sustained Wannous's creativity in the early 1970s had evaporated, and the play offers little hope that the dream of social transformation could be realised.

After completing *The King's the King*, Wannous suffered a profound personal crisis and abandoned drama for over a decade. Chapters six and seven examine his late works, in which he moves away from his earlier concern with collective political action towards a questioning of the assumptions that had underlain his activity in the

late 1960s and 1970s. I show that these works, while by no means abandoning politics or history, show an increasing concern to focus on the lives of individuals, which, Wannous acknowledged, had been neglected by the 'theatre of politicisation', and indeed by the modernising project generally. It was in any case no longer possible to ignore the transformations – political, cultural and social – that had drastically altered Arab societies since the 1980s.

Wannous's last plays were written under the shadow of his illness. Confronting his cancer motivated him not only to write against time but to seek to free himself from the constraints that had controlled his earlier writing. This new freedom can be seen, in varying degrees, in all the works of the 1990s. Wannous's interest in the individual is most intensely expressed in his autobiographical writings. Following al Souleman and others, I argue that the self and the individual are rescued from the marginalisation to which they had been submitted in his earlier work, and the personal and private are liberated from the constraints imposed not only by the totalitarian regimes of the region but also by the collectivising culture of which Wannous had been a prominent member.

The final chapter seeks to draw together all the most important arguments of the preceding chapters and to develop them in order to present as full a picture as possible of Wannous the dramatist. Key themes are explored, and the magnitude and significance of his achievement are assessed. The conflicts and contradictions apparent in his work and thought are also discussed. The chapter thus attempts to provide an understanding of Wannous the man and the dramatist that illuminates both his life and his work.

- ¹ *The King's the King*, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- ² See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 11.
- ³ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. preface.
- ⁴ See Salah Addin Abu Diab, *The Presence and Absence of Saadallah Wannous* (Kuwait: Sua'ad Alsabah Publishing House, 1997), p. 24.
- ⁵ See *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 16.
- ¹¹ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), pp. 23-24.
- ¹² Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 17.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, No. 8, (June 1996), p. 25.
- ¹⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), pp. 232-233.
- ¹⁵ Al-Tahir Ahmid, *The War of June 1967*, Issue 30 (Cairo: Al-Ahram Centre for Translation and Publishing, 1997), p. 88.
- ¹⁶ *Une Mort Éphémère* (1996). Documentary film. Directed by Omar Amiralay. France. TV5 Production.
- ¹⁷ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 49.
- ¹⁸ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 351.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 386.
- ²⁰ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 15.
- ²¹ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 341.
- ²² Wannous had read Hussein as a schoolboy, but it was not until much later that he came to fully appreciate the Egyptian thinker's work. See Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), p. 68.
- ²³ John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 148.
- ²⁴ Roger Owen, *State Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 265.
- ²⁵ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 412.
- ²⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 412.
- ²⁷ See *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 1, ed. John Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 107.
- ²⁸ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 413.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 414.
- ³⁰ See *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 1, ed. John Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 109-110.
- ³¹ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 413-414.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 427.
- ³³ See *Ibid.*, p. 417.
- ³⁴ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 32.
- ³⁵ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 442.
- ³⁶ Elie Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 317.
- ³⁷ Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 17.
- ³⁸ *Al-Adab Magazine*, vol. 18, No. 5, 1970, p. 193. (See al-Abdulla's PhD, p. 76).
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193. (See al-Abdulla's PhD, p. 76).

- ⁴⁰ See Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), pp. 76-78.
- ⁴¹ See *Ibid.*, pp. 76-78.
- ⁴² The Six-Day had begun on 5 June 1967.
- ⁴³ See Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), p. 42.
- ⁴⁴ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 210.
- ⁴⁵ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 276.
- ⁴⁶ Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 17.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ⁴⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 43.
- ⁵⁰ Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 17.
- ⁵¹ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 211.
- ⁵² M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 277.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- ⁵⁴ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 481.
- ⁵⁵ Ghassan Ghuneim, *Political Theatre in Syria, 1967-1990* (Damascus: Aladdin Publishing House, 1996), p. 210.
- ⁵⁶ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 422-3, 426, 436.
- ⁵⁷ Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 16.
- ⁵⁸ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 138.
- ⁵⁹ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 433.
- ⁶⁰ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), pp. 92-96.
- ⁶¹ See Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 16.
- ⁶² See Ali al Souleman, 'Sadallah Wannous: His Last Five Years His Greatest as Playwright' *Al Jadid*, vol.7, no. 34 (Winter 2001), p. 20.
- ⁶³ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 211.
- ⁶⁴ The UNISCO's official translation is: 'Our lot is to hope, and what happens today cannot be the end of time', which unfortunately lacks clarity. Saadallah Wannous, *The Thirst for Dialogue* (World Theatre Day address), translated by International Theatre Institute (ITI), (UNISCO), <http://iti-worldwide.org>, accessed on 11 May 2003.
- ⁶⁵ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 1.
- ⁶⁶ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 3
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- ⁶⁹ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 244.
- ⁷⁰ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 197.
- ⁷¹ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 255.
- ⁷² Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 204.
- ⁷³ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 396.

⁷⁴ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 204.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷⁶ Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 125.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁷⁸ See Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 40.

⁷⁹ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 209.

CHAPTER 2

Seven Early Plays

Wannous began to write plays during his period of study in Cairo (1959 – 1963), and continued to do so while working for the Syrian Ministry of Culture in Damascus (1964 – 1966). He wrote nothing while studying at the Sorbonne, and so the plays considered in this chapter are the work of a young man beginning to find his way as a dramatist. His main preoccupation was the relationship between the individual and the society and its authorities, especially the oppressive regimes to be found throughout the Arab world, not excluding Syria. All his pre-1967 works are brought together under the description ‘early plays’ in his *Collected Works* (1996) indicating that he saw them as a group; the only play to be omitted is his first, *Al-Hayat Abadan (Life Forever)*, which he wrote in 1961 shortly after the dissolution of the UAR. Presumably the play reflects his feelings about this event, but it has never been published and he never discussed its content.

All these plays are short, some no longer than a few pages – and although a few were published in literary magazines, notably *Al-Adab*, most of them were not published in book form until 1965, when they appeared under the title *Hkaya Jawqat Altamathil (The Tales of the Chorus of Statues)*. Before he travelled in 1966 to study in France, he worked for a year in the Syrian Ministry of Culture and managed to have a number of his works published by the ministry’s press. This book comprised five of his early short plays (*The Game of Pins, The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses, The Locusts, The Unknown Messenger at Antigone’s Funeral Ceremony, and The Glass Café*). Nine early works are included in the *Complete Works*, but I have chosen to focus on seven of them. The five named above will be discussed in this chapter, together with *Gush of Blood* and *Corpse on the Pavement*, which were published separately. I have excluded *Medusa Gazes at Life* (1962), and *When Men Play* (1965), mainly for reasons of space.¹ The seven plays that will be studied

provide an analysis of Wannous's early work as they present the complete range of his ideas at that time.

It is not known how seriously Wannous took these early efforts at the time, but it is clear that he later dismissed them as being of little consequence and considered his first important work to be *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, written in 1967-1968. This judgement seems unduly harsh, since they possess some literary merit and are of considerable interest as experimental drama, especially in the context of Syrian theatre at the time; however, it is hard to argue that these works are fully realised pieces for the theatre, mainly perhaps because they were not written to be performed. This may seem strange, but Wannous was following the example set by Hakim, the doyen of Arab drama, who wrote for the reader not the theatre audience. Wannous remarked later, 'I was writing my plays only to be read and I went on doing so for a long time, without having in mind any visualisation of the stage'.² However, it should not be thought that the plays are unstageable, as a few productions were attempted, usually by students at academies of drama, but only after Wannous had attained fame with *Evening Party*. There was very little chance of a young playwright's work being performed by a professional company. Moreover, independent theatre barely existed in Syria, and was frowned on by the Ba'thist authorities, who relied on government-sponsored troupes to convey the official line to the public. The Syrian government tended to be concerned with the effect of performances rather than texts; this emphasis can be seen in the objections made to the theatre of al-Qabani in the nineteenth century and in the recent censorship of Wannous's *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*. Nevertheless, as al-Abdulla points out, Wannous was in a somewhat ambiguous position.³ While not a Ba'thist, he was an employee of the government and therefore had to tread carefully when criticising his employer. Even so, this lack of independence was not a major factor in determining the form or content of these early works, which were influenced by Hakim's 'theatre of mind'. This state of affairs helps to explain some of the problematic stage directions found in these plays, for example the crumbling statues whose expressions change in *The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses* and the man-eating insects in *The Locusts*. Wannous expected that such difficulties would be solved by any director willing to take up the challenge, but expected the reader to visualise the events as best he might.

Wannous and his young contemporaries, such as Walid Ikhlas (1935-) and Farhan Bulbul (1937-), were not seeking to create an Arab theatre so much as to

reflect their fascination with achievements of European theatre, from the classical past to the various tendencies evident in the twentieth century. *Al-Adab* published translations of Sartre, Camus, and Ionesco and was also credited with having a strong influence. Wannous remarked that 'Modern European civilisation represented the cultural ideal model in our theatrical works'.⁴ It is, however, debatable whether these European writers, and the traditions from which they emerged, were well understood at the time by either dramatists or critics. The very few Arab critics who have subsequently paid any attention to Wannous's early works have attempted to trace the influence of the Existentialists or Absurdist, but there is little evidence of this in the plays themselves. The Arab-American critic Dr. Manal Swairjo has highlighted this misunderstanding in a short article in which she argues that these early works are 'focused on the "social condition" of the individual rather than the issues of the "self" that mark existentialist literature'.⁵ Al-Abdulla and al Souleman assert that Wannous's early plays were influenced by Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd, but they seem to accept this proposition *a priori* and argue from it, so their arguments are not altogether convincing; Swairjo's judgement seems more sound. Moreover, al-Abdulla admits that 'Wannous deals with [...] general and political ideas that revolve around the relationship between the oppressive authorities and the people'⁶ and that the plays were 'influenced by the prevailing mood of social injustice in the Arab world'.⁷

Al Souleman acknowledges that 'the work of Wannous in the period under discussion does not conform to the theoretical and the theatrical foundations of either Existentialism or the Theatre of the Absurd, although a number of techniques and themes from these trends were employed by Wannous in his plays'.⁸ He later admits that 'As is the case with Existentialism, the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd on Arabic theatre at the time was not the result of a consistent philosophical vision of the world and mankind';⁹ thus it appears that Wannous was influenced by the receptivity shown by Arab dramatists towards these movements but could not be categorised as either an Existentialist or an Absurdist.

It is also true that Brecht's influence is not directly discernible in Wannous' work until *Evening Party*. But while it is difficult to point to specific instances, it is generally true that the interest of young Arab dramatists in their older European contemporaries changed the way that they thought about the theatre. As Dr. Hussam al-Khatib, a Palestinian academic living in Syria, wrote in 1972, 'The translations

made in Lebanon during that period were widely read in Syria and were accessible to young writers, among whom they created a new pattern of thought different from those that had been the cultural nourishment of the previous generation'.¹⁰ It seems to be the case, then, that European influences changed the atmosphere of Arab drama during the 1960s, thus continuing a tradition that had begun in the nineteenth century.

In his later writings, Wannous himself disparaged his achievements in these early works, not so much for their deficiencies as drama as for their uncritical and undisciplined absorption of these new influences. Above all, he criticised his own inability to take a clear intellectual line on this confusion of influences and speak directly to a real audience about contemporary political realities. He described his troubled state of mind in an interview published in 1977: 'The sociological and intellectual atmosphere that dominated my early plays was a result of a period of sociological and intellectual anxiety. Metaphysical, romantic and existential trends were at war within me'.¹¹ In fact Wannous was reluctant to speak about his early work, and rarely mentioned it, but his general position can be understood from a statement in *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre*, published in 1986. In it he wrote that before the defeat of 1967 he, and Arab playwrights generally, eschewed an overtly and consciously political theatre designed to educate the audience and rouse it to action. They imagined that a theatrical experience could be created 'by presenting random and irrelevant examples from the repertoire of world theatre'.¹² He criticised the 'superficiality and triviality'¹³ of the Arab theatre of those years and admitted that the defeat of 1967 forced playwrights to confront the need for 'a close relationship between the theatre and politics'¹⁴ and to align themselves with the forces of 'progressivism'. This term was widely used at the time in the Arab world to denote active opposition to corruption, a revolutionary stance, and a general antagonism to the reactionary forces blocking the development of Arab societies. Wannous' political position was to be made fully clear in *Evening Party* and in his elaboration of the concept of the 'theatre of politicisation'.

This chapter, then, will deal with the early plays in chronological order since they do not fall into coherent groups and are stylistically very diverse, although most of them are broadly 'political' in theme. It will discuss the salient features of these works but without adopting the dismissive tone that the playwright himself was to use later in his career. It should be noted that by 1986 Wannous had lapsed into silence and was attempting to reassess his achievements and shortcomings as a dramatist. He

had been forced to admit that the 'theatre of politicisation' had failed to fulfil his earlier hopes. No doubt this mood of disillusion coloured his view, but it is nonetheless undeniable that these early plays are apprentice pieces. They will therefore not be considered in great detail, and although some prefigure aspects of Wannous' later plays, they are included in the study mainly because the gulf separating them from *Evening Party* reveals the extent to which Wannous transformed himself as a playwright after the Six-Day War of 1967.

Corpse on the Pavement

(A short play in one act)

Wannous wrote *Jutha 'Ala al-Rasif (Corpse on the Pavement)*, which is only ten pages long, in Cairo; it was first published in the Syrian magazine *Al-Mawqif Al-Arabi (Arab Attitude)* in 1963. The play begins with a scene of two beggars sitting on 'a wide pavement of a clean street'¹⁵ near a wealthy man's palace during a severely cold winter. 'The time is early morning, it is bitterly cold with a severe frost'.¹⁶ One beggar freezes to death and the second addresses his dead friend, complaining about his sufferings and the biting cold. In his monologue, he philosophises on the theme of life and death: 'I wish this would end quickly without any more pain. [...] Life is just a formality [...]. The colder it gets the closer death comes'.¹⁷ Later he says of his friend: 'I'm sure he won't care if his grave is narrow or bare of adornment. What matters is a hole to put him in'.¹⁸ The beggar's incongruously philosophical musings have a darkly comic effect.

The youthful Wannous has been taken to task by the Jordanian critic Dr. Abdulrahman Yaghe, who accuses him of making some of the characters in his early plays function as mouthpieces or spokespersons for his own views, and of pointlessly creating incongruities between the characters' social class, educational level, economic status and style of utterance. The beggar is an example of this, and Yaghe also criticises Wannous' treatment of the character of Khaddour in *The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses*. 'Wannous makes Khaddour, characterised by his narrow thinking and limited concerns, utter a monologue full of deep philosophical and political notions [...] but fortunately this is unusual in Wannous' plays'.¹⁹ Neither of these criticisms is convincing. There is no evidence that Wannous is using the beggar

to voice his own views, although the beggar may be to some extent reflecting Wannous's mood of dejection; and Yaghe's insistence that characters must be made to speak in a way that is congruent with their social position assumes that naturalism is essential in plays that have a political theme. But naturalism is absent even from Wannous' mature works, and he never submits to artistic constraints of this kind. The problem seems to lie in the eclecticism of these plays, in which many undigested influences – Existentialism, the Absurd, Symbolism, Expressionism and Surrealism – are often present in varying degrees and create the impression of a talent unable to decide on which form of literary expression suits its purposes. Certainly Khaddour's monologue is incongruous when viewed from the perspective of naturalism, but its wild flights of 'poetic' imagery are probably intended to express Khaddour's grief and the death of his son in a more powerful way than naturalism would allow. It also represents the young playwright's attempt to create 'literature' that would be appreciated by an elite readership, in a style that such a readership would consider 'advanced'; that is, Western. *Corpse* does not attempt to be naturalistic but seeks to show the underlying reality of the contempt of the rich for the poor in the cities of the Arab world, and the role of the authorities who oppress the poor on behalf of the rich.

A policeman, dressed in thick, warm woollen clothes, comes up to the beggars and orders them to leave, since 'sleeping on the pavement is forbidden',²⁰ but then, to his chagrin, discovers that one of them has died: 'What am I going to say to the sergeant? [...] I'll be accused of negligence'.²¹ Then the 'Master', the owner of the palace, dressed in 'very expensive winter clothes capable of defeating any chilly night'²² approaches the policeman, accompanied by his huge wolf-like dog. The contrast between the rich man and the destitute beggar underlines for the Arab reader the enormous gulf separating the rich from the poor in Arab societies. The rich man offers to buy the corpse from the surviving beggar as food for his hungry dog, provided that the body is not already rotten. This grotesque insult makes it clear that the play is a satire on injustice rather than a naturalistic exposure of it. At first the policeman hesitates to examine the corpse, but in order to avoid the rich man's fury he agrees. The rich man speaks calmly, but then becomes irritated and impatient, putting the officer in his place with an easy arrogance: 'Our comfort is your responsibility, isn't that so, officer? The legal statutes are very clear. [...] The buyer has the right to examine his goods'.²³ The policeman, anxious to please the rich man, uses a knife to cut open the beggar's stomach and examines the bowels in order to make sure that the

corpse has not yet begun to decompose. Then, having made sure that the body is intact, the wealthy man asks the surviving beggar if he is the dead man's brother, and on learning they were merely 'true friends',²⁴ he refuses to pay. Since the policeman is anxious to serve the interests of the rich and powerful, he echoes the wealthy man's remarks and questions, agreeing that the law states that the money should be paid to the public treasury:

MASTER: The law does not consider friendship. Isn't that so, officer?

POLICEMAN (*Like an echo*): Yes sir. The law does not believe in friendship.²⁵

Here, the arbitrary nature of the law, and the subservience of the supposed guardians of justice are both satirised. But the beggar is no more admirable as a moral agent than the other two characters, since he is an apathetic victim, and a symptom of a corrupt society that condones extremes of wealth and poverty. Wannous seems to be suggesting that injustice and inequality destroy the humanity not only of the oppressors and their minions, but also of the oppressed. At the end of the play, the surviving beggar suggests, without irony, that the rich man buy him as well, apparently quite indifferent as to whether he lives or dies. The rich man, however, scornfully rejects this proposal: 'I am not mad. I don't buy living people'.²⁶

The Egyptian scholar M. M. Badawi has remarked that *Corpse* 'is a somewhat surrealistic portrayal of the callous manner in which the authorities side with the rich against the poor and destitute'.²⁷ This view is misleading, since Surrealism is nowhere clearly evident in the play: there is no imagery obviously drawn from dreams or the subconscious, and the dialogue, though grotesque and bordering on the absurd, is not irrational. There is, however, a heavy dose of satirical black humour recalling the old Arab shadow play or puppet theatre, as well as perhaps the impromptu satirical dramas of the peasants in Wannous' home village. The beggar is the earliest example of a 'marginalised' individual to be found in Wannous's theatre, while the rich man might well be a reincarnation of the feudal landlords of nineteenth-century Syria. Wannous treats a social and moral issue by presenting an extreme contrast between wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness in order to unmask and satirise injustice. The beggar and the rich man have no common interests: one is obscenely rich and arrogant, the other owns nothing and has even lost the will to live.

At first glance the play might seem to be an example of the Theatre of The Absurd in some respects – for example its nightmarish atmosphere, grotesque humour, and general air of hopelessness, and the fact that the beggar is isolated, completely incapable of action and undisturbed by any eventuality of fate. But the play suggests that this state of affairs is not an inevitable result of the absurdity of the human condition; the situation has been brought about by social processes. In other words, absurdity is the creation of injustice. Thus the play is a consciously political work and as such looks forward to the theatre of Wannous's middle period; the Syrian critic Hassan 'Abbas has claimed that 'Corpse is a starting point for a bigger scheme'.²⁸ Each character acts according to his place in that society, and it is the society that is condemned. In this respect, *Corpse* might be described as Brechtian, although Wannous never mentioned Brecht in connection with his early plays. Nevertheless, as Augusto Boal points out, Brecht tends to see the character 'as an object, as a spokesman for economic and social forces'²⁹ and this seems to apply here.

Yet although the play seems to be attempting to demonstrate the painful contradictions of contemporary social reality, Wannous is not interested in analysing social relationships in terms of class, except in the most general way. Its effectiveness and potential as political theatre, in the sense that Wannous later advocated, is also questionable. The play contains no sense of the possibility of change, nor does it indicate how change might be effected, and its political message is diluted by its simplicity and pessimism. Its theme is restricted to the general one of power relationships between the rich and the destitute, and there is no attempt to portray class struggle, or indeed any struggle of any kind. It is perhaps for this reason that Wannous later repudiated the play. Certainly he was later to find all these early works inadequate in the light of his later espousal of a theatre of ideological certainty and commitment. In the mid-1980s he described the pre-1967 Syrian theatre in general, without excluding himself, as 'lost'³⁰ and this might explain his neglect of these plays and justify the criticism that these early works are politically ineffective. But it should be remembered that the political impact of his later works was not as great as he hoped it would be, so perhaps the real distinction is that the young Wannous was confused and unsure of his direction, a state that reflected the confusion and lack of unity of the Arab world at this time; he was more interested in theatrical experimentation than a theatre that might change the society he was attacking.

Wannous makes much use of black humour in several of these early plays; this does not diminish the indignation he expresses against the injustices endemic in the Arab world. Nor is *Corpse* at all obscure; the Arab reader would easily make the connection between the play's events and the political realities of the Arab world and its despotic regimes. Nevertheless, there seems to be a sadomasochistic dynamic underlying the action as well as a political one. In his despair and lack of dignity and willpower the beggar is the antithesis of the revolutionary, and even though Wannous seems to be insisting, through the beggar's monologue, that the poorest man may have thoughts about matters of deep and universal importance, these musings are addressed not to another character but to the reader. They do not lead to action, but prevent it, since they are born of and perpetuate the beggar's despair. Thus it is hard to deny that the play is extremely pessimistic, both politically and morally. While pointing to injustice and oppression, it offers no hope of a better world brought about through action. There have, of course been many arguments as to how far it is an artist's responsibility to solve problems, but after 1967 Wannous became convinced that it was not enough just to expose them and leave it for the audience to find a way out. He believed that it was the artist's responsibility to show that the world is capable of transformation and to suggest, without being too specific, how this transformation might occur. In these early plays, the powerless characters are almost never shown as acting - either as individuals or collectively - to try and change the system that oppresses them. Rather, they remain passive victims who have yet to discover that solidarity and collective action are the key to social transformation, and it is possible to suggest that the pessimism which pervades several of these early plays reflects Wannous's own despair in the face of the harsh realities of Middle Eastern politics. The present study will argue, as Wannous himself acknowledged, that the 1967 war was the key event that transformed his attitude to social change and to the possibilities of theatre as an agent of that change. Nevertheless his hatred of oppressive systems, which is evident in *Corpse*, stems not only from what he knew to be occurring in the Arab world, but also from his early experiences in his home village, which were described in chapter one. His desire to be a voice for the powerless manifested itself early; as Yaghe points out, 'From the beginning [of his life], he took up a deep-rooted position against exploitation, tyranny, racial discrimination, mastery, superiority of one party over another, subjugation and finally poverty and its elements and factors'.³¹

Wannous' treatment of the theme of the abuse of authority highlights a very critical issue; that is, the danger that faces humanity when the control of money, power and the law is seized by a few corrupt hands - or rather when the control itself corrupts the controller. His post-1967 works elaborate on this theme in an attempt to deepen the audience's understanding of this question. His next play, however, dealt with another issue: how is the individual to confront and destroy those aspects of himself that accept injustice, seeking refuge in cynicism and self-indulgence?

Gush of Blood

(A play in one act)

Wannous wrote *Fusd Al-Dam (Gush of Blood)* in 1963, and it was first published in *Al-Adab* in 1964. The central character is Ali, a young Palestinian in his mid-twenties, who is cultured, intelligent, positive and vital: 'He is firm of body, and his face and eyes show determination'.³² By contrast with the generic characters and indeterminate setting of *Corpse on the Pavement*, we have a particular character in a specific political and social context, with a specific history. The Palestinian question was the one issue that united all Arabs, in words if not in deeds, and Wannous was acutely aware of this. When he wrote the play, the Palestinian people were leaderless – the PLO was in the process of formation – and were scattered among a number of states, including Syria, and in danger of losing their identity. Ali is presented as an admirable example of Palestinian youth, but he is, the 'better half' of a split personality: Wannous dramatises the dilemma confronting Palestinian youth through the device of presenting two characters identical to each other in their external appearance, costume, and age, each of whom represents contrasting aspects of the same person. The directions make clear that they are two distinct characters, unlike Shen Te and Shui Ta in Brecht's *Good Person of Szechwan*, and this separation is underlined when they meet at the end of the play.

Ali's negative counterpart is 'Eleawah (a nickname for Ali in Arabic), who is passive, thoughtless and submissive to the conditions of his life and in every respect the opposite of Ali. He is a hard drinker who spends all of his time seeking pleasure: 'He holds a bottle of alcohol throughout the play and appears on stage drunk and staggering'.³³ This behaviour, of course, would be more shocking to a Muslim reader

than to a Western one. The educated readers of *Al-Adab* would probably have been less shocked than the conservative majority; nevertheless the contrast with the sober and thoughtful Ali is clear. But 'Eleawah's behaviour is condemned not from a religious viewpoint but because his irresponsibility and drunkenness prevent him from becoming an active citizen.

A group of people - men, women and children - sitting beside a collapsed wall appear to be the play's chorus although they never speak but comment on the action by nodding and moving their heads. The chorus represents the Palestinian refugees who had gathered in camps on the outskirts of cities such as Damascus ('Eleawah makes this clear) and also apathetic Arabs in general (Wannous indicates this in the preface).³⁴ They are a defeated nation apparently without hope; they do not act, but merely acknowledge the events on stage by the slightest of movements. They are unable to speak, even to express their despair. They do not yet have a voice, which prompts Ali to remark in disgust 'We are without land, just like worms that live in the mud of the swamp'.³⁵ Although this is a thought-provoking conception, the sheer inactivity of this silent chorus detracts from the dramatic quality of the piece, which is really little more than a didactic tract in the form of the play.

The action of the play essentially consists of Ali's pursuit of 'Eleawah. 'Eleawah is afraid of his pursuer: 'That devil is looking for me everywhere! He is looking for me even now. [...] He is confronting me. I see him even in my own mirror, in my loneliness and sadness. He is waiting inside me like a ghost'.³⁶ Ali seeks to destroy 'Eleawah, who is 'like a moth which is eating away the good wood',³⁷ and has thoughts of eliminating his alter ego, whose thoughtless and dissolute behaviour is apparently preventing Ali from acting to liberate his country. Al Souleman relates this conception to the technique, found in early Expressionist drama, of splitting a single personality into several characters to represent the conflict in the mind.³⁸ It is possible that Wannous was influenced by Expressionism, since he was an avid student of all modern European drama, but here as elsewhere in the early plays his approach was eclectic and unfocused. The key point is the political, not psychological, implications of this splitting: Wannous later wrote in the preface to the play that he believed 'that the resistance would not occur unless every Palestinian specifically, and every Arab in general, cut away his diseased part'.³⁹

Two encounters punctuate the pursuit. The first is 'Eleawah's meeting with a patriotic young man, who tunes his radio to various stations, sometimes listening to

announcements of military coups, or to songs calling for a return to the occupied Palestinian lands. 'Eleawah tries to convince the young man, who appears to be politically committed and to care about his nation's sufferings, that his efforts are in vain, and attempts to persuade him to join him in drinking and dissolute behaviour. 'Eleawah eventually succeeds in corrupting the young patriot, who accompanies him on a drinking spree and finally collapses in a stupor. It is clear from the text that the patriotic youth is a naively idealistic teenager, easily led astray by 'Eleawah. The different broadcasts he listens to are government propaganda designed to mislead the public into believing that the coups, which were common in the region, would result in Palestine being restored to its people. The play so far has exposed the dark side of a section of Palestinian youth, although it has not yet revealed Wannous's 'solution' to this social problem. It deals in black and white contrasts and is without ambiguities. We are not led to feel any sympathy for 'Eleawah's position, for this might throw doubt on the 'rightness' of Ali's solution, and this is evidently not what Wannous intends. Whether we are convinced by the presentation of this dichotomy is another question, but it would require a perverse reading to take 'Eleawah's side against Ali.

In the second encounter, the play criticises the official media through a meeting between Ali and an affluent journalist working for a government newspaper. The journalist wants to conduct an interview with Ali which will show the general public's admiration for and satisfaction with the institutions and politics of the leadership, which constantly proclaims that it is doing its best to liberate the occupied territories. The journalist, who is more than content to be an instrument of government propaganda, presses Ali to express his appreciation of 'the Mister, who is the leader of the battle [for liberation] and the knight of our return [to Palestine].'⁴⁰ (In many countries of the Arab world, as in the USA, The President is addressed as 'Mister President'; Wannous humorously substitutes 'the Mister', perhaps to avoid the censors.) The journalist wants Ali to praise the Mister's determination to liberate the occupied lands, but Ali vigorously refuses. Here Wannous is venting his anger at the servile role of the official media throughout the Arab world, having recently experienced its methods and tactics in both Syria and Egypt. Ali remains unpersuaded and the journalist leaves after taking photographs of the silent chorus, who do not respond, and declaring that he intends to write an article picturing them as admirers of 'the Mister'; this, he says, will please his editor-in-chief, who has 'gained his fortune and prestigious position by executing 'the Mister's' wishes'.⁴¹ Wannous's readers

would have been aware that the editor-in-chief is himself far from being an agent of a free press; this scene adds an ironic gloss to the naïve youth's enthusiasm for the government's propaganda broadcasts.

At the end of the play, Ali finally finds 'Eleawah and, intending to be rid of him forever, takes a knife from his pocket, at which 'Eleawah desperately begs to be spared. At first Ali hesitates, moved by 'Eleawah's pleas, but Wannous brings on stage a group of Palestinian refugees who are being forcibly expelled from their homeland. This group stands outside the temporal reality of the play, and appears to be a vivid memory from Ali's own past; the scene touches Ali, especially the speech of a man who insists on staying to defend his land despite his wife's entreaties to accompany her and their child. This memory restores Ali's determination to cut away his diseased side. He kills 'Eleawah and declares: 'To respond to the homeward call we have to make sacrifices. Now I have managed to let my own rotten blood gush out, so I can begin'.⁴²

When *Gush of Blood* was written, the Arab world was severely divided and its nationalist regimes in particular were viciously at war with one another. Manal Swairjo notes that 'The Arab leaders were cursing each other through the radio stations, which were stupefying the people with songs celebrating the imminent return'.⁴³ In 1963 the Arab media were busy with aggressive propaganda, probably influenced by Nasser's enthusiastic speeches, promising the imminent return of the forcibly expelled Palestinians and the restoration of their occupied land. Wannous wrote in the preface 'During that time the birth of any resistance was no more than a dream or a desperate wish. Every one of us should let his blood gush so that the spark can ignite and the resistance be born'.⁴⁴ In this situation, the play considers the birth of resistance to be a legitimate dream, although it does not define what type of resistance it is advocating: is it to liberate the land, or to stand up against the Arab world's corrupt and despotic regimes? *Gush of Blood* is a call to action, but an action which is never defined. It partially criticises the Arab governments which hide behind their official media, and calls on them to help the Palestinians by deeds, not by false words. But it equally condemns the irresponsible and feckless Palestinian youth who waste their lives in intoxication while their country groans under occupation, calling on these young men to abandon their irresponsible behaviour, realise the dream of resistance, recognise the gravity of the situation and begin to work for the liberation of their country. Although the play calls on the Palestinians specifically, since it is

not set in Palestine itself Wannous appears to be speaking to every Arab, as for almost two decades Arab governments had been 'supporting' the Palestinian struggle, with no appreciable result. Ironically, when the Arab states finally did take action a few years later the result was a disaster for the Palestinians and the Arab world generally. The play, however, is ineffective as a call to action, partly because of its psychological crudity and unconvincing rhetoric, and partly because it was not addressed to an audience that was likely to respond. If Wannous thought about an audience at all, it was certainly not the 'Alis' of the refugee camps, let alone the 'Eleawahs'. Twenty years later, in *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre*, he confessed that his audience had been the intellectual élite, not the downtrodden people. The young readers of *Al-Adab* and similar literary magazines were either already engaged in action, or, like Wannous himself, supported the struggle in words but not in deeds. This is not to say that committed writers must abandon the pen for the gun, but it should be remembered that after 1967, Wannous became concerned that his work should have the effect of an overtly political act, and developed his concept of the 'theatre of politicisation' accordingly.

One Arab critic has observed that 'Wannous had always called for resistance against injustice, racism, despotism and aggression, and for the rejection of submissiveness, and had dreamed of resistance',⁴⁵ and indeed the play can be seen as an early, crude attempt to create, on a small scale, a 'theatre of politicisation'. But since here Wannous was essentially 'preaching to the converted', it is difficult to see it as a successful work, even on its own terms. Moreover, although it has been noted by Isma'il Fahad Isma'il that Ali and 'Eleawah embody 'the dualism in every Palestinian specifically and every Arab generally [...]',⁴⁶ the dualism is presented so starkly and schematically that it is unlikely to convince the reader that they personally need to take action to eliminate their own 'Eleawah. Also, the play depicts Ali as the model prospective resistance fighter, but his individual revolt, praised here, is contrary to what Wannous was to propagate in his post-1967 plays, in which he calls for collective and organized resistance. Nevertheless the play is certainly more optimistic and less ambiguous than *Corpse on the Pavement* or any of the other plays that will be considered in this chapter. It may be that the need to speak clearly on the crucial subject of the Palestinian problem prompted Wannous to abandon a more subtle treatment, or it may be that he was uninterested in, or incapable of, subtlety at this point in his career. In fact everything is subordinated to the message; this is a

strongly didactic and humourless work which nevertheless eschews naturalism, since presenting the 'two halves' of a radically split personality can only be accepted on a symbolic level. Ali and 'Eleawah are two-dimensional as characters. It is this, however, that reduces the power of the play as an avowedly political work, since the reader would surely find it difficult to identify fully with Ali's dilemma. Ali sees nothing good in his alter ego, whom the reader is also invited to despise, and has no real connection with him. The proposition that 'Eleawah is his other half is not developed at all; we are merely asked to accept it. While one should not ask that 'political' drama limit itself to social realism, a little psychological realism would have increased the play's power as drama and therefore, probably, its power as a call to action. Ali's elimination of 'Eleawah has the character of a conversion, in which the devil is driven out, allowing the 'good' person, previously hampered by the 'bad', to pursue the 'right path'. It is hard to see how the sceptical reader could be moved by this to emulate the virtuous Ali and take up arms against tyranny. In *Gush of Blood* Wannous shows, however unconvincingly, the making of a resistance fighter. In his next play he turned to an exploration of the impact of the apparatus of tyranny on a single powerless individual.

The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses

(A play in four short scenes)

Maasat Bayi' Al-Dibs Al-Faquir (The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses) was first published *Al-Adab* in 1964. It was the only one among Wannous's early plays to be given a staged production, at the first Arab Festival of Theatrical Arts in Damascus in 1969, an event which was partly organised by Wannous; it was at this festival that Wannous introduced his concept of the 'theatre of politicisation'. The theme of this, the longest and perhaps most ambitious of Wannous' early plays, is the nature of the relationship between the powerful and ruthless intelligence services in repressive countries in the Arab world, and the ordinary people, represented by Khaddour, the downtrodden seller of molasses, who knows nothing of politics and cares only about gaining his daily bread. Zealous servants of the regime, the intelligence agents, act as *agents provocateurs*, searching for the slightest evidence of the people's dissatisfaction with the regime, even among the naïve, impoverished and

humble who have never thought of challenging those in power. Their activities are calculated to inspire fear and ensure obedience among the populace, and it is immaterial whether or not the victim is a danger to the state. The regime's weapons are terror and arbitrary arrest, and imprisonment and torture are used to ensure the survival of the system, even when one despotic regime is overthrown by another, as occurs more than once in the play. In *Poor Seller*, Wannous deals with the plight of the exploited; but while condemning the tyranny of the military authorities, the play also strongly criticises those who retreat to the sidelines of political events, taking refuge in silence, fear and passivity. Wannous shows that such passivity offers no protection against oppression and tyranny.

Poor Seller is set in a town ruled by a brutal military regime which imposes its will through terror, ensuring that the people are fearful and suspicious of their neighbours. Cowed, passive and defeatist, they accept the status quo, and are incapable of actively confronting the reality of their situation and intervening in the course of events. Life is a nightmare full of fear, wariness and anxious expectancy. Khaddour is an ordinary man of limited intellect who sells molasses; he is devoutly religious and fatalistic, and represents the naïve and uneducated Arab who believes in the miracles of prophets and thinks that everything that happens is by the 'will of the God of heaven and earth'.⁴⁷ Unlike the beggar in *Corpse on the Pavement*, he is a 'good citizen': he loves his wife and children and for their sake he works night and day so that 'they might not starve'.⁴⁸ Khaddour is obviously a countryman, possibly an illiterate migrant; as Nadim Mua'ala points out, Khaddour 'is a name common among peasants in Syria'.⁴⁹ The second character is Hassan, a secret agent who spies on the citizens for the authorities, and whose special talent is entrapping the innocent and having them thrown in prison. Hassan appears in each scene with a different name, adopted as a disguise to allay the suspicions of his victims, first calling himself Hassan, then Hussein and finally Muhsen. This draws on a popular Arab proverb; 'Hassan is the brother of Hussein' or sometimes Muhsen, which is roughly equivalent to 'birds of a feather flock together' in English. Wannous gives Hassan symbolic physical characteristics in the stage directions to reveal certain aspects of his character. His chin looks like a dog's, indicating his loyalty and faithfulness to the authorities; his eyes are like a wolf's, signifying cruelty, cunning and his adeptness at spying on the townspeople.

Wannous also presents an ironic chorus of nine pale statues, which stand in the town square. Al Souleman points out that several Arab dramatists of this period were interested by the possibilities of using the chorus as a means of symbolising the public of a city or nation.⁵⁰ Wannous uses this device to dramatise the alienation and passivity of the Arab public; the chorus can be taken to represent the conscience as well as the cowardice of the townspeople. Being statues, they are fixed to their bases and cannot take action, but unlike the chorus in *Gush of Blood*, they speak their thoughts. The statues are gradually reduced to rubble during the course of the play, as one despotic regime succeeds another, and the depression and sorrow on their faces increase whenever Khaddour is treated unjustly or tortured in the dungeons of the secret police after being entrapped by Hassan. Wannous leaves the mechanics of how this is to be done to the director, but they would certainly be played by live actors so that an audience would see that they could move but make their own decision not to.

Wannous describes the *Poor Seller* stage set as representing a gloomy town. In the square, the nine statues chant, singing of their role as passive observers: 'We are like you',⁵¹ they tell the audience. In this sombre setting, Khaddour, who is forty but looks older, walks onstage praising his molasses as 'sweeter than honey'.⁵² Hassan enters; he has apparently been following Khaddour unnoticed. Although he has never spoken to Khaddour before this moment, Hassan addresses him reproachfully: 'Don't you know me? I am Hassan. We are neighbours'.⁵³ Khaddour, kind and good-hearted to the point of naiveté, does not question Hassan's statement, rather he doubts his own memory and offers excuses. Khaddour's response gives Hassan a chance to get acquainted with him and win his trust; his purpose is to discover and exploit Khaddour's attitude and feelings towards the regime, twisting his words if necessary, in order to deliver him to the security police. It should be emphasised that Wannous is not exaggerating here; countless stories have been documented about the jailing of innocent people for many years as a result of false evidence. As Khaddour himself later says, these detainees 'are in their hundreds in the detention camp, and their sufferings are just the same as mine'.⁵⁴ Wannous, of course, was not alone in drawing attention to this hideous state of affairs. Mostyn quotes the Iranian poet Ahmad Shamloo's lines from 'Punishment', published in 1967, where, as Mostyn says, 'the atmosphere of terror is chilling':

In this place there is a maze of prisons
And in each prison a myriad of dungeons
And in each dungeon countless cells
And in each cell scores of men in irons.⁵⁵

Hassan professes sympathy for Khaddour, cursing the hard life of the town; then he shifts the conversation to politics in order to incriminate the gullible molasses seller. At first Khaddour's naïve replies are not incriminating enough for Hassan to deliver him to interrogation and imprisonment, since the poor man's simplicity prevents him from grasping Hassan's meaning. Hassan then asks Khaddour whether he feels that he is being paid enough for his work. Khaddour's naive reply, that he is like a mule working hard for no reward, is twisted by Hassan into a criticism of the authorities; he declares: 'I admire you; you are right to despise them, because they are no more than a gang of villains. You ignore them and treat them with the contempt they deserve. Everyone says they are a pack of thieves'.⁵⁶ This dialogue is a turning-point in Hassan's conversation with Khaddour, since the agent speaks on behalf of the poor man, interprets the speech as he likes, draws conclusions that serve his malicious ends and attributes them to Khaddour.

Hassan is clearly a diabolical figure and, with great cunning and not without a touch of black humour, he eventually traps Khaddour into cursing the authorities without intending to, and compliments him on his grasp of political realities. Bewildered, Khaddour withdraws to a corner of the stage, while Hassan makes movements indicating that he is telephoning the security police. As he mimes the call, he gloats: 'Masked discontent, and impenetrable naïveté, one should not disregard them. Masks should not deceive us'.⁵⁷ Hassan leaves the stage and the chorus of statues speaks, lamenting the passing of freedom and courage; things are not as they once were, and to speak out is impossible. Then we hear a confused cry coming from the corner of the stage, and it soon becomes clear that it is the voice of Khaddour, insisting he has committed no crime and begging for release.

The action of scene two takes place within the same panoramic set, but slight changes have occurred. The expressions of isolation and gloom on the faces of the statue-chorus have become more marked, and one of the statues has collapsed into a heap of rubble. Since the statues represent the audience, perhaps the collapse, that is, the death of one of them, whenever Khaddour is oppressed, is a message to the audience that Khaddour is the audience's compatriot, and therefore they should

identify with his agony, which they themselves might well face someday. Perhaps Wannous also intends to indicate more generally that the sufferings of one person affect the lives of everyone in the community. The first sound the audience hears in this scene is a particular military march, which is used in place of the chorus's song and which indicates to a Middle Eastern audience that a military coup has taken place. Military coups were hardly infrequent in the region, especially in Syria; when Nasser toppled King Farouq in 1952, and whenever a coup took place in Syria and Iraq, the local radio stations broadcast only military marches until the new regime was in place, and therefore coups are always associated in the Arab world with this type of military music.

When Khaddour eventually re-enters, his face and body show that he has been subjected to brutal punishment. His leg is broken and he looks like an old man. He hobbles to the front of the stage, falls and describes in detail the tortures he suffered with the other detainees during his incarceration, which lasted half a year. It is striking that Wannous includes this detailed description, since he avoided such emotive material in *Gush of Blood*, where it might have served his purpose well. When Hassan returns, he pretends that he has never met Khaddour, and although the terrified molasses seller recognises him as Hassan, he introduces himself as Hussein and, feigning surprise, denies any connection with the so-called Hassan. Khaddour naïvely accepts Hassan's lie as the truth, and again falls into the trap, while the statue-chorus impotently bewail the impossibility of speaking out or acting against the powers that be.

By the beginning of scene three, two of the statues have crumbled away. The military march is heard again, indicating that another coup has occurred; one despot may topple another, but as long as the people fear to act, the nature of the regime will not change – a theme to which Wannous would return in *The King's the King*. In a long monologue, Khaddour again discloses to the audience all the inhuman punishments he has undergone, which have finally prompted him to start using his reason.

Khaddour has decided that he will not humbly accept his fate in the name of religion. This decision marks a dramatic development in his character, paralleling the dramatic development of the events, and causing him to behave with caution when he confronts the secret agent Muhsen, formerly known as Hassan and Hussein. Muhsen enters from the same place as Khaddour entered, indicating that he has again been

keeping a close watch on the molasses seller. But this time Khaddour denies Muhsen the opportunity to lure him into saying something that would cause his arrest, and Muhsen becomes desperate.

MUHSEN: [...] My name is Muhsen and I live in the eastern district.

KHADDOUR: Muhsen? Your name is Muhsen?

MUHSEN: Yes. What is wrong with that?

KHADDOUR: What about Hassan? What about Hussein?
[...] Yes, I remember; perhaps your mother had triplets.⁵⁸

When Khaddour has gone, Muhsen admits: 'My chances have dried up'.⁵⁹ This time he does not call his masters on the telephone. Muhsen leaves, and again the statues deliver their message of despair. Khaddour's victory over Muhsen has, it seems, had no effect on them.

The fourth scene is set in a street that has no beginning or end. The nightmare has triumphed; it has always been like this, it always will be. In this street, three creatures, which look more like automata than human beings are going back and forth. Each has 'a round featureless head flattened at the front'; these disfigured creatures are of a similar height and build, wear identical uniforms and move to the same rhythm with an arrogant military strut, and appear to represent and reflect Hassan's three identities – Hasan, Hussein, Muhsen. The statues are absent during this scene. The regime seems to have transformed its servants into dehumanised slaves of the military machine; as for the statue-chorus, they have either been removed by the authorities or have all collapsed into rubble and been carted away. The former is more likely, as we hear them speak at the end of the play, but since we do not see them the latter is also possible. Whatever the reason, their comments are superfluous in this triumph of totalitarianism. Khaddour, however, has not become one of the featureless slaves. He enters, gestures to us, and creeps like a ghost with trembling steps and bowed head. This time Khaddour cannot escape the forces of tyranny, and the three faceless creatures trample him to death, leaving only a pool of yellow liquid. The streetlight goes out, and a breeze starts blowing which grows stronger, announcing the arrival of a storm on the horizon. This symbolism is unclear. It could signify that things are about to get even worse, or more probably, that the storm, the people's resistance, will sweep away the tyranny that has oppressed them. After the curtain

falls, the statue-chorus is heard for the last time, speaking from behind the curtain about the victims of the regime, who include a beautiful secretary (who will become Khidra in the sequel), whose honour has been sacrificed to the regime. Yet it seems that Wannous intends the pervading pessimism of the play to be relieved by a glimpse of hope: the chorus speaks to the audience, asking them not to forget that statues 'do not only shatter but can also crush and strike'.⁶⁰ This is presumably intended to remind Wannous's readers that they have the power to oppose the regimes that oppress them, but the line does little to lighten the pervading gloom.

Wannous's drama evokes the situation in several countries in the Arab world at that time. Khaddour is uneducated and gullible, but those who are slightly more aware and might be able to oppose the authorities and yet do nothing are just as passive as Khaddour; and the play implies that those among Wannous's readers whose inertia and despair mask their cowardice are, like the chorus, petrified by the regime's use of terror. Instead of acting, they are as static and inactive as stones. Thus Wannous represents Khaddour's countrymen in two ways; firstly through Khaddour himself: as Yaghe says '[...] his agony is a clear indication of his countrymen's suffering',⁶¹ and secondly, through the moral condemnation of the chorus of statues, who say to the audience: 'fear has muzzled us [...] don't expect us to interfere'.⁶² What both have in common is their passivity, whether unconscious in the case of Khaddour, who is oblivious to what is going on around him, or conscious and deliberate on the part of the statues, who are aware of every development, but are unwilling or incapable of confronting injustice. Politically the play is surely ineffective if judged as a call to action. While it is taken as read that the regime is to be condemned – Hassan's characterisation of the authorities is, ironically, more or less true – Wannous does not provide any historical context and, more importantly, does not hold the regime wholly responsible for Khaddour's, and his country's, pathetic circumstances. Khaddour, like the beggar in *Corpse on the Pavement*, is entirely passive, though he learns from his experiences and is able to evade Hassan's trap in scene three. And while Hassan is cunning and energetic as well as callous and amoral, and is arguably the play's most interesting character, Khaddour and the statue-chorus exist, for most of the action, in a constant state of desperation and surrender.

Wannous calls the play a tragedy, yet Khaddour is a victim not a tragic hero, so that the tragedy may be seen as that of a society that produces both oppressors and

oppressed. It is very difficult to explain the events of scene four except by saying that Wannous himself has reverted to the despair he temporarily overcame in *Gush of Blood*. Although Khaddour wins a kind of victory over Hassan at the end of scene three, he is immediately destroyed in scene four. This scene bears a superficial resemblance to the final scene of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, but al Souleman is surely mistaken in considering the whole play to be reminiscent of Ionesco's on the ground that *Poor Seller* dramatises the 'absolute contradiction between the individual and political authority'.⁶³ As we have indicated, *Poor Seller* does not address its theme in such abstract terms, but refers to the iniquities of a particular political situation. Moreover, Khaddour's destruction is a surprising development, which has in no way been prepared for by scene three. The impression is one of incoherence, and the ray of hope presented at the end of the play is not convincing, given what has just occurred. We have no reason to believe in the symbol of the coming storm or in the statues' words, which do not succeed in dispelling the nightmarish atmosphere of the events we have just witnessed. They seem a rhetorical gesture, merely asserting that the chorus, representing the politically conscious but inactive audience, has the potential to resist. This seems a considerable flaw, not only dramatically but also as regards Wannous' implicit political purpose - to encourage resistance to tyranny and injustice; this implicit purpose is made explicit in the play's sequel. Moreover, had this not been his purpose it is unlikely that he would have consented to the play being produced at the 1969 Damascus Theatre Festival, given his views on the task of the theatre of politicisation, which was to arouse the audience to take direct political action against the Arab world's oppressive regimes. To say that *Poor Seller* is not naturalistic and has the character of a dream does not answer these criticisms.

Besides the various influences discussed above, including that of Ionesco – as Wannous later admitted, 'possibly in my earliest plays Ionesco influenced me'⁶⁴ – it is difficult to imagine that Wannous had not read Kafka; Al-Abdulla mentions this possibility,⁶⁵ and it seems very likely. Khaddour is the victim of an inscrutable authority (inscrutable to the victim, not the audience) which destroys him, although he has no idea what he might be guilty of. His guilt has already been decided and his crimes are known to the authority, therefore he must confess. However, while Sartre and Ionesco may have impressed Wannous, Khaddour does not resemble any of their characters; he is uneducated, is not spiritually isolated, is not a bourgeois, and does not live in an advanced capitalist society; he is one of the poor toiling masses

Wannous was concerned to defend. But Khaddour has no social ties apart from his family, no workmates, works only for himself, and so has no class consciousness born of solidarity and comradely struggle. It is significant that, once again, Wannous presents a victim, a character very different from the tough and politically aware peasants he had known in his native village. Those people, his own people, had created a thriving and supportive community in the face of feudal oppression and the threat of murder. It may be that Wannous is commenting on the isolation endured by poor migrants to the cities who have been cut off from their communities.

Some Arab critics see this play as 'the gate to Wannous' political theatre',⁶⁶ and it has, perhaps, more of a claim to this title than *Gush of Blood*, since it challenges the audience directly; indeed, it is the only one of his early plays to attempt an active relationship with the audience. On the other hand, its nightmarish atmosphere and pessimism which are not, in my view, dissipated by the final pages, are unlikely to arouse anyone to act against a dictatorial regime. Perhaps Wannous wanted to say that revolution does not come about until the people themselves decide to act, and that the time is not yet ripe. He was to return to this idea in *The King's the King*. Nevertheless he is young and impatient, and while he condemns oppressive governments, he also condemns those who tacitly accept their tyranny. His next play was to be a sequel to *Poor Seller*.

The Unknown Messenger at Antigone's Funeral Ceremony

(A short play in two scenes)

Wannous wrote *Al-Rasoul Al-Majhoul fi Matam Antigone*⁶⁷ (*The Unknown Messenger at Antigone's Funeral Ceremony*) in 1965. It was written the year after he completed *Poor Seller*, and was subsequently published in *The Tales of the Chorus of Statues*. The two plays were originally intended to be part of a trilogy. *The Unknown Messenger* is usually considered an extension of the earlier play (although it can stand alone) as it begins at the point where Khaddour's agony ends. 'The general atmosphere is imbued with sorrow and fear [...]. The action takes place in the same location as the previous play - *Poor Seller* - but the town is much grimmer and dirtier.'⁶⁸ The textual association becomes clear at the very beginning, when the chorus of statues, now reinstated, reminds the audience of the beautiful female

secretary. The chorus's chant at the end of *Poor Seller* implied that she had been raped by the secret agent, Hassan, shortly after the death of Khaddour at the hands of the three faceless creatures. This secretary, who is merely referred to in *Poor Seller*, has now become, according to the chorus, a slave in Hassan's palace: '[Hassan] has violated beauty in a room protected by the eyes of wolves. [...] The wolfish creature wanted her body, which glowed like ripe wheat, her youth, the warmth of her lips, and he won them. He violated her beauty time after time'.⁶⁹

Wannous names this young woman Khidra. She was 'beautiful and her mouth was like a flower', but since Hassan's crime she has become pale and wasted.⁷⁰ Her name is the feminine form of Khaddour, which is another indication that this play is an extension of *Poor Seller* and that Khidra's agony is an extension of Khaddour's. She can be seen to represent the female half of society and her sufferings as a woman are no less than a man's. The play begins with the chorus's disclosure that supreme authority in the town has fallen into the hands of Hassan, the secret agent, who has succeeded in eliminating his rivals, and has overthrown the existing authority, having mastered the game of power through experience and cunning: 'The town is governed by a wolf following a wolf'.⁷¹ In other words, yet another coup has taken place. It also appears that the Hassan\Husseini\Muhsen triad has reverted to a single character. Now his power is complete and he intends ruthlessly to eliminate any opponent, however marginal or passive.

HASSAN: Wasn't I cleverness itself, and didn't my eyes steal everyone's deepest secrets? Is it right for someone like me to spend his life as a servant? [...] My cleverness taught me to wait until the opportunity ripens and then seize it.⁷²

But as Hassan is arrogantly viewing the city, a 'fearless' little boy of nine years old, whose eyes, according to the stage directions, 'like two diamonds radiate infinite brilliance and intelligence',⁷³ prophesies his downfall. The little boy's courage and bold warning enrage the tyrannical Hassan, and at once he cuts off part of the child's tongue to stop his speech.

HASSAN (*bursting with anger*): What?

BOY (*steadfastly*): My Master, 'History', tells you: you will not escape, and your fate will be no different from your predecessors.

HASSAN: Really. Is that what it says? [...]

*He takes a knife from his belt, holds the boy's head and cuts off his tongue. The boy keeps quiet and doesn't move.*⁷⁴

But the little boy repeats his warning over and over, whereupon Hassan cuts out the rest of his tongue, and then kills him. The boy's verbal 'pursuit' of Hassan in this scene turns the tables on the new ruler: the pursuer of Khaddour becomes the pursued.

Although Hassan's ruthlessness has given him absolute power over Khidra and the whole city, at the end of the play the little boy's prophecy comes true and the despot dies just like his predecessors. However, the manner of his death is bizarre: he dies in agony after being bitten by invisible ants. These insects may represent the organised townspeople, but it is striking that he is not crushed by the statues, as they intimidated might occur at the end of *Poor Seller*. The symbolism of the ants seems less dramatically effective; however, Wannous may be saying that the people must be as organised as ants to realise their dream of freedom. Following Hassan's death, the little boy is miraculously raised from the dead, the statues are revived, and Khidra's beauty and vitality are restored. Actions in the play are minimal and the play's importance lies in its poetic style, which is at its most lyrical in the utterances of Khidra, who speaks of her long-awaited knight, who will rescue her from her agony; here she prefigures Izza in *The King's the King*. The character of Khidra takes on a symbolic dimension which goes beyond individual limits, and the chorus acknowledges this in referring to Khidra as 'our city'.⁷⁵ In personifying the city as a woman Wannous is, of course, following a well-established tradition.

In *Unknown Messenger* we find ourselves in the realm of the fairy tale. Naturalism has been banished, but the play is not an example of the Theatre of the Absurd, despite Wannous' cautious admission of the influence of Ionesco. Neither the play as a whole nor the characters of Khidra, the boy and Hassan conform to the statement Ionesco made describing his theatre: 'Devoid of purpose [...] cut from religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless'.⁷⁶ This does not describe the world of this poetic, symbolic drama, where fantasy and the mysterious serve humanism and encourage hope, rather than persuade us that life is meaningless. Nevertheless it can be argued that passivity

and the inability to resist mark the attitudes of Khidra and the powerless chorus, as they did that of Khaddour in *Poor Seller*. Khidra is not an active character, despite her importance as a symbol, and is generally acted upon and spoken about. Her speeches consist of responses to the other characters' questions, and are marked by elaborate poetical discourse, and rather than defend herself she waits for a knight to save her. Incapable of taking her fate into her own hands. Khidra is thus the opposite of the decisive and fearless Antigone who challenges Creon's orders. The conflict in the Greek tragedy is subtler than in this play, however, for the battle here is not between two goods, but between good and evil. Nonetheless, courage and energy are needed, as the chorus realise: 'If Antigone is to appear again, women must take matters into their own hands'.⁷⁷ The argument is apparently not a feminist one, but extends the metaphor of the city as female, so 'women' should be understood here to represent the city as a whole. Feminism was to have no impact on Wannous's theatre until the third phase of his career.

The little boy is an innovation in Wannous's theatre. His optimism and courage redeem the pessimism, defeatism and despair of Khidra and the chorus, suggesting that Wannous attached hope to the coming generations, who he believed would shoulder their responsibilities and succeed in transforming their corrupt societies. Thus the nameless boy, like Khidra, symbolises something larger than the individual, representing the potential of youth and presumably being the 'unknown messenger' of the title. His function is similar to that of the group of children in *The Glass Café*, who rebel against their elders' humdrum and submissive lives. In his next play Wannous moved from optimistic fable to the satire and farce of the puppet play.

The Game of Pins

(A play in one scene)

Wannous wrote *Li'bat Al-Dababis*⁷⁸ (*The Game of Pins*) in 1965. At the very beginning of its stage directions he describes a buffoonish character called Shudoud, with a balloon-shaped body and a head like a doll's, who is sitting on a large chair which suits his size. The name Shudoud is related to the word *shada*, meaning stretching or expansion. He delivers a boastful monologue extolling his admirable character, creative brilliance and everlasting energy: 'My friends throughout the

world are countless. [...] A couple of days ago I squashed a group of men with one slap. [...] Men were falling like flies, and their blood was pouring like torrential rain. [...] When I was a child I was able to calculate the most complicated mathematical operation in seconds'.⁷⁹ However, he insists that he hates speaking about himself, as humility is an important virtue for men.⁸⁰

Shudoud is inflated to bursting point with unjustifiable conceit, and he is not alone in his opinion; during his monologue, we hear two voices offstage echoing his speech and praising his heroic deeds. They respond with 'yes' and 'true' to everything he says, and when he praises his modesty they echo solemnly: 'You are modesty itself'.⁸¹ These voices and Shudoud's monologue stop immediately on the entrance of a fourth character, Barhoum. He is - according to the stage directions - 'a thin man, clever and swift-moving with cunning looks'.⁸² He takes a long needle out of his pocket, and asks Shudoud to join him in his game with the pin, but when Shudoud sees the shining needle he is terrified and refuses to play. Barhoum shows Shudoud some of his tricks: he drives the needle into the palm of his hand without bleeding, and thrusts it through both cheeks without shedding a drop of blood. After this performance he starts to chase Shudoud, seeking to deflate him. Shudoud, terrified, tries to flee, but Barhoum catches him and punctures his inflated body, which explodes and turns to dust (another challenge to the director). Then the two flatterers, whose voices were heard offstage, appear and loudly lament the demise of their hero; they start beating Barhoum, who is astonished by this seemingly unprovoked assault. But when a nameless character, who is blowing up a balloon, appears on stage, Barhoum's attackers stop their wailing at once and gaze enraptured at the inflating balloon. Soon, however, the man holding the balloon leaves the stage, and their happiness turns to sadness once more; they seem to have imagined that Shudoud was being brought back to life and restored to them. Taking pity on them, Barhoum asks them to play a game with him, but they sadly refuse. Eventually, Barhoum grows tired and sits down on Shudoud's big chair. The two sycophants are delighted and disappear backstage, where they resume their previous role, repeating Barhoum's words and praising him. Immediately he starts to praise himself and act as proudly as Shudoud had done. The chair seems to have extraordinary powers, since Barhoum's body inflates like a balloon until the curtain falls.

This strange little play, which recalls the antics of circus clowns and, perhaps, the ludicrous monarch of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, can be interpreted in more than one

way; but while Wannous never spoke or wrote about it publicly, when considered in the context of his other early work, the most obvious meaning is not hard to discover: the characters are grotesques who caricature the world of the despot and his entourage. Though the play resembles a dream it is too light in tone to be a nightmare, and, despite its pessimism, it is presented in such a farcical way it amuses rather than depresses the reader. Wannous later said, in relation to some of his early plays, that he was presenting 'a game on stage with the ambition of imitating the game of life'.⁸³ Here the elements of the game are a conceited and cowardly fool, a magic chair conferring limitless self-confidence on anyone who sits on it, two ridiculous sycophants who veer between joy and despair, a man with a pin bent on destruction, and so on. These, and the schematic plot, are used to depict the nature of power, its logic and goals, the mechanism of its operation and the means by which it maintains its survival; all of this prompts the conclusion that *The Game of Pins* is a kind of diagram of Wannous's main concerns as a dramatist at this time.

The key to understanding this very brief play (it is only a few pages long) seems to lie in Wannous' presentation of the two sycophants who echo everything Shudoud utters. The name of the more dominant of the two flatterers is Altabe'e, which means in English 'an inferior follower or member of an entourage'.⁸⁴ These two praise and adore anyone who sits on the chair of power, since it is power they worship and which guarantees their happiness, not the qualities of the individual who occupies the chair. The psychology of Altabe'e and his companion is not explored; they may be sincere in their admiration of the chair's tenant as long as he does not move from it; they may be complete hypocrites; they may be cynical opportunists like Hassan in *Poor Seller*. This is not particularly important; what Wannous is highlighting is that they represent the typical subordinate, the beneficiary of power whose main goal is to maintain a position through flattery of the powerful. The play also indicates that the most prominent characteristic of the one occupying the chair of power is his inflated sense of his own ability. The moment he sits on the chair he becomes subject to delusions of grandeur due to his parasitic entourage's endless fawning and flattery. The play suggests that this type of person survives in power by creating around himself a group of subordinate individuals, who play their part by supporting and, in a sense, creating him. Moreover their apparent devotion is not to be trusted, since their loyalty is given to the chair of power, not to the individual who occupies it. It seems that Wannous is here satirising not only the apparatus of

government but also the official media and government-sponsored writers who habitually offered fawning support to the despotic regimes of the Arab world. Altabe'e is in this sense a clownish counterpart to the journalist in *Gush of Blood*; like the journalist, he wears 'elegant clothes'.⁸⁵ Thus Wannous presents a schema of the man of power and his servants, whether a king and his courtiers or a dictator and his minions. The rage and sorrow of Altabe'e and his companion when Shudoud explodes is not due to their sadness at his death; they fear above all being deprived of their role, status and security because of the resulting power vacuum, the proof of which is that their happiness is restored as soon as Barhoum takes Shudoud's place. Wannous is not aiming at subtlety here; *The Game of Pins* is a kind of political cartoon that strips the situation to its essentials.

The next chapters will discuss the development of Wannous' treatment of the issue of power and authority, and we shall see that the theme of *The Game of Pins* makes it (like several of these early plays), a schematic precursor of *The King's the King*. Wannous's next play is not only very different from *The Game of Pins*, but has very little in common with any of his other early works.

The Locusts

(A short play in one act)

*Al-Jarad*⁸⁶ (*The Locusts*), written in 1964 and published in 1965, is a dream play. Its main character is Yousef, a married man in his mid-thirties who supports his sick younger brother as well as his own family, and who also indirectly supports his sister-in-law, Nadia. In what is essentially a prologue to this very short play, we learn that Yousef's life is disturbed in three ways. First, he is obliged by the duties of kinship to support his sick brother; second, he wants to stop supporting his brother because he himself is poor, and because his wife, who is nameless like his brother, wants him to stop wasting the family's resources. The third disturbance is internal and only becomes apparent during his dream: it is his unconscious love for his sick brother's wife. Wannous presents the contradictions of Yousef's suppressed desires through a nightmare during his nap. Before he falls asleep his wife takes him to task for his naïveté and - in her view - excessive concern for his brother. When his wife leaves the bedroom, Yousef falls asleep and his snores can be heard issuing from the

back of the stage throughout the play. The play proper consists of a nightmare experienced by this sleeping man. Badawi found *Corpse on the Pavement* 'Surrealistic',⁸⁷ but there is no evidence of Surrealism in that play. *The Locusts* is the only one among Wannous's early works that clearly shows that he was familiar with Surrealist practice.

After Yousef falls asleep, Wannous presents a series of bizarre incidents, which we understand are occurring in his dream. First he is surprised by a man who seems to personify his feelings of guilt towards his brother, which stem from their childhood. There is a strong hint of sibling rivalry here: his brother has always been their parents' favourite. The man disappears, and a frightening figure without facial features, except two eyes and a slit for a mouth, next appears to Yousef. Its appearance bears obvious similarities to that of the robotic figures in scene four of *Poor Seller*. He takes out a rope and Yousef is terrified, fearing that he will be hanged, but his brother's wife appears immediately and the featureless man disappears, to Yousef's great relief. Nadia rushes towards Yousef and stands in front of him, and Yousef happily touches her arms and hands. It is possible that this wish-fulfilment conceals the desire for a much more intimate contact; we learn that Yousef had fallen in love with Nadia at first sight, when he accompanied his father and mother on their visit to Nadia's family to present his brother's proposal of marriage. But Nadia's features soon change into those of his mother, who sternly admonishes Yousef because of his harshness towards his brother. The featureless figure, who may represent Yousef's punishing superego, then reappears with a snakelike rope and approaches him with an expression full of anger and disdain. Besides the connection with death, the snakelike character of the rope may be a phallic symbol indicating Yousef's illicit desire not only for his sister-in-law, but also for his mother. Yousef tries to escape, whereupon Nadia returns and Yousef is comforted. Finally, Yousef's father and mother appear carrying his brother's coffin. His father tells him that he is doomed, while imams surround the coffin and perform the funeral ceremony. Then his mother opens her arms towards Yousef and a big black locust emerges and attacks Yousef's stomach, followed by a second and a third; then a great horde of the insects pour forth and begin to feed on his bowels, while he screams with pain and begs for mercy. He wakes abruptly and the curtain falls. It should be noted that in the stage directions Wannous informs the reader that Yousef sees his family as being like locusts - a clear enough simile.

Wannous was not concerned with how these nightmarish events could be produced on stage. They are intended to take place in the reader's mind, but could be best realised on film (Buñuel and Dali spring to mind) or through animation; the Czech surrealist Jan Svankmajer (1934-) would be a suitable interpreter. In neither his published writings nor his interviews did Wannous mention anything that could help in tracing the motivations and circumstances that informed and accompanied the writing of this strange piece. It is difficult to understand why he should have chosen this theme, which is so different from his other early works. We should note here, however, that his late play *Miserable Dreams* (1994) contains an important and lengthy dream scene which connects it to the surrealism of *The Locusts*. *Miserable Dreams* is a reworking of an abandoned play written at about the same time as *The Locusts*, and internal evidence suggests that much of the material of the abandoned work was incorporated into the later reworking – including the dream scene.

The nightmarish quality of *The Locusts* derives from its exploration of the realm of dreams and the subconscious. It seems that Wannous believed – or was experimenting with the idea – that Yousef's dream indicates the 'real' state of his mind and desires, because dreams are the language of the subconscious mind. Wannous was certainly aware of the Surrealists and contributed an article on André Breton to *Al-Adab* in 1966.⁸⁸ By 1966, however, he had become disenchanted with the Surrealists' neglect of social realities. In his view it had failed 'to change humankind or penetrate its internal life. It's fading and becoming only a memory. It's leaving the court open for new forms that are more coherent and more connected to people's problems'.⁸⁹ While acknowledging the importance and wide influence of Freud's work, Wannous took issue with Surrealist practice, which he felt enriched inspiration but was 'still only broadening one's vision and could not change human life'.⁹⁰ He complained that Surrealism enhanced individualism and thus deprived art 'of one of its main characteristics; that is, interconnection with mankind'.⁹¹ The article's emphasis on art's potential to change human life and connect with the people's problems seems related to the strong probability that it was written during Wannous's first period of study at the Sorbonne, where he came under the influence of Bernard Dort, an important critic of Brecht and the epic theatre. In 1964, however, Wannous was certainly influenced by the Surrealists and by Freud's argument that 'whatever the dream may present, it acquires its material from reality [...] all the material

composing the content of the dream derives in some way from our experience, and so is reproduced, remembered, in the dream'.⁹²

Another link between *The Locusts* and Freudianism can be forged from the transformation of Nadia's face into that of Yousef's mother during his dream. Freud once declared: 'I have found, in my own case too, the phenomenon of being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood. The expression of these primordial emotions might explain the power of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* [...]'.⁹³ For Freud, accepting the prohibition against incest - accepting the renunciation of a primordial desire - is the crucible in which human subjectivity and culture are formed. Although it could be argued that in *The Locusts* Wannous indicates Yousef's unconscious guilt regarding his desire for his brother's wife by the appearance of the mother as a symbol of decisive prohibition, it is possible that the play derives one aspect of its content from Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. The Egyptian critic Faridah Al-Naqash has suggested that the play derives its content from two ancient stories: that of Cain, who killed his brother Abel according to the scriptures, and that of Oedipus, the son who forms an incestuous relationship with his mother, but she does not argue that Freud had any direct influence on Wannous.⁹⁴

Finally, although Wannous seems to be aiming to explore the subconscious, this exploration appears to have no relevance to the individual's relation to the wider society beyond the family circle, and to have no political dimension: This also sets it apart from his other early work, to which it is linked only by its disturbing atmosphere. In his next play, the last to be considered in this chapter, Wannous returned to the wider social world neglected in *The Locusts*.

The Glass Cafe

(A short play in one scene)

This play is the longest of Wannous's early works with the exception of *Poor Seller*. It was written in 1965 and is in several ways the most interesting of his early works, and is the only one to have been translated into English.⁹⁵ It is this translation that will be used when quoting passages from the text.

The set is 'a coffee shop like any other, except that its walls are made of thick glass stained a light yellow, indicating age and neglect'.⁹⁶ The glass, which can hardly be seen through, can be read as symbolising the blindness of the older generation. The customers are middle-aged or older and all of them have roughly similar faces, which appear to have been subjected to a slow process of change that has altered the distinctiveness of their original features. The customers' 'flat look', the emptiness of their expressions, indicate that they have abandoned their individuality – a recurrent motif in these plays. They are effectively prisoners of the routine imposed by the café's owner, playing cards or backgammon or sometimes sleeping. The nameless waiter, who is intelligent and energetic but cynical, is terrified of Zaza, the owner, and periodically attempts to talk to him about the fate of his mother, a seamstress, who has apparently 'blown up'; that is, the boils on her face have exploded. This image of sudden eruption is repeated several times during the play, heightening the tension and preparing the reader for the denouement. These aspects link the play to certain features of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Zaza, a fat man with rosy cheeks, whose smile 'combines sweetness with derisive cunning',⁹⁷ sits behind a table with a thick glass top; the other two characters are Unsi and Jassem, who play backgammon until almost the end of the play. Interestingly, sections of their dialogue are in colloquial Arabic – the only instance of the extended use of this form in all the early plays, perhaps reflecting a desire on Wannous's part to inject a degree of realism and linguistic vitality into this play. But while Jassem, the older, is absorbed in the game as he smokes his water pipe, Unsi is unable to concentrate. He is obviously anxious, though at first it is not clear why. We soon learn that two of the customers have died recently, having lost their games. Jassem remains unmoved by their deaths, remarking merely that one of them used to like his tea very sweet. Meanwhile, the waiter fusses around, making sure their wants are satisfied. He is the intermediary between the customers and Zaza, constantly making sure that the routine of the café runs smoothly, whether or not customers die at their tables. Nothing, not even death, must be permitted to disturb the order Zaza has imposed.

As Jassem and Unsi play it becomes clear that the game is not only a metaphor for the defeat and victories of life, but has become a substitute for living. Unsi asks, apparently apropos of the game, 'And how important is resistance?'⁹⁸ He asks for a pipe and enquires after Jassem's children. Jassem now reveals himself as a brutal

domestic tyrant; he has beaten his son for smoking. Not noticing Unsi's look of distaste, he boasts that he 'won't tolerate any anarchy or deviation'.⁹⁹ Unsi's attitude is very different. He tells Jassem that he no longer understands his son and can no longer command him. The language of Unsi's speech is a departure from the dialogue so far. Its intensity and incoherence seem incongruous, but the incongruity is here used to much greater effect than in any of the other early plays:

UNSI: [...] There he was in front of me, only a tile's distance between us- he was breathing quite calmly- but in his eyes there was a pagan look - as though threatening me - no, not that - maybe reproaching me - no it was not reproach - it was like a whipping - like poison - oh, I don't know - I felt - as though my heart was a fish whose gills were blocked - slowly suffocating - (*Breathing heavily*) I tried to escape - but his gaze was firm, and unshakeable - a strange sea with no waves - suddenly everything lost its meaning - suddenly the boy began to grow - he grew - and grew - I remember him a fistful of red meat, and there he was before me, swelling and swelling - he filled the entire room - he was crowding me against the wall - cancelling me out [...].¹⁰⁰

Jassem is quite unperturbed by this outburst and encourages Unsi to go on with the game. 'The tarnished glass barely illuminates their faces with its yellowish glow, reminiscent neither of daylight nor of any one season, but only of an old tale taking place in a well deep underground'.¹⁰¹ The café is a world outside time, outside history. Suddenly one of the customers dies; the others are momentarily disturbed, but respond with meaningless clichés; only Unsi is moved. Zaza at once makes the necessary arrangements and the corpse is removed in a coffin amid cries of '*Allahu Akbar*' (God is great) which are repeated mechanically and dully and have no emotional content. Zaza is unconcerned:

ZAZA: [...] Plenty of customers have died and the shop's still teeming with them. In a while another customer will arrive. We've seen sons sitting in their fathers' chairs - and brothers sitting in their brothers'.¹⁰²

The café is effectively an anteroom to the next world, in which order is preserved whether the customers are alive or dead.

Unsi tries to explain to Jassem his fear of his son, whom he likens to a terrifying mountain, a volcano about to explode. The waiter tries to explain to Zaza his shock at his mother's fate, and suddenly asks him 'What day is it?' Zaza, furious, reminds him that any mention of time is forbidden. Unsi, frightened now, repeats the question over and over. A small pebble bangs against the yellow glass, then another; Unsi is the only one to notice this. He confronts the waiter, and then Zaza, who realises what is happening but pretends all is well and tries to distract him with tea and lemon. Unsi will have none of it; as more stones strike the glass he notices it is cracking and says to Zaza:

UNSI: You can't trust the strength of this glass. We've all made a mistake. Everything we suppose to be fixed and certain could collapse and rot way.¹⁰³

Zaza remains unmoved. Distraught, Unsi tries to force Jassem to look at the glass, but to no avail. Then he looks through the glass and sees a crowd of children, his son among them; it is they who have been attacking the café. He tries to force the other customers to look, but it is useless. Now the stones are cracking the glass at regular intervals, like the ticking of a clock; the play seems to be suggesting that time and the forces of history are invading the café. Zaza, annoyed at the disturbance Unsi is causing, has the waiter carry the protesting man, who has now become dangerous to the order of the café, through the side door. It is this door that the coffin passed through only minutes before.

UNSI: It's not fair - can't we do something - the stones will smash me - we'll die - let me be - we've already died - we *are* dead - wake them up - our coffee shop's falling down.

As they exit by the side door where the coffin disappeared, and MASTER ZAZA continues to search for a flea to swat, the following words echo softly until the curtain falls.

Everything's crumbling - it's crumbling - it's crumb -¹⁰⁴

The world of *The Glass Café* is at first sight one ruled by an apparently benevolent and indulgent proprietor. The waiter assiduously ministers to the simple

needs of his clientele, who spend their days dozing or playing games, taking refuge from the world. The stage directions, however, in their descriptions of Zaza and the waiter, sound a note of warning that all is not what it seems. Wannous builds the reader's disquiet slowly, through an accumulation of details in the dialogue: the strange fate of the waiter's mother, the obvious nervousness of Unsi, the customers' recent deaths and Jassem's lack of emotion; the realisation of Jassem's hypocrisy and cruel authoritarianism; and the story of Unsi's strange experience with his son. The catastrophe of the customer's death accelerates the action until the dénouement. It becomes clear that the closed world of the café is a place of death in life, a tomb for the living. The customers have grown so similar as to be almost indistinguishable; they have almost ceased to feel and cannot react with emotion even to the death of one of their number. They have fallen into an unquestioning submission to Zaza's arbitrary rules, which is so complete that they avert their gaze from anything that might disrupt their routine. The refuge exists only as long as the outside world does not intrude; time is suspended; there is no clock or calendar, and no reference to the passing of the days is allowed. The yellowed glass itself seems to be a metaphor for how 'age and neglect' have dimmed the vision of these men, who are wasting their lives in meaningless pastimes. They relate to one another through cards or backgammon, and the petty drama of these encounters is the only thing that arouses their enthusiasm; only Unsi has been shocked out of this complacency by the strange, challenging gaze of his son, which he fears heralds disaster. The customers' impassivity links this play to *Corpse on the Pavement*, and their loss of individuality to the chorus of statues in *Poor Seller* and *Unknown Messenger*.

Wannous presents a setting in which the naturalistic surface is constantly being shattered by dialogue and events pointing towards a deeper vision. He is attacking, through the stone-throwing children, the submission to authority, social conservatism and lack of engagement of many men in the Arab world. The novelist and critic Isma'il Fahad Isma'il sees the play as condemning a way of life characterised by 'monotony, backwardness, defeatism of the soul and heedlessness'.¹⁰⁵ 'Social conditions'¹⁰⁶ had forced unemployed men to fritter their lives away in cafés playing cards and backgammon. The play also condemns the 'benign' despot Zaza and his minion, the waiter, who oversee this stagnant existence. The waiter is too terrified of Zaza to oppose his will, though he would like to disobey, and takes refuge in cynicism. Zaza, like all dictators, is afraid of change, and like the

real despots of the Arab world he rules partly by consent, partly by intimidation. Only when the smooth running of his regime is threatened does he act, in this case by removing the 'dangerous' messenger of ill tidings. Zaza, however, deceives himself; he refuses to see the writing on the wall and so invites his own demise, which, the play implies, is inevitable.

Isma'il, among others, has also argued that the play is 'pessimistic and even nihilistic',¹⁰⁷ because Unsi fails to convince the customers and is ejected from the café. This judgment ignores the optimism which tempers the grimness of the ending. The play looks to the future, placing hope in the coming generations, who will sooner or later bring about the transformation of a society that is ripe for reform. This hope was not unreasonable; by the 1960s over half the population of the Arab world was under twenty years old.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the play's note of optimism is more persuasive than the symbolic wind that arises at the end of the *Poor Seller*, and less fantastic than the revival of the boy in *Unknown Messenger*. The *Glass Café* is thus a metaphor for certain aspects of Arab society, but it is far from being a direct call to action as is *Gush of Blood*. It deals with social rather than overtly political issues, or rather it deals with those issues only by implication. This is not a weakness, and as drama the play is all the more forceful for being subtle. Wannous himself, however, rejected this approach in his next play, *Evening Party*, and turned to more direct methods of dealing with Middle Eastern politics, but *The Glass Café* remains an impressive piece of work. The use of the Arabic language is consistently striking - as it is in even the least dramatically effective of these early plays - and Wannous achieves a degree of tension not found in the other works of this period. Moreover, the four main characters are drawn with economy, clarity and vividness, and the alternation of dialogue between Zaza and the waiter, and Unsi and Jassem is well handled. There is also, especially in the character of Zaza, an element of dark, sardonic humour, which is to be found in many of these works.

The children are probably not to be seen as embodying a coherent political movement, but possibly they are to be regarded serving 'History', like the boy in *Unknown Messenger*. They may act collectively, but they have no programme and they certainly do not constitute a class; they are, as the image of the volcano suggests, a force of nature that suddenly and explosively overturns the existing order. They simply represent youth, whose task it is to challenge the tired compromises and intellectual stagnation of their fathers, who ignore or assault them at their peril; their

destructiveness is a necessary condition for change. Thus the play is in part a depiction of the struggle between youthful energy and middle-aged complacency, which is hardly a new theme. It is perhaps for this reason that Wannous grew dissatisfied with this play and rejected it, along with all his early works, after the disaster of June 1967.

Conclusions

Wannous's early plays do not form a coherent group in terms of style, although we have shown that, apart from *The Locusts*, they are thematically linked. The language of the texts, is consistently striking and often beautiful, and is the main reason they still merit attention; nevertheless it is a pity that so few of them have been performed, even in academies of drama. As they were not written 'in expectation of performance' they should be seen as constituting a theatre of the mind, to be realised in the reader's imagination, and should be judged accordingly. *The Glass Café* is arguably the most successful; however, these early works suggest that Wannous was feeling his way towards a kind of theatre he was not to bring to fruition until after his studies at the Sorbonne and, more importantly, the 1967 war.

In most of these plays Wannous is mainly preoccupied with the issue of power and responsibility - the power of the despot and the responsibility of the oppressed to take control of their own lives and secure their own freedoms. This theme appears in his very first published play and is developed and presented in new ways in subsequent works. *The Locusts* is an exception to this rule, but it is connected to the others by virtue of its disturbing atmosphere. Although it is the least naturalistic, none of the other plays, as we have seen, can be said to portray events or character from an entirely naturalistic viewpoint, and they have only an oblique relationship to 'real' locations or events. This is no reason to condemn them, but Wannous' approach has been criticised, not least by Wannous himself – who later remarked on the 'superficiality and triviality'¹⁰⁹ of the Arab theatre of early 1960s as an inadequate response to the problems of the Arab world of that time; as he remarked: 'It is not enough for a playwright to declare falsely that he is writing for the downtrodden working class and then to do nothing except presenting absurd works [...] before fifty or a hundred of the élite'.¹¹⁰

These early plays reflect a period of social and intellectual turmoil in the Arab world and in Wannous's own life. His training was in journalism, and he had no practical experience of the theatre. He had not yet developed an understanding of how drama could deal with politics in an Arab context and so looked to Europe, as so many had done before. It was not so much European examples as the impact of the 1967 war that really changed the way that Arab dramatists thought about theatre. What is more, it would be a mistake to see these plays as the work of a precociously talented dramatist; Wannous was, rather, a gifted user of language. The fact that *Al-Adab* published some of his plays is of little significance, as the magazine, like many in the Arab world, had a policy of encouraging promising young writers. Wannous did not at this stage give much thought to his audience, or how to communicate with it in theatrical terms, and only with *Evening Party* did he recognise the crucial importance of staging. Communicating with a theatre audience is very different from communicating with solitary readers, who tend to experience the play as literature. A theatrical production is a collective endeavour, to which the audience has a collective response. There is no doubt that, had those early plays which are deficient as drama been submitted to the rigours of a production before being published, and been revised after considering the audience's reaction, many of their defects would have been removed. Wannous, however, was ignorant of the value of such collective activity, and this may help to explain why collective action is not presented as an option in these plays. This does not mean, however, that the older Wannous was justified in dismissing these plays, by implication, as the work of a dilettante who was more interested in experimentation and eclecticism than in creating a theatre that would change society. Certainly the plays do not conform to the criteria of the 'theatre of politicisation', but the young Wannous's outrage at the injustices of Arab despotism was genuine. He had not yet found his voice as a dramatist, however, and was not yet a man of the theatre. Nevertheless, the plays reveal a deep concern with the problems of his time, and contain many ideas in embryo that he was later to develop.

Like many educated sons of peasants, Wannous was drawn to radical ideas, and chose to present these in simple antithetical terms: the rich against the poor, the powerful against the weak, the cunning and ruthless against the naïve and ignorant. There is no class analysis in these plays; more importantly, they veer between pessimism and optimism. The former is usually more convincing, the latter a triumph

of hope over experience. As a whole, they do not present a coherent attitude towards the problems besetting Middle Eastern society. Furthermore, he seems inconsistent in his view of those who fail to meet the challenge of the times through weakness or ignorance. Wannous is very concerned that individuals should be responsible for their actions; he sympathises with ignorance and naïvety, but has little patience with the morally weak and timorous; the moral tone reflects the scorn the young often feel for the compromises of their elders. While this may be justified, it tends to prevent Wannous from attempting to understand those who submit or comply, and coarsens the psychology of some of these plays, giving them a strongly satirical character. The black humour that pervades many of them reinforces this judgment, and it is perhaps in this uncompromisingly stern morality that the plays show the influence of Existentialism. Though Wannous seems not to have been concerned with the complex ramifications of Sartre's philosophy, he would surely have agreed that responsibility brings with it a feeling of profound anguish, that mankind in a Godless world is 'condemned to be free'¹¹¹ and that, in Sartre's words, the coward is 'responsible for his cowardice. [...] he has made himself into a coward by his actions'.¹¹² The main charge that can be levelled against these early plays is that, while Wannous had no particular audience in mind at the time, he was in effect, as he acknowledged, writing for an élite. As a consequence, he was not writing for the oppressed, however strongly he felt for their plight, but on their behalf. It might be argued in his defence that he was writing for those who could inspire and lead the oppressed, but he himself never claimed this.

Overall, the impression left by this disparate group of plays is that the writer is an energetic and impatient young idealist, passionate about both the possibilities of drama and the injustice and oppression rampant in the Arab World, but who has not yet adopted a coherent political position or an artistic style capable of reaching or inciting to action those who most need to act: the young generation of the poor and dispossessed. He has moved beyond his peasant roots by virtue of an education in the cultural capital of the Arab world, and presents his themes and characters from the point of view of a moralist and a satirist, rather than a political playwright in the sense he was later to define, using black humour to attack the iniquities of the political systems he sees all around him. Thus he excoriates injustice but his characters are generally isolated individuals whose revolt, when it takes place, as in *Gush of Blood*, remains on a personal level. The necessity or even the possibility of collective action

is not considered, or at most only indirectly alluded to, as in *The Glass Café*. Thus Wannous is often unable to free himself from a pessimism unrelieved by even the few gleams of hope that occur, for example, at the end of *Poor Seller*. As for the optimism to be found in *Unknown Messenger*, it exists on a symbolic level that has only the most tenuous connection to political realities. Wannous appears to despair of his elders; he places his hope in the potential of his own generation or of those even younger.

Wannous' early plays thus show him to be an enemy of despotism, but one who is as critical of those who passively accept tyranny as he is of the tyrants themselves, who are in a sense created by the conditions of the time, as in *The Game of Pins*. His condemnation of the passivity of those who should act, which nevertheless does not protect them from destruction, is perhaps a reflection of his own impotence as an unperformed playwright who is neither a man of action nor a political activist playing a useful, practical part in the struggle. It is also interesting to note that his world as a dramatist is almost entirely masculine. There are no active female characters of any significance. In this respect he is a man very much of his time and place. Nevertheless, these early works are interesting on a number of levels, not least as literature, and contain themes that will be developed in his later plays, as we shall see in the study's examination of his first important achievement, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June 1967*, which will be considered in the next chapter. He could not have attempted such a work without serving the apprenticeship we have discussed here.

- ¹ The Arabic for *Medusa Gazes at life* is *Medusa Tohadig fi al-Hayat*, while 'indama Yal'ab al-Rijal is the Arabic for *When Men Play*. It should be said that *Medusa Gazes at Life* has been omitted from the discussion partly because it is totally unconcerned with political realities. For a brief analysis of the play see al Souleman pp. 27-8. Al Souleman also does not discuss *When Men Play*.
- ² Fuad Dawara, 'Dialogue with the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous', *Al-Hilal*, (April 1977), p. 190.
- ³ See Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wann̄us*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), p. 110.
- ⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *Al-Hayat Al-Masrahiah*, No. 2, (1977,) p. 111.
- ⁵ See Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), pp. 16-17.
- ⁶ Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wann̄us*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), p. 110.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- ⁸ Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 25.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ¹⁰ Hussam Al-Khatib, 'Theatre', *Al-Ma'rafah*, (April 1972), pp. 73-74
- ¹¹ Fuad Dawara, 'Dialogue with the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous', *Al-Hilal*, (April 1977), p. 190.
- ¹² Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1986), p. 107.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ¹⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 431.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 291-294.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 295.
- ¹⁹ Abdurahman Yaghe, *Wannous and Theatre* (Syria: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1998), p. 57.
- ²⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 292.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 294-295.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 301.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 302.
- ²⁷ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 11.
- ²⁸ 'Abbas, Hassan *Reading of Corpse* (http://www.albaath.news.sy/epublishe r/html_np/12656/2.html), accessed on 20 February 2003.
- ²⁹ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 94.
- ³⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1986), p. 106.
- ³¹ Abdurahman Yaghe, *Wannous and Theatre* (Syria: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1998), p. 18.
- ³² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 329.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 328.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 334.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 331.
- ³⁸ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 34.

- ³⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 327.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 355.
- ⁴³ Manal Swairjo. 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 16.
- ⁴⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 327.
- ⁴⁵ Abdurahman Yaghe, *Wannous and Theatre* (Syria: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1998), p. 18.
- ⁴⁶ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), p. 30.
- ⁴⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 236.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- ⁴⁹ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ⁵⁰ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 38.
- ⁵¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 225.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- ⁵⁵ Ahmid Shamloo, *The Gardens of Mirror* (Tehran: Morvarid Publishers, 1967), in Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 25.
- ⁵⁶ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 231.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- ⁶¹ Abdurahman Yaghe, *Wannous and Theatre* (Syria: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1998), p. 59.
- ⁶² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 225.
- ⁶³ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 30.
- ⁶⁴ Fuad Dawara, 'Dialogue with the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous', *Al-Hilal* (April 1977), p. 182.
- ⁶⁵ Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wann°us*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), p. 164.
- ⁶⁶ Abdurahman Yaghe, *Wannous and Theatre* (Syria: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1998), p. 51.
- ⁶⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 257.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- ⁷⁶ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. xix.
- ⁷⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 267.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

- ⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 413-415.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 412.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., p. 412.
- ⁸² Ibid., p. 416.
- ⁸³ Abdurahman Yaghe, *Wannous and Theatre* (Syria: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1998), p. 63.
- ⁸⁴ See *Al-Mawred Dictionary* (Lebanon: El-Ilm Lil-Malaen Publishing House, 1998), p. 360.
- ⁸⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 422.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 303.
- ⁸⁷ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 11.
- ⁸⁸ Wannous, Saadallah, 'Breton's Revolution', *Al-Adab*, No. 12, (December 1966), p. 30.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 30.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 31.
- ⁹¹ Ibid., p. 31.
- ⁹² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 12.
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. xi.
- ⁹⁴ See Faridah Al-Naqash, 'Saadallah Wannous's Theatre' *Al-Hilal*, (June 1971), p. 76.
- ⁹⁵ Publisher: Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (New York: Interlink Publishing Group, 2003).
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 412.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 413.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 416.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 419.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 421.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 422.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., p. 425.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 429.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 432.
- ¹⁰⁵ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), p. 51.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 51.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 51.
- ¹⁰⁸ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 373.
- ¹⁰⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1986), p. 107.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 23.
- ¹¹¹ Jane-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen 1948); in *Jean-Paul Sartre, Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest. (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 32.
- ¹¹² Ibid., p. 37.

CHAPTER 3

Evening Party for the Fifth of June

(A long play in one act)

Wannous began to write *Haflat Samar min Ajl Khamsah Huzayran* (*Evening Party for the Fifth of June*) shortly after and in reaction to the defeat of 1967. He evidently concluded that the situation required that those who had the courage and determination should speak out against the oppressive regimes that had failed internally and internationally. Like the prophetic boy in his earlier play *Unknown Messenger*, Wannous did not shrink from speaking what he believed to be the truth about the defeat and its causes, but to do so in a new way. *Evening Party* deals with that bitter reality in a way that was unprecedented in the theatre of the Arab world; Wannous's method is now one of direct attack and loud denunciation of the Arab totalitarian regimes, condemning their dictatorial methods and monopoly of power.

The catastrophic impact of the 1967 defeat caused Wannous to change his approach to playwriting. In 1979, at a time when he had abandoned writing for the theatre, he explained the nature of that change to the Kuwaiti novelist Isma'il Fahad Isma'il. Wannous had attempted suicide after President Sadat of Egypt's peace initiative in Israel, which had taken place in November 1977. Now, less than two years later, unsure of the future of Arabic drama, his words were bitter:

Words were also defeated and the language collapsed. One might say that words had contributed more to the defeat of 1967 than they had to any other defeat in history. I felt as if words were a trap in which we had all been caught [...]. When I remember the addresses [of Nasser], the [governmental propaganda] radio stations, the statements, the slogans, the exchanges of boastful words, and the insults and curses [between Arab governments], the very structure of the language collapses as if built of sand and worthless trash. When I started writing *Evening Party*, I wanted to convey the meaninglessness of writing and the emptiness of

words. What is the use of words when deeds are what we need in order to cleanse us of words' rottenness and falsehood, of their stench spreading in the scorching heat of the defeat? What is the use of words if they do not match our deeds?¹

Wannous deplored the condition of his country and his nation and strove to find a solution. He was to find it, at least for a time, in the committed theatre. Wannous later wrote:

After the defeat, the battle to create a relationship between theatre and politics was a pressing issue. It was clear that the theatre, like the Arab people, was taken by surprise by the defeat, and it had been too late in responding to the pressing issues. It seems that because of negligence and other complex cultural problems in which the ruling regime had a hand, the theatre had not found time to tackle these questions and answer them properly until after the war, when it became clear that it had been an instrument of deception or a part of a great cultural campaign of misinformation.²

It seemed to Wannous that the defeat had dealt a fatal blow to his earlier, immature work; it had also unmasked the dreams that some Arab leaders, especially Nasser, had peddled in their public addresses. The playwright began to fashion his pen into a surgical instrument, anatomising the anaesthetised Arab body, hoping that his theatre would be a catalyst in bringing about change. For Wannous, the so-called 'setback' was not simply a bitter military defeat; rather it was a natural consequence of the power monopoly and corruption that characterised the dictatorial regimes, as well as a direct reflection of the internal defeat of the ordinary citizen brought about by the moral and often physical torture he had experienced daily at the hands of such regimes. Wannous had addressed the nature of this internal defeat through the character of Khaddour in *Poor Seller*. For him, the defeat revealed the true nature of the oppressive relationship between the ruling regimes and the people, evident in the removal of the ordinary citizen from the decision-making process. It revealed also the potential importance of what he termed later 'the politicisation of the people' through a 'theatre of politicisation', that would urge them to recapture their rights, stolen by the totalitarian regimes that ruled them with an iron fist. As he explained in 1988, 'These works [*Evening Party* and the three plays that followed it] were all written under the pressure of the defeat, in an atmosphere of depression and frustration and

from a desire to bring about change. It was a matter of urgency not only to reflect the existing state of affairs but also to try to describe reality in such a way that would open other horizons and allow us to seize a better future'.³

At first Wannous found himself unable to respond to the defeat. In 1979 he vividly described his struggle with the impulse to abandon writing altogether: 'Following the defeat, as a defeated man, I wondered on that June evening, why do we write? The question was like swallowing a bundle of thorns or razor blades'.⁴ However, when he returned to Paris in the autumn of 1967 he found that the vitality of the capital's intellectual and cultural life gave him the energy to begin to write again. He determined to eschew what he now saw as equivocation and nightmarish distractions, by radically reconsidering and going beyond his early theatre. Of this new mood he later wrote, 'The defeat was so bitter that it created a [new] kind of awareness'.⁵ This awareness produced perhaps Wannous's most famous works; these were bold statements challenging the dictatorial regimes in Syria and the Arab world in general which in that respect have had few rivals. He produced five plays over the next decade: *Evening Party* (1967-1968), *The King's Elephant* (1969), *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head* (1970), *Soirée with Abu Khaleel al-Qabani* (1972) and, after a gap of five years, *The King's the King* (1977). In these works he reconsidered the relationship between theatre and politics, using the theatre as an instrument to unmask corruption and as a mirror to reflect the real situation in the Arab countries as he saw it. In 1970 Wannous wrote, 'We create a theatre because we want to change and develop the people's mentality and to deepen our collective awareness of our common historical destiny'.⁶ He later argued that when 'people are given the chance to express themselves and learn how to make their voices heard, they will gradually come to possess the boldness necessary for making a true statement and thus shattering the internal power that has seized their destiny'.⁷ Wannous emphasised that after the mid-1960s he sought a theatrical form, controlled by the people rather than controlling them, which would be 'active'; that is, which would lead to a revolt against the existing reality. 'I said to myself, why don't we start from the status quo [...] why don't we work out a theatre that is suitable for us? From this came *Evening Party* [...]'.⁸ He had a conviction that culture in general and theatre in particular were being methodically marginalised by the totalitarian Arab regimes, and he believed that the role of the theatre was to serve the downtrodden members of society, especially the peasants and working class, whom Wannous called 'the third-class citizens'.⁹ In

other words, it should serve the transformation of society by acting as a catalyst of revolutionary action.

Evening Party was Wannous's first work to reflect this new programme. The Saudi critic and novelist Abdulrahman Munif (d. 2004), who spent most of his adult life in Syria, remarked, 'When I saw *Evening Party for the Fifth of June's* first performances [in Damascus] I felt so happy in spite of the grim conditions of that time. I was glad because this was the first time that an Arab playwright had stood firm in that difficult time to confront the truth in all its severity and harshness'.¹⁰ The play achieved immediate fame and remains highly regarded among Arab intellectuals. No other Arab play of the late 1960s has achieved such a reputation, which is founded upon several important features. First, as Roger Allen¹¹ points out, the extent of Wannous's use of Brecht's techniques in combination makes the work a pivotal event within the context of Arabic drama of the time. These techniques are the direct address to the audience and the changing of stage settings in full view of the audience by actors or theatre workers. Wannous also achieves a distancing effect by placing actors among the audience. *Evening Party* was not the first Arab play to use Brechtian techniques. As al Souleman points out, in Egypt Rashad Rushdi's *Itfarraj ya Salam* (*Come to the show, Come and Look*, 1966) and Alfred Faraj's *al-Zir Salim* (*Prince Salim*, 1967) both employed such techniques,¹² but Wannous was the first Syrian playwright to use them, and he used them in an attempt to generate political action among the audience 'not only in the theatrical place, but, more importantly, in the real world'.¹³ Second, *Evening Party* was one of the rare Arab plays to draw a demarcation line between two periods. It discards the sensationalism and empty nationalist slogans that had predominated in the 1950s and 1960s, and attempts to anatomise the conditions prevailing in the Arab world in order to disclose the real causes of the defeat. Third, and perhaps most importantly, in addition to its revolutionary purpose, it also called for a change in the function of theatre, and its role in serving society. Shortly after writing the play, Wannous said, 'I want a theatre that teaches and that inspires to revolution, challenges the audience, provokes them, pushes them to come up with initiatives by asking the question: 'why [are things as they are]?' Then they will act'.¹⁴ This naïve and unrealistic hope, partly fired by Wannous's experiences in Paris in May 1968, was doomed to fail in the very different conditions of the Arab world.

Wannous's distress at the defeat was different from the helpless passive sorrow felt by many; it was, as Munif has said, 'critical and analytical'.¹⁵ He attempted to translate his disillusionment and anger into words through which lessons could be learned. It proved not to be an easy task. The new work would have to be very different from his previous work if it was to fulfil Wannous's purposes. In 1969 Wannous surprisingly said, in an interview with the Syrian critic Saadallah Khan, that *Evening Party* was not first and foremost a theatrical work. Wannous explained, 'It was a risk taken in a defeated country which had been hard hit by this severe historical defeat. The ground had moved under people's feet, and in a situation like that, you can't imagine the horror and resentment one feels when one picks up a newspaper or magazine and reads the same words that one used to read before June the fifth'.¹⁶ Once Wannous had overcome his dejection he found that the defeat had created an enthusiasm in him different from that apparent in his earlier works. He had become acutely aware of the importance of 'words' and their role in promoting and clarifying his society's political awareness. In Wannous's view, it was impossible after the defeat to continue to indulge in experimentation for its own sake, only hinting at meanings and allowing the audience to read between the lines; rather it was necessary to destroy the ideological structure and to reconstruct it from scratch in such a way that it conformed to the time's significant events, and to the interests of the deprived people in Syrian society. What was needed was a 'word-action', as he put it in 1979, that would enable the theatre to fulfil its social function. He explained this in his terms in his conversation with Isma'il Fahad Isma'il:

In the mid-sixties, the relationship between me and 'words' began to become unclear and problematic[...] But when our structure of sand collapsed on the morning of June the fifth, this problematic relationship became very clear, as if under a spotlight. Now I can understand the relationship; it involved a different ambition: to reveal the collapse of reality by means of words and to engage in a direct struggle that would change the existing state of affairs. To be more specific, I was ambitious to achieve a 'word-action' that would be consistent with both the dream and deeds of the revolution. The role of a mere witness could not be truly effective, which I intended to be. [...] I often thought, driven by enthusiasm, that I could disclose the reality of the defeat and tear away the masks in the context of a people's revolt which starts spontaneously, then takes its course in the form of a turmoil that leads to a real popular uprising.¹⁷

Wannous believed that such a 'word-action' could be made to change history, through decisive effect on the spectator. Wannous's audiences, potential soldiers of the revolution, would be moved to transform themselves from passive observers of events into an 'active' party – a collectivity – that would take their destiny into their own hands. Wannous believed that what was needed was a '[...] theatrical movement that continuously interacts with its audiences [...] A theatrical movement of this kind is capable of leading the theatre out of its labyrinth'.¹⁸ This transformation of the audience's consciousness was to be achieved by creating a new relationship between the audience and the actor. That relationship was founded upon the conviction that the ambiguities that had dissipated the theatre's energies had been swept away by the defeat. Wannous's new 'awareness' was based on his certainty that a socialist or Marxist analysis of conditions in the Arab world would enable the theatre to decisively intervene in history. The Lebanese critic Yumna al-'Id has pointed out that the 'question of theatre' in the late 1960s and 1970s was not so much what the truth is, but how this truth could be brought to the stage and presented to the audience in such a way as to offer no room for doubt.¹⁹

It should be remembered that the general situation in the region allowed the entertainment of the hope that 'revolution' could sweep away corruption and the corrupted. Many groupings, from the Marxists on the left to the Muslim Brotherhood on the right, believed that the despotic Arab states, weakened by the defeat, could be overthrown by the people – as long as the people were properly led and guided. Belief in the 'inevitable' collapse of the existing order was not confined to the Arab countries: Europe and the USA were also shaken by powerful political disturbances that seemed to some to be the heralds of profound social transformation, linked by a shared international consciousness of the need for radical reform. Street protests were occurring in Germany, where there had been a wave of student agitation against the university system; in Spain where from October 1967 to June 1968 students organised street demonstrations for freedom of the press and against the Franco regime; in Italy, where students campaigned in Rome, Pisa, Turin and Milan for reforms of the university system; in Poland, where students were in the forefront of the liberalisation movement in the period later to be known as the Prague Spring. 'A wind of freedom had swept across Europe and had taken to cosmopolitan Paris all the seeds of revolt it had gathered from different parts of the continent. And in Paris, these seeds found

their most fertile ground yet'.²⁰ The 'May events' of 1967 almost brought down the French government. Wannous was studying in Paris in that turbulent month, and was apparently exhilarated by the ferment taking place in the capital of the old colonial power and especially by the part played by students and young workers; it must have seemed like a vindication of his prophecy of youthful revolt articulated in *The Glass Café*. When the Odeon theatre was occupied he was moved to discuss the revolutionary credentials of Brecht and Beckett with his friend Jean-Marie Serrault, who had directed the work of both with great distinction.

We know nothing concrete about the gestation of *Evening Party* but it seems reasonable to assume that the May events and Wannous's newly kindled interest in Brecht had a direct effect on the play's final form. Wannous was also reacting strongly against the dominant trends in the 'official' theatre of the Arab world and of Syria in particular. In Syria, all the major theatres were under the supervision of the government, which, according to Wannous, found it desirable to use the theatre only to disseminate culture 'by presenting random and irrelevant examples from the repertoire of world theatre'.²¹ Wannous sarcastically noted that even after the disaster of 1967 Syrian theatrical productions continued to present 'entertainments [...] where the popular troupes performed their folk dances and concerts'²² to glorify the military government. The repertoire of the main state theatre, The National Theatre, was controlled by the government, and it was also the place to be seen, where the aristocracy and bourgeoisie rubbed shoulders with the compliant theatre-going intelligentsia. The Syrian critic Salman Qataya observed in 1988 that 'the national theatre was tailored to its audience; that is, the Damascus bourgeoisie'.²³ Thus the Syrian theatre attempted to be a cultural ornament, presenting examples of world theatre or panegyrics to the regime and showed nothing Wannous considered relevant to Syrian life. Wannous commented that its 'main concern [...] was to tailor its activity to the identity and needs of its audience',²⁴ and he decided to oppose the government-sponsored theatre, which deliberately ignored the 'third-class citizens'. Before *Evening Party*, some writers had commented critically on the political situation, although such comments were very rare, and they were concealed, similarly to those in Wannous's early works, under symbolism and ambiguity in order to escape the attentions of the authorities. The case of *Evening Party* is totally different, because Wannous was determined to confront the government with its misdeeds and failings, and to issue a challenge to its censors, no matter what the consequences.

Before the 1967 defeat, Syrian plays generally took the form of family melodramas, but the disaster shook Wannous's generation of dramatists; some became convinced that the theatre should serve a social function and, like Wannous, abandoned or modified their earlier concerns. Some playwrights, however, adopted the role of spokesman for the regimes in power and chose to shift towards the demagogic, calling on the people to stand fast behind the leaders under slogans such as 'Every citizen is a watchman'²⁵ on the ground that the defeat was simply a temporary 'setback'. The Syrian playwright Ali Uqlah 'Ersan is a notable case in point. This Ba'th party loyalist argued that the theatre must not be free because 'it causes disorder and threatens the state's security and higher interest'.²⁶ The Syrian critic Bader al-Din Abdulrahman notes that as a result of this trend 'most plays that dealt with the defeat were shallow and incapable of dealing effectively with this historical event by relating it to its historical, political, social, ideological and economic circumstances as well as by explaining it on the basis of the objective causes that led to its occurrence'.²⁷ In writing *Evening Party*, Wannous can therefore be seen to have been swimming against the current of the dominant theatrical trend in the post-1967 Arab world. The play attempted to be revolutionary and critical in an environment where most playwrights were happy to be mere apologists for the errors of the regimes that had contributed to the defeat. Wannous, as a vehement critic of the demagogic style, remarked 'undoubtedly that one of the problems of the progressive political forces in the Arab countries was their enthusiasm and rhetorical flourishes, and so their influence did not penetrate the dominant mentality or the social reality existing on the ground'.²⁸ The extraordinary challenge posed by the play and the debate it immediately engendered alarmed the government. In late 1968, after only two performances by a group of Syrian actors at the Al-Hamra Playhouse in Damascus the authorities not only banned the play, but the Syrian Ministry of Culture also withdrew the script from sale for two years, thus preventing its printing as well as any further performances. They saw the play as an outrageous attack on the Ba'th regime, and were not persuaded to reconsider even when '*Evening Party* was awarded a prize for committed drama by UNESCO'.²⁹ Fortunately, as the Syrian door closed a neighbouring door was opened when the Lebanese magazine *Al-Mawaqif* (Attitudes) published the play owing to its being so highly appreciated internationally. *Al-Mawaqif*'s editor-in-chief was the acclaimed Syrian poet Ali Ahmid Said (1930-), better known by his pen name Adonis, who is considered by many the most creative

and influential living Arab poet and critic. Having been imprisoned for six months in 1955 for joining the opposition party, he had decided to settle in Lebanon in 1956 and later became a Lebanese national.

Evening Party was reprinted in 1969 and the Syrian director, Aladdin Kookash (1940-), produced it in early 1970 in Beirut, 'to avoid [Syrian] censorship'.³⁰ According to Faiza al-Shawish, 'The play was very well received in Beirut, and was shown there for fifteen nights'.³¹ In Syria, this success caught the attention of a number of critics and directors, who requested that the censor lift the ban and permit the play to be performed at The Second Festival of Theatre Arts, to be held the same year. The authority concerned had already decided to lift the ban, but quickly went back on its decision without giving any reason or justification; Nadim Mua'ala has commented that 'the censors' decisions were often capricious and difficult to fathom'.³² Mostyn notes that the Syrian censors had wide-ranging powers granted them by the 1963 State of Emergency Law; these included censorship of 'all means of communication, propaganda and publicity before issue; also their seizure, confiscation and suspension and the closure of the places in which they are printed'.³³ So *Evening Party* was a problematic case for the authorities from its earliest days. It should be noted, however, that the ban was lifted in 1973, by which time *Evening Party* was no longer considered a threat or even a nuisance to the regime, which was now more securely established and even began to consider its formerly 'dangerous' rebels to be valuable propaganda assets. Moreover, the Syrian regime has not been as ruthless as many other Middle Eastern regimes; it has not imprisoned the dissidents among its writers, but has been satisfied with banning any work it has found unacceptable; and when irritated, it 'has broken the writer's pen, not his neck or head'.³⁴

Having explored the background to *Evening Party*, it is now important to discuss what Wannous meant by 'politicisation'. He defined it in the introduction to *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head* (1970) as 'a dialogue between two realms. The first is the dramatic performance by a troupe that aims to communicate and conduct a dialogue with the audience. The second is the audience, which suffers greatly because of its situation and is beset by problems'.³⁵ Although in 1968 Wannous had not yet formulated the concept, *Evening Party* conforms to this definition. At a more complex level, the concept of politicisation embodied in *Evening Party* can be described as follows. The majority of the Arab population was

deprived of its rights and freedoms and had no clear way to restore these. This majority was largely made up of peasants; these, and the small urban working class, Wannous described in the play as 'millions of cut-off tongues'.³⁶ To obtain their rights and freedoms, he believed that these classes needed someone to guide them politically, or, to use Wannous's term, to 'politicise' them. According to Wannous:

The classes that need politicisation are the ruled classes not the ruling one that dominates the government agencies, the means of production and the economy of the country. The ruling class is pre-politicised in that it has its own ideology. It deliberately tries to keep the working class ignorant of the political issues, so I have chosen the path of politicisation to give the theatre a revolutionary role.³⁷

The dialogue between the stage and audience can be seen from two perspectives. The first is intellectual: raising the political issues on stage, then stimulating and motivating the audience to conceive and implement revolutionary solutions to those issues, such as staging demonstrations against the existing state of affairs. The second concerns technique, that is, the use of theatrical techniques to communicate with the passive audiences to arouse them to revolutionary action.³⁸ In *Evening Party*, two dramatic techniques are selected for this purpose: the 'breaking down of the fourth wall' between actors and audience, and the 'play within a play'. It should be noted here that Wannous had no intention of overseeing the realisation of his conceptions himself. He had never produced or directed a play, and would very rarely perform these roles, almost always leaving such matters to others. Sometimes his instructions were precise; at other times he gave the producer and director great freedom. In *Evening Party*, Wannous used these techniques for the first time in his dramatic work, thinking that they would remove the barrier between actors and audience and, by creating a productive interaction with the audience, accelerate their politicisation. Wannous believed that in *Evening Party* he could use the technique of the 'play within a play' to remove the fourth wall, and that this would generate a heated and spontaneous debate between the performers and the audience in a manner that would ignite the spark of change. Wannous's purpose was highly serious: while entertainment should not be rejected out of hand and could be used to facilitate the process, it was far more important to induce the audience to reflect on their destiny and prepare themselves for revolution. From now on, Wannous argued, no theatre

could be taken seriously that did not address the audience directly in order to crystallise a fruitful interaction between audience and stage. The theatre advocated by Wannous would be very sharply focused: 'capable of solving the essential problems and disregarding the shallow ones'.³⁹

Here I would like to develop an important historical point mentioned earlier. The precise formulation of the concept of politicisation took place between 1969 and 1970. In 1969, Wannous introduced the term verbally in a symposium held on the fringe of the Damascus Festival of Theatre Arts.⁴⁰ In October 1970, he published in *Al-Ma'refah (Knowledge)* magazine a 25-page essay in which he proposed a detailed theory of the theatre of politicisation, which was later included in *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre*, published in 1988 and named after the 1970 essay. The emergence of the term is itself a dramatic story; it was the result of a set of complicated circumstances that can be briefly described as follows. Wannous used the term 'politicisation' in order to differentiate his conception from the somewhat imprecise term 'political theatre' as known and discussed internationally. Wannous pointed out in his 1986 interview with Dr. al-Hafar, that the term 'political theatre' is surrounded by ideological ambiguities in the Arab world.⁴¹ The substance of the debate lay in an acrimonious dispute between Wannous and a group of Syrian playwrights led by Wannous's main theatrical opponent, Ali 'Uqlah 'Ersan (head of the Arab Writers' Union), who, as we have noted earlier, was an enthusiastic supporter of the Syrian regime. 'Ersan's opinion, expressed in his book *Politics in Theatre* was that 'political theatre' was a novelty introduced by some Arab playwrights (he refrained from naming Wannous personally) in order to imitate European models. 'Ersan wrote, 'In my opinion, [...] the relationship of theatre with politics or politics with theatre is an old affair, as old as the theatre itself [...] The current fashion for political theatre that is gaining strength nowadays will have a destructive impact on the art [...]. When has theatre ever been separable from politics?'⁴² Wannous was not a slavish imitator of European theatre, but the term 'political theatre' had been used by some Arab critics to describe *Evening Party*. 'Ersan's intention was probably to stigmatise Wannous's works by accusing him of being an uncritical advocate of Western culture. Although this ruse did not succeed, one could easily imagine the effect of labelling Wannous as a sycophant of the 'West' in Syria and in the whole region, where the West was seen as a blind supporter of Israel.

'Ersan had a valid point; but he used his argument maliciously to undermine Wannous, who consequently felt it necessary to coin a new term that would denote his own conception and prevent confusion. 'Ersan's machinations on behalf of the Ba'th party did not weaken Wannous's determination or prevent him from pursuing his chosen course. Indeed, this study has benefited from such clashes because they motivated Wannous to write articles in which he defended his theatrical ideas against the attacks launched by 'Ersan and his Ba'th loyalist clique, primarily Ahmad al-Hamo and Abdullah Abu Haif. These articles were included in *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (1988), in which Wannous proposed his theory of drama and laid down the principles of his theatre of politicisation. Apart from the plays themselves, this book is the most important primary source informing this present study, and is particularly relevant to the discussion of *Evening Party* and the four works that followed it.

The audience in *Evening Party* is conceived as integral to the play, or, as Wannous emphasised, 'the work should begin with the audience'.⁴³ The audience is the backbone of the play and without its physical presence in the auditorium the play is meaningless; thus *Evening Party* is a radical departure from the world of the early plays, which can be understood through reading alone. This play was written to be experienced in a playhouse where there is an audience to be politicised; hence, Wannous insisted that 'the form of *Evening Party* is part and parcel of its content. Its form [which includes the audience's dialogue with the actors] was generated by an incident at a specific time [the defeat of 1967]; therefore, it must be presented as it is or it will be nonsense'.⁴⁴ This insistence on the centrality of the audience's role is another reason why *Evening Party* can be regarded as a turning-point in the development of modern Arab drama.

An analytical reading of the text

In *Evening Party*, Wannous implicitly and explicitly criticises the practices of the Syrian theatre supervised by the state before and after the 1967 defeat, and divides this theatre into two types: theatre for the bourgeois élites, which neglected the issues that concern the people, and theatre as a source of misleading propaganda; in his view both contributed to the 1967 defeat. Therefore, Wannous intended the play to be a new kind of theatrical experience, one that took the risk of attacking a submissive

theatre that represented the Syrian government. He also intended – there is evidence for this in the play itself – to show that this theatre’s distractions were those of a cultural institution that lacked integrity. Judging by *Evening Party*, Wannous seems to have believed that the new theatre must not only speak the truth, but must also be a parliament for those who have no vote; or, let us say, a court, under whose roof everyone who was responsible for the defeat and its consequences is tried.⁴⁵ The play implies that the theatre is required to change from a servile institution that stupefies and misleads into a progressive institution in which politically marginalised groups, chiefly peasants and proletarians, are encouraged to speak about their problems and criticise those who are responsible for their sufferings. This theatre must be one where they can be prepared at least psychologically for revolution against the existing despotic order.⁴⁶

In *Evening Party*, then, Wannous presents examples of two antithetical types of theatre: one which he respects and encourages and one which he despises. These two theatres are represented by two contrasting characters: ‘the director’ and ‘the playwright’. The first is a mercenary opportunist who disregards what he knows to be the truth in favour of the official line and is rewarded for his duplicity by the regime. Wannous explains that this director, ‘as is the case in our country, also works as director of the playhouse [...] his role goes beyond the stage and the theatre building which he runs’.⁴⁷ His morality is no different to Hassan’s in *Poor Seller*, except that he is not linked directly with the Syrian intelligence service. He is, however, employed by the dictatorship to ensure the dominance of its voice within the theatre, and he betrays his country through the presentation of a work that seeks to mitigate the people’s anger by falsely justifying the defeat. His current project is a piece celebrating the prodigies of heroism performed by the soldiers during the war ‘even if [such heroic deeds] have not actually happened’.⁴⁸ As he insists: ‘What importance has truth for an artist? It’s nothing more than an irrelevant useless detail’.⁴⁹ Later in the play he gives a clear example of his attitude to truth in words intended by Wannous to satirise the hyperbole of government propaganda: ‘Our soldiers are the bravest in the world. Just one of them is worth a hundred of any other country’.⁵⁰

In marked contrast, the other character, Abdulghani the playwright, is portrayed as honest with himself and with his fellow countrymen, refusing to write ‘heroic’ works designed to mislead the audience. Wannous was unjustifiably accused of using certain characters in his early plays as mere mouthpieces for his own

opinions, but here Abdulghani does seem to represent the conscience of troubled intellectuals like Wannous, who were committed to undertaking the task of enlightenment despite the lack of democracy in the Arab countries. But Abdulghani's conscience has only just been awakened. In fact, he had previously been persuaded by the director to produce a play glorifying the regime, which should have been performed this very evening. But in the morning, only a few hours before the premiere, he realises the magnitude of the conspiracy of deception plotted by the director and his group against the people, and of his own part in it. He now comes to the theatre to insist that his script be withdrawn and the performance cancelled.

DIRECTOR [*To audience*]: The playwright hesitated for quite a while, [...] but then he agreed to write the play which you have come to see.

ABDULGHANI: I hesitated for a long time. [...]

DIRECTOR: We've been rehearsing the script for three weeks. [...] [*Addressing the audience*] If you knew how much trouble we've had with this play. He'd correct the text every day, but we didn't show any resentment; not one of the actors lost his nerve. [...]

ABDULGHANI: I smelt the odour of my words on the lines of the script and it reminded me of the vaginas of prostitutes. [...] I was like someone who throws trash in the faces of the audience. [...]

DIRECTOR (*To audience*): Oh! You wouldn't believe it [...] the playwright comes a few hours before the production and says that he won't allow us to present his play. Imagine! A few hours before the show he stops his play and threatens to commit any sort of stupidity that you could imagine.[...]

ABDULGHANI: [...] yes, that is what happened. I suddenly said to myself, as if I had woken up from a long absence of mind: when one's breath stinks one should not speak. [...] (*To audience*) I wanted to tell you the whole truth about the dilemma I found I had fallen into.⁵¹

Here Wannous presents the audience with representatives of the two types of theatre he is considering in *Evening Party*. The director is loyal to the regime, not to the people. He is surely intended to personify the regime's theatres, awash with government propaganda. On the other hand, the playwright can be considered as representing an alternative theatre in opposition to the first. Unlike the officially sanctioned theatre, it has a conscience, which is tied to issues important to the people,

and its role is that of a bringer of enlightenment. The director sees his role entirely differently: as Wannous explains in the introduction to the second edition (1980) of *Evening Party*: 'As soon as the 1967 war broke out, most directors and heads of the cultural institutions, particularly the official ones, were persuaded to prove the loyalty of their institutions in the eyes of the authorities'.⁵² This director evidently did not need much persuading, for he is content to apply his theatrical cosmetics to disguise the wounds inflicted by the defeat. Indeed, he objects to the very use of this word:

ABDULGHANI: [...] Remember that defeat withers and starves the imagination.

DIRECTOR: Defeat!

ABDULGHANI: Yes, defeat. Did the word surprise you or does it have a strange impact?

DIRECTOR: Damn defeat and anyone who talks about it.

ABDULGHANI: So what are we talking about?

DIRECTOR: I believe we are talking about heroism, not defeat. You are in one valley and I am in another. Heroism, as you well know, is an eternal inspiration.⁵³

We are not sure whether the director believes that his theatre's lies are necessary for the stability of the regime or whether he is completely cynical, and it is clear that Wannous attaches little importance to the question; the director's mission is to defend the regime and its errors at all costs. Any critic, any questioner of its authority is, according to the director, guilty of instigating 'a conspiracy against the country plotted from A to Z'.⁵⁴ In his view, the task of the government theatres is not only to present to the people an array of justifications absolving the regime from all blame; it is also to praise in the most fulsome terms the 'heroism' of the regime. Those in power have made great sacrifices to protect their people and in standing firm against what the government official, later in the play, calls 'imperialism and its hirelings'.⁵⁵ This propaganda, articulated most successfully by Nasser, successfully disguised the reality of oppression until the catastrophe of the defeat opened the eyes of the people. Wannous commented on the state's dominance and perversion of media and theatre: 'Our government gave us a ready-made awareness and we remained defeated all these years [...]. So finally we must learn how to build our own awareness'.⁵⁶

In *Evening Party* Wannous makes it clear that in order to maintain their power, the regimes must tighten their grip on every significant kind of culture, including theatre, and ensure that their propaganda is disseminated as widely as possible. To do this, they made use of theatrical censorship both directly, by banning plays, as the Syrian Ministry of Culture did with *Evening Party* in 1968, and indirectly by encouraging productions such as those presented by the Syrian National Theatre. Sometimes Arab regimes took more extreme measures than those applied to Wannous. We have noted that Adonis was imprisoned in 1956; and in Iraq, and in Egypt, for instance, a playwright, an actor, or even a singer might be persecuted by the security authorities through the fabrication of false evidence and jailed.⁵⁷ The Egyptian secret police used this tactic against playwrights and intellectuals opposing Nasser's rule (1954-1970), on the ground that they were guilty of undermining the 1952 July revolution which had overthrown King Farouq. The eminent journalist Mustafa Amin (1914-1997) was imprisoned in the mid-1960s and tortured by Nasser's jailers for his opposition to the regime, and on the grounds that he had been spying for the USA.⁵⁸ He was released by President Sadat in 1974. Whether direct or indirect, the effect of censorship was to create the anger and grief reflected in Wannous's theatre, and to cause people to reject the state's 'ready-made' awareness and the dominance of the single view in those countries where the 'tongues of millions of people are cut off'.

Having outlined the two types of theatre Wannous is considering in *Evening Party*, it is apposite here to return to the very start of the play in order to examine the strategy Wannous uses in an attempt to create the conditions for dialogue between the audience and the actors. Wannous's intention is to prepare the audience to express themselves publicly and to educate them in the culture of freedom of expression. He asks in the introduction to the published script that anyone who wants to produce the play should delay the start with a view to provoking the audience and arousing their protests:

The play starts at half past eight, but the time can be changed according to the programme of the troupe performing the play. Time passes but no actor appears on the stage and no signal is given to indicate that the play is about to start. The audience will begin to show their resentment and impatience and gradually begin to whisper to each other.⁵⁹

This provocation of the audience is intended to push them to protest overtly and thus to involve them in a dialogue with the performers. This provocation is similar to that used in Augusto Boal's Invisible Theatre. Boal's theatre, however, was not presented in the theatrical space itself but in other public places such as restaurants and markets, where the public were not aware that a performance was taking place.⁶⁰ In *Evening Party*, performers are in fact already concealed among the audience, but the audience are unaware of this. As Badawi notes, 'Wannous extends the stage to the entire audience by strategically placing some of the actors amidst the audience'.⁶¹ Once the protests have begun to spread throughout the auditorium, some of these performers begin to complain loudly: 'Is this a theatre or a hotel?... We didn't come here to sleep... This is an insult to the audience... They are making fun of us'⁶² and so on.

At this point a corpulent figure bustles on to the stage. This is the 'fat director, who is full of self-confidence and whose face glows with good health, yet he exudes a kind of dullness that makes it difficult to imagine how he could possibly set things right'.⁶³ His physical appearance and self-satisfaction reminds us of Zaza in *The Glass Café*, and it may be noted here that his characterisation sounds the only note of humour in the play. Corpulence is often associated with villainy in Wannous's theatre, perhaps because it is a sign of a comfortable, not to say luxurious life. The director surveys the restive audience for a while, then admits that he is extremely embarrassed and is in a pitiful position, particularly with regard to the 'senior officials' sitting in the front row. These officials are, needless to say, smartly dressed actors. The director appears to be breaking into a sweat, 'mopping his face, embarrassed',⁶⁴ focusing his apology on the party VIPs. The delay, he assures them, is beyond his control. He tells the audience that he and his troupe are victims of the play's author, who 'has deprived us of our roles without warning'.⁶⁵ The director's apparent frankness about the playwright's 'ignoble trap'⁶⁶ constitutes another attempt by Wannous to provoke the audience into contributing to the play by either showing their understanding of the director's position or voicing their resentment. Through this device, and others, Wannous intended to make the audience an important part of the play, since they are inextricably involved in the problem facing the director. Wannous calculates that they will be unlikely to sit quietly, having made the effort to travel to the theatre and paid for tickets. Their disappointment and impatience will prompt them to intervene; how they do so is immaterial at this stage. All the foregoing is designed as a preliminary

step towards the realisation of what Wannous hoped would be the impact of politicisation on the audience:

The audience are required to change their attitude from being passive receivers of everything presented to them. They are required to frankly intervene in the action when they notice anything false or discover any deception and to interrupt those who try to stupefy them.⁶⁷

Amidst the hoped-for confusion and complaints there appears from the audience 'a tall, handsome man with a keen but somewhat ambiguous expression',⁶⁸ who declares that he is the author of the play criticised by the director, who has been complaining about him; the director has just lamented to the audience, 'How hard this betrayal is! How hard are blows dealt by friends!'⁶⁹ Abdulghani ignores the director, confidently mounts the stage, and begins to refute the director's accusations, using the arguments outlined earlier: silence is better than lies told to flatter the regime and deceive the people. He confesses that in the past he has been ready to cooperate with the director and wrote several successful and enthusiastically patriotic plays for him during and after the invasion of Egypt by Britain, France and Israel in 1956. But now, the shock of the defeat has made him realise that this kind of theatrical work serves only to damage the interests of the people. The director reminds him of their past collaborations, in an attempt to change his mind. During the fifties, we learn, the playwright had fallen in line with the slogans reiterated by Nasser and other rulers who had seized power and plunged the region into disastrous adventures and internecine conflict. Abdulghani was naively unaware of his complicity in these crimes. He admits to misleading his fellow citizens unwittingly and supporting oppression, by producing works that aroused emotions and ignored reason. They had urged the people to accept the status quo, because the priority had been the defence of the country, which was threatened by 'imperialism'.

Abdulghani has not become a revolutionary, however; he remains a patriot, he says, 'just like any citizen who never neglects his national duty'.⁷⁰ However, his view of the function and purpose of theatre has undergone a kind of revolution - just as Wannous's had. The defeat has taught him that the 'real theatre' is the one that does not hesitate to condemn corrupt regimes. He now believes in the importance of giving the people the opportunity to choose their own way towards growth and

development, and that the best way of doing this is by encouraging the audience to discuss and criticise the existing state of affairs. Only this freedom to engage in constructive dialogue can liberate the downtrodden from their subservience to the ruling ideology and lead to the kind of political action that will change society for the better. The playwright confesses that after the 1967 defeat he was depressed and pessimistic and so yielded to the blandishments of the director, but that now he has woken up, regained his mental balance and self-confidence and has irrevocably decided to abandon his former ways. The first step in his rehabilitation is to withdraw his script and confess his fault in public. The emergence of the playwright from among the audience, making his way through the aisles, marks Wannous's first attempt to break down the 'fourth wall', and dismantle the normal relationship between audience and stage in the Arab theatre, which the director tries to maintain by saying to the audience later in the play, 'No, you do not have the right to speak. The stage is ours, the seats in the auditorium are yours. This is a simple rule of logic'.⁷¹ This abolition of the fourth wall is not a matter of mere technique or style; it represents a challenge to the fixed relationship between the audience and the stage, and threatens to overthrow the conservative cultural heritage which had dominated Syrian theatre since the 1940s. This heritage dictated the total separation of stage and audience and insisted that any violation of this principle was tantamount to an attack on the integrity of society. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that those playwrights loyal to the regime, like Ali Uqlah 'Ersan, launched a furious attack on Wannous, as they realised the dangerous implications of the political motivations behind this step. It should be noted here that Wannous was not the first Arab playwright to remove the fourth wall. The pioneer in this respect was the Egyptian, Yusuf Idris, in *Al-Farafir* (*The Pretenders*, 1964), which is well known in the Middle East. Idris, however, used this device as a mere aesthetic experiment and did not develop the idea for a political purpose as Wannous did.

Evening Party raises an array of questions relating to a variety of political, social and cultural issues in the Arab countries in general and Syria in particular. These questions are distilled by Wannous into two essential issues: 'Who are we? Why [were we defeated]?'⁷² As Wannous wrote in the preface of *Evening Party*, these questions focus the concerns of the play so that it might function as a 'mirror'⁷³ held up to Arab societies and the placing of the actors among the audience reflects the composition of those societies. 'Senior officials' as well as 'peasants' and

'proletarians' are present and all have a part to play in the politicisation process. If real officials attend, so much the better, for then they will see their misdeeds and evasions held up to the light. Such was Wannous's intention, according to a 1970 article entitled 'Theatre as Mirror' and placed at the beginning of *Manifestos for New Arab Theatre*,⁷⁴ and it is not surprising that the Ba'th party resented his dissection of the Syrian identity. It is important to note that all classes attend the few theatres that are to be found in Arab cities, and so there is no custom of one theatre for the rich and another for the poor. The seats at the front are more expensive, so the influential and wealthy sit in the first rows while the back rows are occupied by the poorer classes. Thus, the possibility that Wannous's mirror could have reflected the party officials in their presence cannot be ruled out.

Once the audience has become aware of the clash between the playwright and the director, Wannous presents an explanatory scene, narrated by the director, giving the story of the play that Abdulghani has withdrawn. The name of the play is *The Whistling of Spirits*; it portrays a group of Syrian soldiers who come under bombardment from the enemy's fighter planes, and most of whom subsequently die. During the action, amid the sound of wailing sirens and the thunder of bombs, the soldiers fight bravely and the enemy's occupation will occur, the director says, 'only over their dead bodies'.⁷⁵ At the end of the play, the raid stops and the remaining few soldiers gather together, boasting and entreating all civilians to leave the battlefield to them; as the play ends they enthusiastically proclaim, 'We will not leave our land [...] Our homes will not be left desolate'.⁷⁶ *The Whistling of Spirits* is written in the propagandistic style of the predominant plays of that time,⁷⁷ and even the most cursory synopsis conveys its shallowness, its blatant appeal to the emotions and its spurious attempt to mould the tangible defeat into a moral victory. Wannous is clearly criticising the defects of this type of theatre, condemning the works written in the style of *The Whistling of Spirits*, calling on those who write such works to desist and admit to their mistakes, and, warning audiences not to be misled by their rhetoric. Wannous is arguing that these works are part of a conspiracy against the people's awareness, and consequently a great moral responsibility rests on the shoulders of their authors. *Evening Party* is thus in part a call to Wannous's fellow playwrights to follow his example and form a movement in opposition to the purveyors of the regime's propaganda.

These are the works that Wannous condemns, but what about the works that he encourages? What is the alternative he suggests? It is at this point that the 'active' theatre advocated by Wannous emerges. A number of actors sitting in the back rows stand up and push their way to the stage. They are wearing the *shirwal*, the Syrian peasants' costume, and are playing peasants driven from their occupied village to the refugee camps by the 1967 war. These 'peasants' mount the stage to protest against the 'political prostitution' proposed by the story of *The Whistling of Spirits*, which, Wannous points out, glorifies the heroism of the soldiers on the battlefield without mentioning the suffering that they experienced because of that ridiculous war. One of the peasants, Abu Faraj, complains that when the war broke out they were completely unprepared. No one had warned them.⁷⁸ Wannous' intention was that the audience at the first performance would believe that the actors were real Syrian peasants who strongly objected to the story of *The Whistling of Spirits*. This impression could not have lasted beyond the first night, but Wannous apparently hoped that even if the audience was aware that the peasants were actors in costumes, they would still be moved to engage with the problems of the people and take action accordingly. Wannous placed these performers among the audience to encourage the peasants and proletarians who might be in the audience to imitate them, and participate in and intensify the heated debate. Wannous expected great things of this participation: he hoped the dialogue would generate a kind of chain reaction that would lead to 'a real popular uprising'.⁷⁹

It is a basic principle of Wannous's 'theatre of politicisation', in contrast to the government theatre run by the state's civil servants, that it both totally rejects the flattery of despots and seeks to reveal the truth about the people's sufferings. Therefore the 'peasants', having taken the stage, begin to tell their stories depicting the disasters of the war. The war took them by surprise and they had no time to arrange their affairs and prepare for the protection of their families. Even if they had had time, resistance would have been futile: the enemy's weapons were far superior to their simple personal arms, and being civilians, as a 'member of the audience' later remarks, 'they had no experience of the tactics of war; they had only sticks and the memories of ancient and petty rural revenges'.⁸⁰ The peasants' stories involve the sufferings of children, women and the elderly; they are simply told and are all the more painful for being so. These stories are intended to stir the audience, especially the peasants, or children of peasants like Wannous himself, to mount the stage and

denounce the authorities in similar terms. Wannous's intention is to create a space where such criticisms can be expressed without fear.

Late in the play Wannous inserts a short monologue in which the issues of the land and history are interwoven, and which may also be connected with an incident in Wannous's own past. An elderly teacher of geography discourses on a tattered map of the Arab world which he takes from his pocket and unfolds. He points to the territories overrun by Turkey and more recently by Israel, and complains that the Arab world has lost touch not only with its history but with its geography: 'A teacher of geography [...] feels that the lines separating countries are more than lines. He smells the odour of the land arising from the paper and on the lines he touches borders and human settlements'.⁸¹ The teacher regrets that he could never make his pupils understand the significance of his map, and tears it in pieces: 'Paper gets torn just like lands without protection'.⁸² It is possible that in this scene Wannous is referring to his own geography teacher. In his autobiographical work *A Journey Through the Obscurities of a Passing Death* (1996) Wannous recalls that in 1959, while preparing to leave for Egypt, he happened to meet this teacher, whom he had loved like a friend. Wannous was shocked to discover that the teacher had just been dismissed for his alleged communist sympathies. In 1959 Wannous was anti-communist, but he considered the dismissal 'unfair, provocative and totally unjustified'.⁸³ It may be that when composing *Evening Party*, Wannous remembered this incident and chose to pay tribute to the old man. The people's ignorance of their own history and geography is connected with their tolerance of the adventurism of their rulers. This tolerance is strongly criticised in several scenes in the play. *Evening Party* denounces those governments that act in the interests of a small elite while disregarding the consequences of their adventures on the lives of the people. These governments, Wannous argues, underestimate the people and neglect the importance of their key role in the defence of the country, though they are the ones most affected by the conflict. One of the most important messages carried by *Evening Party* is that the 1967 defeat is a reality; it cannot be turned into a victory, moral or otherwise, and that the lesson to be drawn is that the decision to go to war should not be taken by an individual or an oligarchy. The consent of the people is vital, and the people must be respected and informed rather than despised and distrusted. Human rights must be observed, not abused, and dialogue must replace decrees and propaganda. Thus Wannous's theatre of politicisation calls for true democracy and participation in the

political process, beginning with the liberation of the Syrian peasants and urban working class. Wannous remarked in 1986,

The image that had shaken me and was consequently reflected in my works is the image of the defeated Arab individual, who despite his defeat tries to find his way and take responsibility for his fate but finds nothing but difficulties and obstacles. These obstacles are created by the political situation in which he lives and the systematic and long oppression to which he is subjugated, as well as by the ferocity of the external forces [the authorities] that try to defeat him and prevent him from taking his fate into his own hands. I believe that if we make a quick inventory of some of my plays, we find, for instance, that the peasants who breach the false stage in *Evening Party* are an image of the Arab individual.⁸⁴

The theatre of politicisation treats character differently from the way it was treated in Wannous's early work. Wannous is still concerned with the Arab individual, but now that individual is seen more in terms of his or her class. In the introduction to *Evening Party* he writes: 'There are no characters in this play in the traditional sense, and the director and the playwright are no exception to this. [...] Individuals do not have their own dimensions and their features are drawn only by the lines or details they add to the picture of the general historical situation'.⁸⁵ This is not to say that the characters are crude stereotypes or mere mouthpieces for ideology, as they are in *The Whistling of Spirits*, but they are intended to be representatives of their class or social group. This applies particularly to Wannous's treatment of the peasants, whose problems are those of their class as a whole. In Wannous's view it was essential to focus on common problems and interests so as not to distract and confuse the audience with matters relating to individual psychology. Thus the conditions of the characters reflect the conditions of their class. Wannous wrote in 1970: 'We need a theatre for the downtrodden working classes'.⁸⁶ The best means for providing this theatre, Wannous thought, was to construct characters who appear only as representatives of their class, rather than individuals with their own dreams, and to portray the conditions of these classes and their living problems and circumstances, rather than dramatise their personal problems. At this point in his development Wannous did not believe that the personal life of an individual could be a fit subject for serious drama. A concern with the 'big political issues' dominated his thinking,

and he would not admit the importance of the personal until he returned to drama, after a decade-long silence, in 1989.

To return to the action of the play: the director is appalled by the peasants' invasion of 'his' stage. In an attempt to nip such intrusions in the bud, and in order to please the party officials, who have so far been sitting in silent disapproval, he brings on stage a group of entertainers to perform a Syrian folkloric entertainment of dancing and singing. He hopes this will compensate for the postponement of *The Whistling of Spirits*, and that he may yet obtain forgiveness for the criticisms delivered from the stage against the government. It is worth mentioning here that *Evening Party for the Fifth of June* refers specifically to this scene: since Abdulghani's play cannot be performed, the only option left to the director is to present an entertainment he hopes will please his superiors – an 'evening party' or soiree. He also hopes that the spectacle will divert the rest of the audience and prevent any further embarrassment. Wannous was not against the use of the Arab's folk heritage and was to make use of it himself, but in 1986 he objected to its use as a pacifier: 'Aesthetically, our audience is deprived, their taste is distorted, their means of expression are falsified and their folklore has been stolen, and is used in works supporting oppression and backwardness'.⁸⁷ The director's ruse fails; one of the actors hidden among the audience shouts: 'When something real happens on stage – when we finally have the chance to talk about our real situation, you give us dancing and singing'.⁸⁸ The director, taken aback, now attempts to bully the audience into submission; it is imperative that he asserts his authority to impress the 'senior officials'.

DIRECTOR: I refuse to discuss the matter. You people are all alike – you are wasting my time. Before the audience gets too impatient, would you kindly sit in your place and appreciate the excellence of our folk dance?

The entertainers are still trying to perform the dance

AUDIENCE 4 (*To director*): You and your folk troupe have no shame! Do you think that we can be bought off with an hour of dancing and singing? Take your troupe to a country that has no problems. Settle down there and entertain those people. But this is a country of refugee camps. Here are people who fled their villages without understanding why. Do you hear

me? We are bleeding and the *Migana* [the Syrian folk song and dance being performed] won't stop it.⁸⁹

In the midst of this turmoil, two refugee peasants, Abdurahman and Abu Faraj, try to step on to the stage. The director, enraged, tries to prevent them but the actors among the audience intervene, putting an end to his protests, and ask the peasants to speak freely. The playwright, Abdulghani, is delighted by this turn of events and encourages the peasants. By this stage, Wannous hoped, the real audience would be participating in the events. The peasants tell their stories of the Six-Day War, and are joined by a number of 'Syrian revolutionary intellectuals'. Abu Faraj, weeping with joy, tells his friend Abdurahman how happy he is that at long last their sufferings are being taken seriously. As the debate on the peasants' conditions increases in intensity, the communication between the 'audience' and the stage also gradually increases. It is Wannous's intention that, in accordance with his idea of politicisation, the real audience will now be moved to participate fully. The director, greatly perturbed, makes every effort to rid the stage of its usurpers, who he says are 'no better than a gang of rioters'.⁹⁰ Things seem to be getting out of hand, and at this point, a number of 'Ba'thist security policemen' move to block the auditorium doors, preventing anyone entering or leaving the building. This might well have terrified the audience at the first performance, but it is necessary to Wannous's purpose and to the message conveyed by the work. Wannous had wanted to create a disturbance. He had experienced the turmoil of a popular uprising in Paris and had no qualms about instigating a minor riot in the theatre. What he would have done if an actor had been attacked we do not know, since this never happened. He wanted to create a mood of revolt that would explode on to the streets or be nurtured and developed in revolutionary cells. Such was his anger and bitterness at the betrayal by the leaders of the Arab world, and such was his faith in the ultimate victory and the truth of his doctrine, that he was willing to take large risks with his own safety and that of others.

It is instructive to compare Wannous's conception with Dario Fo's 'fake coup', which formed part of his 1973 show *People's War in Chile*.⁹¹ The idea was to convince the audience that a coup was taking place in Italy. This is not the place to go into details, but it appears that the provocation was remarkably successful in many Italian cities. Audiences were shocked, almost disappointed, to discover that the 'coup' was a deliberate theatrical device to remind people that even in Italy certain

scenarios were not impossible. The fake coup was staged partly to educate the audience and raise their political consciousness, partly to overturn the rules of the theatre. However, the actors ran considerable risk of violence, and in Salerno the fake Chief Constable narrowly avoided a knifing. Fo was arrested in Sardinia, but his immense popularity in Italy produced a strong reaction among the people: strikes, demonstrations, union motions and agitation by intellectuals, not to mention the interest of the international media, secured his rapid release. The contrast with Wannous and the political situation in Syria could hardly be more telling.

Evening Party is approaching its end. As the 'security men' surround the auditorium, those on stage continue to call for demonstrations and an uprising against the government. Wannous now takes the situation to its logical conclusion: the false audience, and, Wannous hoped, the real one, clash with the security men. The 'audience' repeats that two factors helped bring about the defeat: the state of ignorance resulting from the information blackout, and the government's refusal to accede to the refugee peasants' demand for arms to defend their lands.

SPECTATOR 4: That was our war.[...]

SPECTATOR 5: We all wanted to get hold of a weapon [...]

SPECTATOR 7: We took to the streets on that day in June,
all shouting the same thing: What do we want?

GROUP: Arms!

SPECTATOR: We went to the authorities, but were met
with scowls.

SPECTATOR 5: As long as I live I'll never forget the
threatening look in their eyes.

SPECTATOR: They told us, [...] War is not your business.
[...]

SPECTATOR 7: Go back to your homes, they said, and
follow the heroic deeds of our brave army on your
radio.⁹²

Now the stage is crowded with angry figures. The 'officials' decide to play their last card. One of them, sitting in the first front row, gestures to a number of 'security men' among the audience. They take light firearms out of the folds of their clothes and level them at the audience. The official gestures again, and all those on stage are arrested and herded together and placed in a corner of the theatre. Among those arrested are the playwright and those members of the 'audience' who took part in the discussions and dared to question government policy. Presumably members of the real audience

would also be 'arrested'. The official climbs on to the stage 'with an angry and arrogant expression'.⁹³ He harangues the audience, declaring that he totally rejects the slander of the 'great regime',⁹⁴ and goes on to warn them of the danger posed by enemies of the state: 'Oh citizens, oh people of our glorious nation [...] tonight's events emphasise once more that enemies are hiding among us, lurking in disguise behind masks of all kinds; and so we must be alert and every citizen must be a watchman. Be on your guard against the plotters and traitors [...] oh people, go forward, go forward'.⁹⁵ 'Go forward' was a slogan often used in the leaders' speeches to their people in the Middle East, mainly during the 1960s.

At the end of the official's speech, the playwright is handcuffed in view of the audience and led out, together with those 'peasants who had mounted the stage', and some 'intellectuals', on charges of sabotage and spying. While the detained 'members of the audience' are being led from the theatre, one of them shouts above the hubbub 'Tonight we improvised, but tomorrow will you go beyond our improvisation?'⁹⁶ He throws down Wannous's challenge to the audience – will they act on what they have learned from *Evening Party*? Wannous demands that the audience reject, bring pressure to bear, interrupt, express themselves freely and correct what is said; this, he believed, was essential to any post-1967 theatrical production. 'The audience is required to be watchful and blunt and in this way, many lies can be exposed'.⁹⁷ Only this can politicise an audience, and only a politicised audience is capable of action.

The play is apparently over, but Wannous misses no chance to stress the importance of regaining one's rights, even as the audience is leaving the auditorium. In the last moments of the play, a final dialogue takes place in which Wannous accuses the man who stands by while injustice is done to him or his country, condemning him as a coward:

SPECTATOR 9: [*timidly to his wife*] I told you that I didn't want to come here. Did you see what happened?

WIFE: So you're still scared! It wasn't you who were arrested.

SPECTATOR 9: You talk as if you wished I had been.

WIFE: You? You would never take a risk like that!⁹⁸

Throughout *Evening Party*, Wannous tries to provoke his audience to feel, to think to debate and, most importantly, to take positive action. *Evening Party* also seeks to unmask the region's totalitarian states, where in the name of the country and

its interests, and of preserving order, anyone who expresses a critical opinion is thrown into dark jails 'which sunlight never reaches, not even once a year'.⁹⁹ In the tragic and hideous conditions depicted by *Evening Party*, man no longer has any value, and becomes a mere marginalised shadow that has no real role in life - unless he is willing to fight for his rights. But many lack the courage, and in their 'de-politicised' state distract themselves by frequenting 'cafés, where they drink tea, smoke, play dice, backgammon and cards, deal in drugs and listen to songs'.¹⁰⁰ It is this bitter reality – the words are clearly an echo of *The Glass Café* – that *Evening Party* was written to change.

Conclusions

In *Evening Party*, Wannous attempts for the first time to deal with a specific political incident, grounded in time and place: the defeat of 1967. In most of his early works, Wannous had tackled political issues in a general way. Thus we find, for instance, the oppressive regime's bias towards the rich at the expense of the poor, as in *Corpse on the Pavement*; the terrorism exercised by the oppressive agencies of the totalitarian states against their citizens, as in *Poor Seller*, and the impact of dictatorial rule, as in *The Unknown Messenger*. But these plays had not been characterised by the call for collective action which is found in *Evening Party*, and which helps to distinguish the play from *Gush of Blood*, its most obvious precursor. It is partly this emphasis on collective action which marks *Evening Party* as a turning point in Wannous's theatre, and he also moves away from the hints and allusions of previous plays to a frontal assault on the regimes he considered responsible for the defeat. From *Evening Party* onwards, Wannous shows his readiness to confront the totalitarian states in the region. At the end of *Evening Party* he embraces a revolutionary view, demanding that the peasants should be armed so that they can defend their lands against the forces of the occupation, and that they should seize their political rights and, if necessary, revolt against their rulers. There is, however, a difficulty with regard to Wannous's treatment of the peasantry in *Evening Party*. His attitude seems contradictory: on the one hand he argues that they should be – or should have been – armed: on the other, that they could not defend their lands even if armed, since they have no military training or experience. His view seems to be that they should never have been treated as third-class citizens, but should have been

trained as a militia in case an invasion occurred. This, however, would have required a completely different political system, since no despotic government would arm and train a force that might one day overthrow it, unless it could control that force ideologically. But Wannous is also vehemently opposed to the stupefaction of the people through propaganda. Therefore, without a democratic structure, arming the peasants is an impossibility, and democracies are not built overnight. Moreover, the peasants, similarly to those portrayed in *Poor Seller* and *Gush of Blood*, are passive, suffering victims. Wannous laments their superstitious and ignorant ways without blaming them, but it is difficult to see how they could expel a powerful and well-trained enemy that had recently defeated the armies of the Arab world, overrun parts of Jordan and Syria and taken Sinai. Wannous seems to accept that this difficulty is problematic and articulates it in the following dialogue:

SPECTATOR 1: [...] if one village had resisted, the situation would have been so different. This is a fact and it reeks like stale armpits

SPECTATOR 2: You're being naïve. How can you expect anything else from them? They are isolated in their remote villages, no one visits them, and they know nothing about what is going on in the world. They've been the victims of poverty and ignorance for a long time; how then can we expect anything else?¹⁰¹

Wannous also criticises the peasants' determination to have nothing to do with politics. He abhors their naive dependence on the regime, their gullibility and fatalism – Khaddour in the *Poor Seller* is exactly of this type. He gives various examples of their most typical proverbs in *Evening Party*: the nearest English equivalents are: 'Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies'.¹⁰² 'Mind your own business';¹⁰³ 'Curiosity killed the cat'.¹⁰⁴ Other equivalents might be 'Better safe than sorry' and 'Let sleeping dogs lie'. Whatever the defects of the peasants, however, *Evening Party* unequivocally accuses the region's regimes of wilfully neglecting them and their interests, and therefore of exposing them to the terrors of foreign invasion. Thus the peasants are the creation of the governments' paranoia and incompetence. The play condemns the Syrian regime particularly for depriving those who were most affected by the defeat of their rights to adequate education, freedom of expression and political participation, and so their ability to take part in the defence of their country.

Although the play focuses on the peasants and their sufferings, Wannous does not neglect the part played by city-dwellers. Compared with the peasantry the urban proletariat was small in number, but, as a socialist, Wannous believed that the vanguard would be formed from them and not from the peasantry; both Russia and China were cases in point. Wannous himself, the son of peasants, was by now a thoroughly urbanised, cosmopolitan intellectual, and though he wished to champion the rural majority he had grown away from Huseen Albahr, his native village. It is possible to take from his plays a sense that he underestimated the Arab peasant and his resources. Be that as it may, the 'Arab individual' Wannous was concerned with is not only the peasant. *Evening Party* addresses not only the peasantry but also every ordinary Syrian – or indeed Arab – working at any craft, who is marginalised, oppressed and 'de-politicised' by the regime. This broader vision is expressed in a scene describing a demonstration held during the June war:

SPECTATOR 7: That day in June, people flooded into the streets; the squares were full. We gathered spontaneously; something was drawing us to those places. We moved in response to a profound call arising from the soil of our land, from fear, from the people's will and their dignity. Enthusiasm burned in our blood; emotion made our faces glow; a huge crowd of us took to the streets. Among us were bakers, blacksmiths, porters and all kinds of workers.

SPECTATOR 3: I saw hawkers among us.

SPECTATOR (*From auditorium*): I saw sellers of lottery tickets, bootblacks and beggars [...]

SPECTATOR 5: Among us were poor people who only have enough to eat on good days.

SPECTATOR 4: Farmers from neighbouring villages came to join us.

SPECTATOR 6: Among us were students and teachers.¹⁰⁵

The tone of this passage is in marked contrast to the hollow heroics of *The Whistling of Spirits*, and to the posturing of party hacks like the playwrights of 'Ersan's clique. *Evening Party's* focus on the peasantry may be explained by the importance of the land in predominantly rural societies, quite apart from questions of patriotism and the territorial integrity of the state. When Israel occupied the Arab lands in 1967, it not only violated national territory, it deprived thousands of peasants of their livelihood. More than this, it deprived them of their identity and destroyed

their communities. The peasant's bond with his land is very strong and very deep, and we should not forget that Syria, for example, had only recently emerged from feudalism. The despair of the dispossessed was hinted at in the image of the huddled, defeated group of refugees in *Gush of Blood*; in *Evening Party* Wannous gave them a voice. This is one of the play's real achievements, and is one reason why it had such an impact. Wannous denied that its analysis had anything to do with 'Arab nationalism' as such: 'The term 'Arab man' is vague and unspecific. [...] There are social segments; there is a certain class stratum that cannot be ignored when talking about the Arab man'.¹⁰⁶ Thus the sufferings of the downtrodden cannot be equated with those of the privileged.

This does not mean, however, that Wannous turns away from the effects of suffering and despair on behaviour, or shrinks from portraying the peasant as he perceives him to be. To do so would be to peddle illusions; he would become another 'Ersan. In one scene we hear of the actions of one 'defeated Arab individual' who vented his pain and frustration on one weaker than himself. Abdurahman and Abu Faraj tell the story of Mohamed, another peasant, who fled from the Israeli bombardment and put all his belongings on his donkey. But the donkey soon became exhausted and Mohamed had no choice but to abandon his belongings on the street. For a man whose 'backbone had been broken'¹⁰⁷ by his hard life, this final indignity was 'much harder to bear than pulling out his own teeth'.¹⁰⁸ Beside himself with rage, he started to beat his helpless wife so violently that she would have died but for the intervention of Abdurahman and Abu Faraj. Mohamed broke down, 'wept bitterly and then remained silent for the rest of the journey'.¹⁰⁹ Through this vivid example, Wannous shows the devastating effect of the defeat on the pride and manhood of the Arab peasant. But Wannous is also making the point that violence against women was hardly unknown among the peasantry, and that the effects of poverty and ignorance could only be mitigated by liberating the peasant from his backwardness. The theatre of politicisation, Wannous believed, could help to create the conditions for this liberation.

How does *Evening Party* stand up now, almost forty years after it was written? This is to some extent a spurious question, since Wannous was not aiming to create a lasting work of art that would take its place in the repertoire. Its power mainly resided in its timeliness in responding almost immediately to the defeat. Wannous himself said, 'I knew that *Evening Party* was written for a particular time, and would end

either with demonstrations or with the normal reaction to a theatrical production – experienced then forgotten'.¹¹⁰ It is clear that many of the play's theatrical techniques, such as the play within a play, placing performers among the audience and so on, have lost their power to startle and are no longer unusual even in the Arab world. Moreover the political situation in the Arab states is not what it was. The optimism of the sixties has faded, the state apparatus is more secure, and increased urbanisation and prosperity have changed the face of the region. Although the Palestinian problem remains unresolved, it is very unlikely that any play could have the effect *Evening Party* had in the late 1960s, because the theatre in the Arab world has been in decline for decades as a forum and focus of debate. The Egyptian playwright Alfred Faraj acknowledged this in an interview published in 1999. In his opinion, one important cause of the decline was that 'the role of Arab intellectuals has shrunk drastically in the second half of the 20th century'.¹¹¹ Wannous himself was profoundly affected by these developments, but while deploring them, he found that the marginalisation of the theatre helped to dispel the constraints that had directed his earlier writing, and that he was able to discover a new freedom of expression in the 1990s.

Evening Party must therefore be judged as a product of its time. How effective was it, then, in realising Wannous's aims? It was certainly a turning point in the history of the Arab theatre generally, and the Syrian theatre in particular, for reasons we have discussed earlier. Certainly it was an act of unprecedented boldness, not to say recklessness, but did it succeed on Wannous's own terms? It must be admitted that it did not, and Wannous was the first to admit it. There were many reasons for its failure. Wannous was now writing for the theatre, but he was not a man of the theatre, and proceeded from theory rather than from practical experience. Driven by hope and optimism, and by his new 'awareness', he miscalculated the effect the play would have. He committed the cardinal sin of the 'engaged' playwright – he did not know his audience, who simply refused to participate to the degree he believed they would. A word needs to be said here about the composition of the audience. Although Wannous intended to address the peasants and proletarians, it is very unlikely that any peasants would have been among the audiences for *Evening Party*, at least not peasants like those depicted in the play. There may well have been educated sons of peasants, and numbers of politically aware workers, but the audiences would generally have been made up of the usual theatre-going public, who were eager to see something new, and all of whom had been appalled by the Six-Day War and its

effects on the peasantry. This audience was clearly – as indicated by its reaction – not ready to respond in the way Wannous hoped.

Wannous wished to abolish the idea of the ‘actor-teacher’ and the ‘spectator-student’. This style of writing had long been dominant in the Arab world. One must not forget that the audience experiencing *Evening Party* is required to participate in order to determine the final form of the play. The play as conceived by Wannous has no fixed form; rather it is intended to provoke the audience to storm the stage and react openly and without restrictions. However, the script is far from being a framework for improvisation. It is fully finished, and the dialogues are already complete – so complete that any director would be able to stage the piece even if the audience said not one word. The question arises, how much improvisation actually took place? If it provoked a reaction, how significant was this? Was it just a matter of a comment here and there by a bold spectator? We know that indignation caused by the gravity of the defeat prompted some Syrian spectators to ‘intervene with questions or to ask permission to make a speech’;¹¹² ‘The number of spectators who intervened during the show was more than ten’.¹¹³ Reaction in Lebanon in 1970 appeared more promising: the audience ‘were driven to mount the stage spontaneously to form a group shouting a slogan behind the actors’,¹¹⁴ and demanding that the government provide them with ‘arms’, a demand already made by the actors. This reaction is not altogether negligible, but less than Wannous had hoped for. The generation of ‘revolutionary action’ proved a chimera. Moreover, although the Syrian audience’s intervention can be seen as a positive reaction, given the nature of the Syrian totalitarian system, the shouting of the Beirut audience was not unusual. Beirut was a far more open and sophisticated city than Damascus, and moreover the Lebanese regime tolerated a certain amount of freedom of speech and expression and, within certain limits, criticism of the authorities did not bring automatic punishment. Wannous himself managed to publish *Evening Party* in Lebanon after its banning in Syria.

Wannous was disappointed, but he did not abandon hope. He wrote in his 1970 essay:

We create a theatre full of life that shakes its audience and raises its awareness, a collective movement that is integrated with a larger group; we will be able to awaken and materialise the common destiny of performers and

audiences. In doing so, we will achieve the most important aspiration of the theatre; that is, to escape from our individual skins in order to unite in a single group and so become aware of our common fate and the needs of such a destiny.¹¹⁵

But in a more sombre mood he said in 1979:

When the play was shown after a long ban, I prepared myself for disappointment, but even so bitterness was reborn in my heart every evening. The final applause ends and the audience leave the theatre just as they do after any other show; they whisper to each other, laughing and praising the show, then what? Nothing happens. The auditorium does not explode with demonstrations, nor do those who have left the theatre intend to take any action; they only go out into the cold night air where defeat builds its nest and regenerates.¹¹⁶

Wannous was also disappointed by the reaction of his colleagues: 'Adonis was the first to shock me, as he wrote to me saying that *Evening Party* had astonished him, especially its 'technical ideas'; what techniques is he talking about? I was not looking for techniques or any change in form. [...] My ambition was to use language as an instrument to bring about a struggle that could change our collapsed reality'.¹¹⁷ *Evening Party*, despite its merits, its creative innovations in language, production and performance, its timeliness and its close relation with the local environment, can be said to have failed because its roots did not strike fertile soil; the necessary conditions were simply absent. It is possible that Wannous's experiences in Paris had given him a totally unrealistic view of what could be achieved in the Middle East. His vision had become utopian; even in Lebanon the enthusiasm of the audience had been limited and temporary. Wannous was for the people, but the people were not with Wannous. We have noted the extraordinary level of public support enjoyed by Dario Fo in Italy; to be effective, the committed or engaged dramatist must know and be supported by his public. As Boal perceptively remarks, 'The Volksbühne, birthplace of the modern epic theater would have been impossible without its sixty thousand proletarian members'.¹¹⁸

Wannous subsequently realised that the Arab audience was very different from its counterpart in Europe, and he came to believe that what was needed was an Arab theatre that, while sharing *Evening Party*'s aims, would cater to the needs of the Arab audience by drawing on familiar folk traditions and methods of storytelling. It was

necessary, in other words, to turn the weapons of the regime against itself. From now on Arab – and particularly Syrian – history and culture would be his sources. He was to say in 1991 in a press interview:

The more literature in general and theatre in particular becomes local and deals with its environment with depth and sensitivity the greater is its ability to influence other environments. Any theatrical production that does not know how to communicate with its environment and the historical moment in which it works cannot achieve anything of significant value'.¹¹⁹

Wannous's experiences in Paris – the May events, his political activism, his debates with his professors – had led him to abandon the Absurdist and Existentialist and take Brecht as his model. Brecht's influence, among others, can be seen in the play's use of placards, 'class-based' characterisation, direct addresses to the audience, and minimal décor. Brecht continued to be Wannous's main inspiration throughout his middle period, although Wannous was influenced by Brecht's theories rather than his practice, of which Wannous knew little. He was still enthusiastic about Brecht's ideas in 1986, but admitted that his techniques could not easily be transferred to the Arab world.¹²⁰ Thus there can be no doubt that Brecht influenced Wannous in the writing of *Evening Party*, but a cautionary note needs to be sounded here. First of all, although the play appeals to the reason of its audience, its main impact seems to lie in its appeal to the emotions and its use of empathetic identification with the sufferings and struggles of its 'third-class' characters. Brecht took a complex view of empathy which evolved over time, and in any case Wannous cannot be criticised for the play's use of it, since influence does not imply slavish obedience. But it is worth noting that the peasants' stories and the literal call to arms apparently provoked the greatest audience reaction. Part of the problem is that it has not been possible to discover what acting style was used – whether the actors presented their characters or were completely identified with them – although since the audience were required to believe that real peasants were participating (at least on the first night) the latter seems more likely. Wannous, unlike Brecht, provides no clues, but it seems clear that strong empathy with certain characters was a vital part of the performance. This point need not be laboured, since in practice Brecht used empathy for his own purposes, but *Evening Party* seems to appeal more to the emotions than to reason – to an extent that

Brecht might not have approved. Moreover, Wannous loads the dice from the beginning by contrasting the fat, sweating director with the tall, handsome playwright. He is not concerned with contradictions of character but with ramming home a simple message, and *Evening Party* does seem to be to some extent an example of agit-prop. But agit-prop was usually taken to its audience rather than staged in a theatre; performers were often drawn from the group who would see the performance (worker – players); and the flexible, usually short form tended to be quickly adopted to meet local and topical situations, usually with a view to stimulating immediate action to achieve a short-term goal.¹²¹ *Evening Party*'s purpose was certainly to stimulate action, but action to achieve a set of broad and long-term objectives. Moreover, despite certain crudities, the quality of the writing lifts the play above mere sloganising; and it should be remembered that Brecht himself was an admirer of good agit-prop.¹²²

A further problem relates to the abolition of the fourth wall. Although Wannous's intention was to remove it, by blurring the distinction between illusion and reality in the auditorium Wannous restores the fourth wall, which now surrounds the theatre. The illusion is intensified for those who do not see through the trick; the audience is under a spell of the kind Brecht tried to destroy. When the spell is broken the response is likely to be the congratulation of the magician rather than impassioned debate leading to action. This may explain Adonis's reaction, which so shocked the play's author. It should also be added that, as in the early plays, there are no significant parts for women, in marked contrast to Brecht's drama. Wannous was still a man writing for men, in a sociopolitical context that was overwhelmingly masculine. Women in *Evening Party* play no part in politics; they are either the victims of the victims or are included to impugn their menfolk's masculinity and deride their cowardice.

Evening Party was an immediate reaction to the stagnation and paralysis that followed the defeat of 1967. This situation, Wannous implies, was not a tragic and inevitable fate imposed on the Arabs, rather it was the natural result of a group of negative political and social factors: dictatorship, oppression, political suppression, and the stupefying demagogic methods used by the region's politicians. These despots controlled the dissemination of information; they used the government-controlled theatres to suffocate any stirrings of popular revolt and to frustrate any movement towards liberation or democracy. So the type of theatre Wannous inaugurated with

Evening Party rejects passivity and defeatism; on the contrary it attempts to help the people overcome their fear of the regimes that deny them political freedom. It is also a serious attempt to demolish the 'stupefying' theatre of the government elite, and build a positive 'theatre of politicisation' on its debris. It is worth quoting Brecht directly here, as his words fortuitously provide a summary of what Wannous, writing a quarter of a century later, was trying to achieve:

a simple presentation of non-aristotelian drama should always start from the need to deal better (more practicably) with the subjects that affect our times than was possible in the old manner. 'all' that had to be eliminated from naturalism was the element of fate. This step made the whole huge reorganisation necessary. Here is the poor dumb peasant, poverty and stupidity treated not as a fact of life but as things which are independent and can be eliminated – then we have non-aristotelian drama.¹²³

Evening Party marks a shift away from the theatre of the mind, which had preoccupied Wannous before 1967. He moves to writing for the stage, for live theatrical performance. To put it another way, the audience and its reaction become a central concern. Although Arab theatrical culture was by no means negligible when Wannous started writing in the early 1960s, it was not closely connected with political realities, and there was little attempt to develop an analysis of the issues confronting Arab societies. When the wretched political condition of the Arab world was revealed by the defeat of 1967, Wannous was shocked into a radical reconsideration of his earlier position – if it can be called a position – regarding the relationship between theatre and life. Wannous became convinced that

Theatre cannot be successful or useful unless it engages with current problems and destroys its own restrictions. Therefore, it must shift to a real and effective form of action that brings about resistance. In these days, one must not talk about problems equivocally; rather the theatre must engage with them. Any serious dramatist must react to such concerns.¹²⁴

Wannous called the defeat 'a fatal blow that caused me terrible psychological pain'.¹²⁵ It was one which led him to abandon his earlier methods and to adopt others which he thought would be far more politically useful and effective. *Evening Party* was a new

theatrical phenomenon in the Arab countries and its uncompromising stance, technical innovations and timeliness made it something of a *cause célèbre*. Unlike the government theatre, it did not attempt to diminish the defeat through hollow chauvinism and shallow political slogans; rather Wannous tried to face the defeat squarely and to present a clear vision of its causes. *Evening Party* thus sought to uncover the causes of the rotten structure of the Arab states and its collapse during the defeat of 1967, as well as to explore the possible means of rebuilding on new and more secure foundations.

Critical reaction to *Evening Party* was mixed; leaving aside the views of 'Ersan and his group, reaction was generally favourable, though Wannous felt that the play had been misunderstood. He expected a strong reaction and was disappointed by the chorus of mild approval that greeted *Evening Party*: 'I was astonished that my play had satisfied everyone'.¹²⁶ He hoped that his play would change the face of Syria by galvanising the revolutionary left and turning liberal intellectuals into revolutionaries, but he found that audience reaction was similar to that of Adonis; the play was praised as an innovative theatrical work and its political purpose was not appreciated. It seems that, contrary to Wannous's intentions, the play was not generally seen as a work based in class politics, although according to the Syrian novelist Hanna Mina, it was 'a work of art which was characterised by a sensitive conscience. The play is progressive, very close to the masses, speaking on behalf of their pure conscience and embodying their experiences'.¹²⁷ The liberal Syrian critic Riyadh Ismat remarked on the play's broad appeal: it 'treats the reality of the Arab nation in such a way that it has simultaneously been adopted by both the left wing and the right wing'.¹²⁸ He noted that in some quarters the play was considered 'counter-revolutionary'¹²⁹ and 'a stab in the back to the progressive forces'¹³⁰ but conceded that it was 'a promising start for the left-wing political theatre in the Arab countries'.¹³¹ Nawwaf Abul-Hayja' failed to grasp the play's method and its connection with the epic theatre, considering it important as 'a dialogue piece'¹³² that was 'at best an attempt to air a grievance'¹³³ and a work that was 'essentially negative in spirit'¹³⁴ – a charge that would often be levelled at Wannous's work. These critics were probably commenting on the script rather than performances, but we cannot be sure. Abul-Hayja' and Mina at least had probably seen the play in performance.

Wannous failed to appreciate that the defeat had shocked all classes in the Arab world, who by 1968 were perfectly aware that the peasantry had suffered

appallingly and who were only too ready to blame the regimes responsible. Thus the play was seen by most people, despite Wannous's protestations to the contrary, as an Arab nationalist work sympathetic to the plight of the mass of the people. After presenting *Evening Party* in Lebanon and later on in a number of Arab countries, Wannous realised that 'word remains word, and theatre is theatre',¹³⁵ and word is not action and theatre is not a spark to ignite revolt or revolution. He said, 'Sometimes and despite my exaggeration in talking about the fertility of the collective theatre, I feel isolated among the audience, especially when I notice that those spectators share neither my deep concerns nor my artistic taste'.¹³⁶

Nevertheless, this initial disappointment did not cause Wannous to lose heart and abandon his project. Rather, he was moved to undertake a new journey that might allow him to reach the same goal by a different route. He was not yet ready to admit that the theatre of politicisation was doomed to fail. This new route will be explored in the next chapter.

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- ¹ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), pp. 150-151.
- ² Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing house, 1988), p. 106.
- ³ Ibid., p. 129.
- ⁴ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), pp. 150-151.
- ⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 106.
- ⁶ Saadallah Wannous, 'Theatre in Syria', *Al-Ma'rafah*, No. 104 (October 1970), p. 13.
- ⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 125.
- ⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Cultural Margins* (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1994), p. 247.
- ⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 3.
- ¹⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 7.
- ¹¹ Allan, Roger, 'Arabic Drama in Theory and Practice', *Al Adab Al-'Arabi*, No. 15 (1984), p. 101.
- ¹² Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 52.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 52.
- ¹⁴ Saadallah Wannous, 'Our Theatre', *Al-Talea 'h*, No. 12 (December 1969), p. 48.
- ¹⁵ Abdulrahman Munif, 'The Kid Who Saw the King Naked'. Syrian Ministry of Culture (Set) (1997), *The First Echoes of Leaving*. Damascus. Syrian Ministry of Culture, p. 49.
- ¹⁶ Saadallah Wannous, 'Personal Dialogue', *Shi'ir*, No. 42 (Spring 1969), pp. 90-91.
- ¹⁷ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), pp. 150-151.
- ¹⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 29.
- ¹⁹ Yumna al-'Id, 'Hiya hadhih al-inzilaqah', *Qadaya wa-Shahadat*, No. 7, Winter 2000, p. 75; (in al-Souleman, p. 47)
- ²⁰ Marc Rohan, *Paris '68: Graffiti, Posters, Newspapers & Poems of the May 1968* (Great Britain: Impact Books, 1988), p. 22.
- ²¹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 107.
- ²² Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 70.
- ²³ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 99.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 51.
- ²⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 145.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 131
- ²⁷ Bader al-Din Abdulrahman, *The Tragic in Syrian Theatrical Literature*, Masters thesis (Syria: Aleppo University, 1995), p. 294.
- ²⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 124.
- ²⁹ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ³² Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ³³ Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 159.
- ³⁴ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ³⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, volume one (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 131.
- ³⁶ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 115.

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- ³⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), pp. 108-109.
- ³⁸ See Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 41.
- ³⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 36
- ⁴⁰ See the account of first forum in *Events of Damascus Festival of Theatre Arts* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1969), p. 11.
- ⁴¹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 109.
- ⁴² Ali Uqlah 'Ersan, *Politics in Theatre* (Damascus: Arab Union Writers Publications, 1978), pp. 23-24.
- ⁴³ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 21.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117
- ⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that, according to Brecht, Piscator saw the theatre as a parliament and the audience as a legislative body. All the great public questions were submitted to this parliament in order to enable the audience to reach political decisions. See John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001), pp. 130-131.
- ⁴⁶ See Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 43.
- ⁴⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 3.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 66- 67- 68- 69. It is possible that the playwright's confession was inspired by the debates that raged in the occupied Odeon Theatre in Paris in May 1968 and perhaps by those taking place in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which Wannous was probably aware of; but Wannous never confirmed this.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- ⁵⁶ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), pp. 127-128.
- ⁵⁷ See Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 32.
- ⁵⁸ Suwellam, S (ed) *Mustafa Amin* (<http://culture.infomideast.com/culture16.html>), accessed on 13 October 2005.
- ⁵⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 5.
- ⁶⁰ See Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 143-147. Also see Frances Babbage, *Augusto Boal*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 21.
- ⁶¹ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 275.
- ⁶² Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 6.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ⁶⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 43.
- ⁶⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 13.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

- ⁷² Ibid., p. 5.
- ⁷³ Ibid., p. 5.
- ⁷⁴ See Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 13.
- ⁷⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 33.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 63.
- ⁷⁷ *Palestinians* (1968) and *The Strangers* (1974) are good examples of such plays.
- ⁷⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 83.
- ⁷⁹ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), p. 151.
- ⁸⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 81.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., p. 122.
- ⁸² Ibid., p. 123.
- ⁸³ Saadallah Wannous, *About Memory and Death*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1997), p. 135.
- ⁸⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 122.
- ⁸⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), pp. 3-4.
- ⁸⁶ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 25.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 109.
- ⁸⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 104.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 93.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 120.
- ⁹¹ See Tom Behan, *Dario Fo: Revolutionary Theatre* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 143-145.
- ⁹² Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), pp. 136-137.
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. 140.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 144.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 146.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 149.
- ⁹⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 43.
- ⁹⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), pp. 147-148.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 115.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 118.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 72.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., p. 117.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 117.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 115.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 130.
- ¹⁰⁶ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 122.
- ¹⁰⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, second edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1980), p. 79.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 79.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 80.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 117.
- ¹¹¹ Alfred Farag, *Alfred Farag Analyzes Decline of Arab Theater* (http://65.54.244.250/cgi-bin/linkrd?_lang=EN&lah=425fff70e6da8b5ea27036865325fe74&lat=1097367353&hm__action=http://www.aljadid.com/theatre/AlfredFaragAnalyzesDeclineofArabTheater.html), accessed on 13 May 2002

- ¹¹² Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), p. 76.
- ¹¹³ Salman Qataya, 'Evening Party for the Fifth of June', *Al-Talea'h*, (19 December 1970, p. 32.
- ¹¹⁴ Jalal Al-'Ashri, 'Fighting Party Not Evening Party', *Al-Akhbar* (30 May 1971), p. 3.
- ¹¹⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 38.
- ¹¹⁶ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), p. 286.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ¹¹⁸ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 174.
- ¹¹⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 72.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- ¹²¹ See Richard Drain, *Twentieth-Century Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp 108-9; from Willett, pp. 61-62.
- ¹²² John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001), p. 111.
- ¹²³ Bertolt Brecht, entry April 3, 1941, in *Bertolt Brecht Journals 1934-1955*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, trans Hugh Rorrison (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 138. (In Bryant-Bertail, p. 25).
- ¹²⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 89.
- ¹²⁵ Fuad Dawara, 'Dialogue with the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous', *Al-Hilal*, (April 1977), p. 192.
- ¹²⁶ Faridah Al-Naqash, 'Saadallah Wannous's Theatre' *Al-Hilal*, (June 1971), p. 130.
- ¹²⁷ Hannah Mina, 'Head Notes About *Evening Party*, by Saadallah Wannous', *Al-Talaaia*', (10 May 1971), p. 5.
- ¹²⁸ Riyad Ismat, *Spot Light, an Applied Study in the Arab Theatre* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture Press, 1975), p. 94.
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ¹³² Nawwaf Abul-Hayja', 'Something from the Theatre of Wannous', in Boullata, Issa J. (ed) (1980). *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980*. (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 352.
- ¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.354.
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- ¹³⁵ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in Saadallah Wannous's Theatre* (Syria: Almada Publishing House, 1996), p. 152.
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CHAPTER 4

Inspiration from Tradition

After the disappointment of the reception of *Evening Party* Wannous returned to Paris to continue his studies. He was unsure of his direction, but a conversation he had with Jean-Marie Serrault, his mentor at the Sorbonne, was to prove crucial to his development as a dramatist. Serrault advised him to avoid the imitation of European models in favour of a reinvigoration of his native traditions, and his advice is worth quoting here at some length because of its importance for the plays Wannous was to write on his return to Syria. According to Wannous, Serrault's words were:

Your countries may lack a theatrical tradition, but their folkloric heritage can be a starting point. The history of Islamic countries often yields examples of the struggle between the people and the feudal system, though this is not always clearly visible. Your heritage is rich in astute criticism. For example, the character of Juha – though I don't claim he is a revolutionary – for centuries conducted a noble campaign against the corruption of the feudal system. So folk tales and traditions make a solid foundation and have great potential. Some critics have seen the lack of a theatrical tradition in the Arab countries as a problem, but this is not important because it would be a great mistake to create a theatre according to European models. You, the Arabs, can contribute to world theatre by breaking away from the inflexible forms of the European models – which restrain our mobility and disable our thinking – in order to invent new theatrical forms and styles. In a virgin climate there are many opportunities for a fresh start which is free, spontaneous and full of collective enthusiasm.¹

The character Juha is, Allen explains, 'the Middle East's primary jokester, [...] a character claimed by almost every nation in the region as its own, and he is known within the Persian and Turkish traditions as Nasreddin'.² The nearest European equivalent is probably Till Eulenspiegel. In the event Wannous did not make use of Juha, perhaps considering him too comedic for his purposes, but Serrault's advice stimulated him to create a new kind of theatre, one which combined traditional Arab

elements with what he considered to be most useful in the European tradition – notably the work of Brecht. Wannous was always wary of this folkloric material, however, and had no intention of producing a parochial or nationalist theatre, as Hakim and Yusuf Idris had sometimes chosen to do. He wrote later, in an essay published in 1978 under the title ‘The Crises of the Theatre’, that ‘Folklore will never make our theatre original; this idea is naïve and shallow. Folklore alone cannot build culture’.³ His main aim, as it had been in *Evening Party*, was to use drama as a means of politically educating the theatre audience, and he attacked those who in his view used folklore to present distracting entertainment or who, like the pro-government Egyptian playwright Rashad Rushdi, used it for what Wannous considered superficial and formal reasons and in ways that did not serve the people. Wannous held that this was unacceptable: in 1970 he wrote ‘We should not forget that in *Baladi Ya Baladi* Rushdi uses the people’s folklore to present an idea that is against them and against their interest’.⁴ As he said in a long interview with the Iraqi critic Farouk Ohan in 1986: ‘I’ve seen many plays [using folk tales] but they either have implications contrary to the people’s interests or are misleading’.⁵

Wannous now determined to achieve his aim by different means. In his next four plays he drew on traditional tales and Arab history, not to issue a direct call to arms as he had done in *Evening Party*, but in an attempt to rouse his audience from their passivity and fatalism, to make them think about their situation, and to encourage them to believe in their own strength when acting collectively in pursuit of a common goal. He was still confident that theatre could change the world; as he admitted in 1996 to Mary Elias, ‘I believed I could change history’.⁶ He therefore abandoned the agit-prop style of *Evening Party* in favour of a method which made use of Arab traditions and was designed to appeal to Arab tastes and expectations. He drew inspiration from his own heritage, using the past to illuminate the present in order to point out the similarities between conditions then and now, and to drive home the lessons to be learned from the comparison. He argued in 1978, in his essay ‘The Crises of the Theatre’, that ‘If we don’t return to the origins of our theatre and if at the same time we fail to address the suffering of our downtrodden people, our theatre will die’.⁷

Taking Serrault’s advice to heart, Wannous produced four plays during the following decade: *The King’s Elephant*, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir’s Head*, *Soiree with Abu Khaleel al-Qabani*, and finally *The King’s the King*. The first of these

is very short and seems to be in the nature of an experiment. It was written in 1969 and performed the same year at the first Damascus Festival of Theatre Arts, together with *Poor Seller*.⁸ Although the festival was not a happy experience for Wannous, he was sufficiently encouraged to write a much more complex piece, which was first banned by the Syrian censors and then promoted by the new regime after Assad seized power in late 1970. *Jabir's Head*, like *The King's Elephant*, seeks to galvanise the audience out of its passivity by presenting a negative example, but it does so far more subtly than the earlier play – evidence that Wannous's voice was maturing and gaining greater authority. In *Al-Qabani*, Wannous combines instruction and entertainment in a unique way, drawing on recent history and making good use of a number of striking innovations. Like its predecessor, this play was also promoted by Assad's regime, but as we shall see, this success did not encourage Wannous to become more productive. On the contrary, it seems to have provoked a crisis of conscience that led him to abandon writing for the theatre, and five years of silence were to pass between the completion of *Al-Qabani* and the writing of *The King's the King*.

The King's Elephant (A short play in four acts)

Wannous wrote *Alfil Ya Malik Al-Zaman (The King's Elephant)* in 1969. The play, set some time in the Ottoman period, is short – less than 20 pages – and contains nothing that might distract from the message Wannous apparently wishes to convey. Badawi calls it 'a didactic parable',⁹ and Wannous may have been influenced by Brecht's idea of the 'teaching play'. It seems likely that he was determined that it should not be misunderstood, as *Evening Party* had been. The story is taken from the Arab oral folk tradition, and in an interview with Farouq Ohan, Wannous commented:

The starting point was our reality and the audience's relationship with [...] daily life. When I took *The King's Elephant* from the folk tale tradition and turned it into a play, I wanted to deal with a story living in the memory of the people and to present it from a new perspective that would urge people to think about the lives they were living and to question their position in the light of the play's attitudes. [...] The main motivation was to search for a historical example of action and for originality at the same time. For

me, it was not a mere matter of borrowing the plot of a folk tale.¹⁰

The plot is extremely simple. An elephant belonging to the King, which he is said to pamper as if it were his own son, is constantly rampaging through the poorest quarter of the city, wreaking havoc wherever it goes. It has just killed a child, and the distraught townsfolk are rallied by Zakaria, a bold young man who leads them to the palace to present their grievances to the King. In the King's presence, however, they are cowed into silence and Zakaria betrays them, changing their complaint into a plea that the elephant should be found a mate and so eventually fill the city with his offspring. The young man is duly rewarded by the King, and the people dismissed, and the play closes with an address by the actors – out of character – directly to the audience.

The King's Elephant is divided into four scenes. The first, 'A decision is taken', begins in confusion, with people running hither and thither, bewailing their fate and speaking of what has just occurred – the elephant has just trampled on a little boy. The setting is one of extreme poverty: 'an alley lined, in the background, with tumbledown houses, miserable and covered with filth'.¹¹ The audience's attention is immediately captured by the movement of the actors who cross the stage singly and in groups, and Wannous skilfully presents the essentials of the situation in a natural and unforced way through the dialogue of the men and women on stage, whose numbers gradually increase until a small crowd has gathered. The wailing of the boy's mother can be heard in the background, though she is not seen and takes no part in the action. The women weep and sympathise with the mother, while the men try to adopt a stoical attitude towards what is merely the latest in a series of disasters wrought by the elephant; But it seems that nothing can be done, because the King dotes on the animal, and the people dare not speak out for fear of what he might do. It is at this point, when the issues have been explained, that Zakaria appears, and the people renew their complaints:

Enter ZAKARIA, a lean young man with a nervous expression and eyes filled with anger. He is accompanied by other men.

ZAKARIA (in a firm, indignant voice): What is all this? It's beyond endurance. *(They all look at him in fear and*

alarm.) Don't we have enough troubles already?

Poverty, misery -

MAN 11: Injustice. Forced labour.

MAN 2: God knows -

ZAKARIA: Disease.

MAN 12: Hunger.

ZAKARIA: Taxes beyond what we even earn.

MAN 5: God knows!

MAN 7: You could go on for ever about the things we have
to put
up with.

ZAKARIA: And now, on top of everything, comes this
elephant.

WOMAN 3 (*wailing*): You're never safe. Never!

ZAKARIA: We haven't known one happy day since he
started
roaming this city.

MAN 8: No one to watch him. No one to stop him.

ZAKARIA: Just hungry for evil.

MAN 7: Every day some new victim.

MAN 1: Every day some new blow.¹²

We are told nothing about Zakaria, but he seems to be more educated than the others, and immediately assumes leadership. In the dialogue that follows, the elephant's depredations are recounted in detail, and, despite their fears, Zakaria manages to convince the people that they must unite and present their grievances to the King in person. He reassures them, saying that the stories of the King's devotion to the elephant have been blown out of proportion, and the people decide to take action.

In the second scene, 'Rehearsal', Zakaria tries, with considerable difficulty, to encourage the people to speak with one voice:

The stage is floodlit to show a public square, with the people gathered around ZAKARIA. There is a din, with voices indistinct.

ZAKARIA (trying to calm them and impose some order): As I keep saying, the crucial thing is discipline. We have to say the same thing, with one voice. The more united we are, the more effect our voices are going to have. We'll go in like this. (He mimes the entrance.) We'll bow to the King, in a completely civil and courteous way, then I'll cry out: 'The elephant, lord of all time!'

GROUP (they are not speaking all together - some start too soon, others too late, and some use a quite different wording anyway; things get worse as the scene

progresses): [...]

The voices become ever more discordant.

ZAKARIA: We have to be organized and controlled. If we don't speak with one voice, our complaint will lose all its force. It's not so very difficult. Try to call out the same sentence, starting and finishing together. Let's try again.¹³

The people find it hard to speak in a disciplined way, but Zakaria emphasises that the stakes are high:

ZAKARIA (*waving his arm to protest*): We're still nowhere near getting it right. We must speak with one voice, all together, clear and distinct. Otherwise the King won't be able to make sense of it. And then he won't be moved by the things we tell him, and he won't have any pity on us. This isn't one person's complaint. It's *our* complaint. That's why we have to voice it as if we were one person.¹⁴

Clearly, Wannous is emphasising that achieving solidarity and collective action is a difficult task and one that must be worked at, but eventually we see that the people succeed in speaking with one voice.

In the third scene, 'Before the King's palace', which covers only one page of the text, the people are nervously waiting for the guard, who, when he arrives, treats them with contempt:

GUARD (*disdainfully*): The King will see you.

VOICES: The King will see us. Long live the King. Amen!

GUARD (*breaking in, still more disdainfully*): Make sure your shoes are properly cleaned before you come in. And give your clothes a good shake-out. We don't want any lice or fleas in here. (*The people begin, automatically, to clean their shoes and shake out their clothes.*) And above all, show a bit of discipline going in. Be sure not to touch anything. You're in the King's palace, remember, not on your mud heaps.¹⁵

In the final scene, 'Before the King', the people are awestruck by the grandeur of the palace and terrified by the stony-faced guards. Here again Wannous returns to the themes of the extremes of wealth and poverty, power and impotence, to be found in unjust societies, and emphasises the immense social distance separating the

ignorant ruler from the people and their sufferings. The guard leading the people to the King continues to speak to them 'disdainfully', and when they finally arrive before the King, who is 'glittering like a meteor'¹⁶ on his high throne, they are unable to speak. Zakaria, in a 'tremulous voice', tries to prompt them using the cue 'The elephant, lord of all time' (the play's Arabic title), but they remain silent. Only a little girl, unimpressed by the splendid throne room, has the courage to begin to speak, but she is immediately prevented by her mother from finishing her sentence. Zakaria tries for the fourth time to prompt the people, without success, and the King, losing patience, threatens to have them whipped. At this point Zakaria, instead of acting as spokesman, changes his tune and his allegiance:

ZAKARIA gazes at the group, first desperately, then with disdain. The look on his face changes as he moves forward toward the KING.

ZAKARIA (uttering his words in a most skilful and accomplished fashion): We love the elephant, lord of all time. We love and cherish the elephant, sire, as you yourself do. When he walks in the city, our hearts fill with delight. We're happy indeed to see him - so much, sire, that life without him is unimaginable now. And yet, Your Majesty, we mark how the elephant, by reason of his loneliness, fails to receive his due share of happiness and joy. Loneliness is a wretched state, My Lord; and so we, your loyal and loving subjects, come to you today to beg that you will find the elephant a wife, a consort to relieve his loneliness - in the hope that, then, he may have scores, no hundreds, thousands, of offspring, to fill the entire city.

VOICES (hoarse, and painfully rough): Find the elephant a wife!

KING (roaring with laughter): Is that what you've come for?

ZAKARIA: We trust our Lord and Master will not deny our request.¹⁷

Note that he looks at the silent, bowed group 'with disdain' - the same word has been used to describe the guard's attitude to the petitioners.

The King declares himself delighted by his loyal subjects' affection and promises that 'Naturally we shall bow to the people's demand'.¹⁸ Zakaria is to be appointed Resident Companion to the elephant and wedding night is to be a public holiday. The play is almost over, but Wannous now breaks the spell by having the actors address the audience:

ZAKARIA: God bless our bounteous king, and preserve him for us!

VOICES (hoarse and painfully rough): God bless our bounteous

king, and preserve him for us!

KING (*laughing*): Your demands have been met. You may go now.

(*They begin to move humbly away. Fade out.*)

Suddenly the stage is lit up again, and the actors stand before the audience in a line. They have now abandoned their parts.

GROUP: That was a story.

ACTOR 5: Which we acted.

ACTOR 3: In the hope we can all learn a lesson from it.

ACTOR 7: Do you know now why elephants exist?

ACTOR 3: Do you know now why elephants breed?

ACTOR 5: But this story of ours is only the start.

ACTOR 4: When elephants breed, a new story starts.

GROUP: A violent, bloody story, which one day we'll act for you.¹⁹

The King's Elephant is, as Nadim Mua'ala noted, 'based on a folk tale from the oral repertoire, told by *hakawatis* in the streets and cafés of Syria and not included in collections such as the *One Thousand and One Nights*'.²⁰ It is not clear what changes Wannous made to the original story, which must have existed in many variants, but as it stands the play is surely a direct attack on arbitrary despotic power unrestrained by law, which the elephant seems to symbolise. Thus it is a direct attack on the Syrian leadership. The beast's viciousness is stressed in scene one:

ZAKARIA: He enjoys his mischief. The more he destroys, the sharper it makes his appetite for destruction. Have you heard of those blood-sucking creatures, that get thirstier for blood the more they suck? (*His voice becomes harsher and firmer:*) For blood, still more blood.²¹

It is clearly as privileged as its master; as one of the men says, 'Whatever he [the elephant] wants, he gets by right. Whatever he does, it has the force of law'.²² In its attack on tyranny and its call for collective action, the play conforms to the general principles of Wannous's theatre of politicisation, but Wannous here turns away from the innovations of *Evening Party* and presents a work drawn from Arab popular narrative. The only aspect of the play that would have been unfamiliar to an Arab audience is the actors' address that closes the play, but simultaneously opens it to future possibilities. Unlike *Evening Party*, the play is straightforward enough to need little detailed comment, but a few points can be usefully made here.

The language of the play eschews poetic phraseology and is lively and naturalistic, despite being written in standard rather than colloquial Arabic. As with

Evening Party, we do not know what acting style was used or recommended, but it is likely that the actors would have been expected to identify with their individual roles until the final address. The staging is conventional; Wannous, it seems, did not want unfamiliar techniques to distract the audience from his message, which is presumably that – in a nutshell – the people must be courageous and united in demanding their rights, that rulers should not be feared or revered, and that demagogues should not be trusted. The power of the demagogue to unite and dominate the people is a dangerous temptation; as Brecht remarked, ‘I don’t think you realize how reluctantly men decide to revolt!’²³ These themes continue the concerns of *Evening Party* in a highly condensed form. Courage in speaking the truth remains Wannous’s primary virtue, and the play can be read as condemning Zakaria as an opportunist – Wannous encouraged this reading – while lamenting the people’s timidity, passivity, fatalism and lack of initiative, as expressed in their constant repetition of pious clichés:

VOICES: Lord, forgive us! God's will be done. Eyes see
what hands can't reach. Leave it to God, the most
Compassionate and Merciful.²⁴

In their de-politicised state they seem to be city cousins of the peasants in *Evening Party*, and their fatalism, Wannous appears to be arguing, leads to and underpins defeatism. *The King’s Elephant*, however, is more pessimistic than *Evening Party*, since the people fail to speak when they have the chance, unlike the peasants. The disappointment of *Evening Party*’s reception and the cooling of the passions of 1968 had made Wannous less confident that theatre could itself incite revolt. What it could do was to educate.

In *The King’s Elephant* Wannous chooses to present a negative example. Zakaria turns out to be a demagogue who, disappointed by the people, uses their cause of the people for his own ends. He is thus an ‘anti-Wannous’ in that Wannous himself never abandoned his principles, as is evidenced by his uncompromising stance when visiting President Assad. It is possible that Zakaria is an educated son of ‘third-class’ parents, as Wannous himself was, though his background is not divulged. He is clearly more politically aware than the other characters, but remains a somewhat shadowy figure, and there are hints that he and the men accompanying him are not from the wretched neighbourhood where scenes one and two take place. Be that as it may, Zakaria, according to Wannous, represents a type of educated man common in

the Arab world and elsewhere: 'This young demagogue uses the sufferings of his people to assume leadership, but only by means of slogans; and when his companions desert him he becomes an opportunist'.²⁵ Wannous's explanation, however, cannot mask what seems to be a central weakness of the play: Zakaria's change of loyalties is possibly too abrupt to be convincing. His sudden betrayal of the people has not been prepared for by any of his earlier words or actions, and one can only make sense of it by deciding, in hindsight, that he was never fully committed to their cause, or perhaps that he was simply trying to avoid disaster for himself and the people – but his disdain works against such a reading. Much can be suggested by the actor playing the role, of course, but Wannous pays scant attention to the motivation of the main character, in favour of a starkly didactic message, is somewhat disappointing. Presumably he felt that such attention would have given undue prominence to Zakaria's psychology. Still, as a negative example, Zakaria fulfils his function, while those who, like Abdulghani in *Evening Party*, and unlike the director or 'Ersan and his clique, remain steadfast and refuse to be co-opted by the authorities or corrupted by the rewards offered by power, are held up by Wannous as positive examples. Wannous himself was well aware of the difficulties of this position. While seeking to draw other playwrights into a movement that would politicise the people through theatre, he warned that 'they should understand the dangers lying ahead once they undertake this role'.²⁶

Wannous's central point seems to be that his Syrian audience, and by extension all Arabs, must overcome their fears and demand their rights, refusing to be overawed by the trappings of power. However, once the decision is made, there must be determination to do what has been decided. There is a nice touch of irony towards the end of scene one, where the people say, 'Things can't get any worse. Of course they can't. So what are we waiting for?'²⁷ They are to learn that things can get much worse when their fear overcomes their desire for justice, and that a despot's 'benevolence' can be more destructive than his anger. Things get worse when the people lack the courage and faith in their own strength to challenge authority and confront tyranny with evidence of its misdeeds or neglect.

The King's Elephant appears to give few grounds for optimism until the final address, but this prophetic ending is more convincing than the false hope offered by, for example, the last page of *Poor Seller*. Wannous denied that the play as a whole was pessimistic. In an interview with Nabil al-Hafar conducted in 1986 he remarked:

I showed the negativity of the people in the presence of the King in *The King's Elephant*. A critic might say 'Stop! You're showing them as negative characters'. He might also say 'You're treating them unjustly!' In my opinion this is a misinterpretation. The question is not whether the townspeople represent our own people. The critic should ask himself what the audience's reaction will be when observing the people's panic. The audience's reactions will range between anger and sorrow. Both these reactions are positive; so where is the negativity?²⁸

The play moves from outrage, terror and anger through uncertain hope to betrayal and bitter disappointment, but the actors' final words can be seen as a challenge to the audience to consider their situation, understand their condition and its causes, and act on the basis of that understanding. The 'bloody story' which will be acted is, Wannous seems to hope, the story of the struggle for freedom in the Arab world.

The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head (A long play in two acts)

Mughamarat Ras Al-Mamlouk Jabir (The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head) was completed in 1970 and is the first important fruit of Serrault's advice to Wannous to break away 'from the inflexible forms of the European models'.²⁹ In *Jabir's Head* Wannous continues to explore and make use of the Arab heritage, here drawing on the historical accounts of a violent catastrophe that befell the great city of Baghdad in the thirteenth century. The story of this disaster, brought about by treachery, is still well known in the Arab world, and Wannous uses the device of the *hakawati* to point the moral. In 1986 he explained in an interview that he had come across the story of Jabir when reading about the exploits of the great Mamluk Sultan Baybars (r. 1260-1277), who, before gaining the throne by murdering his sovereign, had defeated the invading Mongols at 'Ayn Jalut in Palestine.³⁰ The Sultan does not appear but is referred to in the play. Wannous's aim was, he said, to write 'a contemporary play that dealt with the current situation'.³¹ Nawwaf Abul-Hayja', who as we noted in the last chapter was not impressed by *Evening Party*, was delighted by Wannous's return to the roots of the Arab dramatic tradition: 'The folk-narrator (*al-hakawati*), of course, has been one of the earliest Arab dramatic attempts from ancient times to the present. How many folk-narrators have we and our parents known, and how many evenings have we all spent listening to the folk-narrators relating the

stories of *al-zir*, the *One Thousand and One Nights*, '*Antara*, and so on?!'³² These were the tales that had enthralled Wannous as a child in Huseen Albahr.

The plot apparently refers to an incident that helped to bring about the destruction of Baghdad in 1258, but the external enemy in the play is not the Mongols but the Persians. We know that Wannous wished to focus on the contemporary Middle East and Syria's current situation, and so it may be that the Persians represent the Israeli forces; indeed, there is strong evidence for this: the Persian King is called Munkatim (secretive) bin Dawoud (son of David). Wannous never commented on the reasons for his decision but it is clear that in *Jabir's Head* he alters history for his own purposes, allowing himself the freedom Brecht gave himself when setting his plays in an exotic context. The play centres on a disagreement between the two powers in Baghdad in the mid-thirteenth century, the last Abbasid Caliph, or head of state, and his Vizier, or chief minister. According to the play, the caliph's name is al-Muktader Bellah, although the name of the actual historical figure was al-Musta'sim.³³ In the play the Vizier is in the weaker position, though almost as powerful as al-Muktader; he wishes to overthrow the Caliph and seize power, but he cannot do so without help from external forces.

Briefly, the historical situation was as follows. The Vizier in 1258 was called, as in the play, al-'Alqami, and was a Shi'a while the Caliph was a Sunni. Angered by the Caliph's acquiescence in the harsh treatment meted out to the Shi'a in his domains, al-'Alqami plotted revenge and the overthrow of the Caliph, sending secret letters to Hulagu, the Mongol commander, asking him to take Baghdad, and promising assistance. When Hulagu besieged the city, al-'Alqami contrived to lure the Caliph and his official entourage to the Mongol camp on the pretext that Hulagu wished to negotiate peace terms. As a result, the Caliph and all his companions were slaughtered, the Vizier opened the gates of the city to the Mongols, and Baghdad was sacked amid great loss of life. About 50 years after the destruction of Baghdad stories grew up, and were recorded by historians, that the letters sent by al-'Alqami to Hulagu had been tattooed on the shaven heads of slaves. Their hair was then allowed to grow and when the message was hidden they were despatched to the Mongols. One historian, Muhammad bin Shaker al-Katbi, reported that a slave had been executed, as happens in Wannous's play, but there is no mention of the name Jabir.³⁴

In Wannous's play, the idea of concealing the message sent to the enemy is conceived by the slave and not by the Vizier, and the play implies that both are to be

condemned, but they are not the only ones shown to be responsible for the disaster. Again, the people's passivity and lack of interest in political matters is revealed, as they are portrayed as being primarily interested only in their own daily struggle for existence; affairs of state are the concern of the powerful and have nothing to do with them. This attitude, the play suggests, is one of the factors that brings destruction on their city and themselves, and a connection can be drawn with the peasantry in *Evening Party* and the people in *The King's Elephant*, as well as with the chorus in *Poor Seller*.

Jabir's Head, like *The King's Elephant*, refers to the post-1967 situation in Syria, and by extension to the Arab world generally, by constructing a parallel example through which lessons can be learned. The means used to realise Wannous's aim of politicising the audience, however, are a synthesis of the 'play within a play' device employed in *Evening Party* and the telling of a traditional tale of the kind used in *The King's Elephant*. A further innovation was originally envisioned by Wannous: he asks that the play be performed in an Arab café of the type depicted in *The Glass Café* and referred to in chapter four, believing that the theatre should go to the people and not wait for the people to come to it. He wrote in the introduction to the play, where he also set out the principles of the theatre of politicisation: 'The café is the whole theatre [...] we can free ourselves from the stiffness of the conventional theatre. Here we can develop a close friendship with the audience that allows us to present an allegorical tale [...] in order to bring about a dialogue between the audience and the actors'.³⁵ Perhaps more pertinently, he remarked in a 1975 article concerning a documentary film project: 'We should go to where the people live. We should go to the countryside, to the people's districts and to the factories, in order to unmask the truth'.³⁶ Wannous did not insist that *Jabir's Head* must be performed in a café, stating in the introduction that 'the play can be presented anywhere'.³⁷ However, in his 1986 interview with al-Hafar he said that he never intended to have the play produced in a theatre: 'I did not conceive *Jabir's Head* as a work to be shown on the conventional stage, but unfortunately it was shown only on the conventional stage'.³⁸ It is difficult to ascertain the truth in this regard, but in any case his original idea was abandoned and a theatre was found.

The reason for this decision appears to have been that the authorities would not have allowed the play to be performed in an 'unofficial' venue, but in the event the play was banned before its first performance, as Wannous's widow has

confirmed.³⁹ It remained unperformed in Syria until 1984, when it was produced by Jawad al-Asadi, a young Iraqi director, and it continues to be unjustly neglected in terms of performance; Abul-Hayja' remarks '[...] I am greatly surprised that this play has not received the attention and the scholarly study that *Haflat Samar* has'.⁴⁰ It is interesting to note, however, that the play was not altogether neglected by Assad's regime - quite the reverse: the ban was lifted in 1973, and *Jabir's Head* was almost immediately chosen as an official entry for a cultural exchange programme between Syria and the German Democratic Republic, presumably to demonstrate to Western socialists that Syria was a liberal country which actively encouraged dissent. The play, performed in German, achieved a notable success, but the hosts were apprehensive lest it should be construed as an attack on the government of the GDR. They feared that the Persian besiegers might be equated with the forces of the Soviet Union, and so a large map of Baghdad was prominently displayed to ensure that no inconvenient assumptions could be made by the authorities - or by the audience. Even the chirrup of crickets was removed, since their song could also be heard close to the Berlin Wall.⁴¹ Despite these ironies and absurdities, Wannous, who was present, was delighted by the applause and confided to the director, As'ad Faddah, that he had been unsure of the play's merits but that its reception in Berlin had restored his self-confidence. It vindicated his faith that *Jabir's Head* could be 'performed anywhere'.⁴²

In the pre-Assad years, however, writing *The King's Elephant* and *Jabir's Head* was a courageous act, and even in the 1970s plays could be banned - or the ban could be lifted - for no obvious reason. Wannous remarked in his interview with Mary Elias in 1996: 'We shouldn't forget that I was the first playwright to be summoned for questioning by military intelligence; that was because of *Evening Party*. I was the only playwright in Syria - and I'm not boasting here - to have a play banned on the opening night. My early clash with the censors revealed to me the limits of my dream and of the theatre's capabilities'.⁴³ According to Nadim Mua'ala 'Censorship was rigorously enforced in Syria in the 1970s; the intelligence service was responsible for its enforcement since the country was at that time under martial law'.⁴⁴ *Jabir's Head* was the only one among Wannous's plays that he attempted to direct himself. We cannot be sure why he took on this responsibility, but it may be that he wanted to take full control of the production in order to ensure that the audience should not misinterpret *Jabir's Head* as they had *Evening Party*; he may

also have wished to avoid involving any other person in the event of intervention by the censors.

All had been prepared for the first performance and the dress rehearsal was taking place the day before the first night, when the government officials arrived. According to his widow, Faiza al-Shawish, 'In October 1971 the rehearsals were going very well. Some officials came to see the dress rehearsal, and when we had finished, they said to Wannous 'This play is inappropriate' and told him he would not be allowed to present it the following evening. They summoned him later on for interrogation although they treated him gently. [...] I think the play was banned because of its similarities with the situation in Damascus back then. Wannous was a cultured man, and so his plays usually contain a shrewd and perceptive reading of the political situation'.⁴⁵ Curiously, Assad's censors had already removed the ban on *Evening Party*, and so when *Jabir's Head* was banned *Evening Party* was presented instead; according to Wannous's widow, 40 performances were given to packed houses, but there was very little audience participation. Nadim Mua'ala commented, 'Censorship in Syria is unpredictable. You can't say for sure why they released *Evening Party* and banned *Jabir's Head!*'⁴⁶ However, it is probable that Assad considered that plays banned before he seized power in 1970 were directed against the old regime and thus could be released for performance, while those written after 1970 could be interpreted as alluding to him and therefore should be banned.⁴⁷

Jabir's Head remains an important example of Wannous's theatre of politicisation, though it is unfortunate that it was never staged in a café or some similar space where actors and audience could mingle freely. In the theatre, with its separation of stage and auditorium, the interaction hoped for was unlikely to occur. In the introduction to the play Wannous wrote: 'We are trying here, by means of these new methods, to break down the circle of silence. We are trying here to present an example by which, through repetition [by other playwrights] we might achieve our pivotal aim, which is to build improvised and real dialogues between the stage and the audience'.⁴⁸ Wannous was seeking to encourage a new approach to theatre, to found a movement of Arab dramatists committed to the general principles of the theatre of politicisation and concerned to create interaction between audience and stage. Abul-Hayja', whose article constitutes the only substantial criticism of the play, is worth quoting at some length here, since he summarises Wannous's intentions clearly and succinctly. Unfortunately he does not say whether these intentions were realised in

performance, and it is not apparent whether he actually witnessed a performance or is basing his comments on a reading of the published text.

Since Saadallah has additionally provided for the comments of the audience to be freely offered, he has programmed the work to include actors and audience in an objective, living relationship, renewed and strengthened repeatedly during each presentation of the play, for two blocs interact in a dynamic and ever changing fashion.

The fact that Saadallah Wannous does not insist on the inviolability of the published text, especially with regard to the comments and opinions of the audience, is further evidence of his efforts to permit the audience to express itself in accordance with the requirements of the daily life of the people, their relations, conditions, political, social, and intellectual attitudes, and their reactions to recent events during the course of the play. This has been a new and really exciting feature.⁴⁹

Wannous's refusal to 'insist on the inviolability of the published text' is an important feature of the play. He encouraged prospective producers to treat the café customers' dialogues as suggestions only, and to translate them from the standard Arabic in which they were written into the local colloquial form. However, as Wannous noted in an interview given in 1986, 'So far, the dialogues were translated literally and word-for-word, and this made the experience very poor and often led to the disintegration of the production'.⁵⁰ Thus Wannous's intention that the script should be no more than a blueprint for actual performances was frustrated by the directors' lack of imagination, reverence for the text and – despite Wannous's detailed elaboration of his ideas in the introduction – misunderstanding of the concept and principles of the theatre of politicisation.

Since *Jabir's Head* was never performed in a café, the following discussion will consider only the printed text and assume that the performance is given in a theatre. The action takes place on two levels: the story of Jabir and the comments of the customers on the events. The *hakawati*, an old man called Moa'nis, who can be seen to represent dispassionate objectivity – according to the stage directions, his face expresses 'a cool neutrality', which should be maintained throughout the performance⁵¹ – acts as a kind of chorus connecting these two planes. Wannous, however, constantly disrupts the historical distance separating the planes, so that the membrane

between them is never allowed to become opaque. The spectator is not permitted to believe that what he or she is watching is a reproduction of reality. Wannous's skill and inventiveness in achieving this effect show how much he had learned and understood since the failed experiment of *Evening Party*, not only about Brecht's theatrical ideas, but also about how the *Verfremdungseffekt* could be effectively relocated to an Arab context.

The customers are expecting to hear the *hakawati* tell the story of the illustrious warrior Caliph, Dhahir Baybars, one of the great heroes of Islam; the atmosphere of the café is one of '[...] relaxation, hookah smoke, folk songs on the radio and chatting customers. The waiter frequently moves around carrying tea or coffee throughout the performance'.⁵² The play begins with the customers demanding that the *hakawati* narrate the tale of Baybars, a story of victories, heroism, peace and prosperity, but Moa'nis declines. He insists that present circumstances demand a quite different tale, one that also dates from the thirteenth century but which is more relevant to the situation in which he and the customers find themselves. A story of betrayal and defeat must be told and the right lessons learned; only then can there be 'stories of happy days'.⁵³ It would be wrong to distract and mislead the audience with stories of victory, when, as Mua'ala remarks, 'chaos, turmoil, fear and oppression overshadowed the Arab countries in the late sixties [...]'.⁵⁴ On hearing the story of Jabir, the customers recognise the rightness of Moa'nis's decision: 'We are living that time [...] we experience its bitterness at every moment'.⁵⁵ In Wannous's view nothing had changed to improve the situation in the Arab world in the wake of the defeat of 1967.

Moa'nis begins to tell the story of the slave Jabir and his intervention in great affairs of state, while a group of actors in another corner of the café portray the events. Jabir's master, the Vizier al-'Alqami, wishes to send a letter to the King of Persia, Munkatim bin Dawoud, asking for his assistance in overthrowing the caliph. The enmity between the Caliph and the Vizier is presented as one of simple rivalry, as Wannous alters and simplifies the real historical situation so as not to distract the audience from its essentials. The Vizier believes that the Persians will make him ruler; in the event, as Abul-Hayja' remarks, 'he becomes a dog to the conquerors'.⁵⁶ He thinks of nothing but his own interests; the people, the city and the state are as nothing when weighed against his ambition. The parallels between the Vizier and certain rulers of the Arab world would have been obvious to Wannous's audience.

While the Vizier plots with one of his supporters, Prince Abdullatif, the Caliph is seeking to crush the Vizier and his faction. The Caliph is aware of the Vizier's plan to send a letter to the Persians, and he orders his soldiers to secure the city and thoroughly search any suspicious person. The minister's letter must not be allowed to reach Munkatim. Meanwhile, the people of the city go about their daily affairs oblivious of the approaching catastrophe, aware of the rivalry between the Caliph and his minister, but considering it none of their business. Here again Wannous is attempting to adopt a critical and analytical approach to the politics of his own time, and to illuminate his own and his fellow Arabs' situation by reference to an event that occurred six hundred years before. When the Caliph seals the city the citizens are perturbed, but their only thought is to go to the bakeries: 'We had better stock up with bread and stay in our houses'.⁵⁷ The people's passivity is illustrated by phrases such as 'As far as we're concerned, we have nothing to do with it [...], the best thing we can do is not to stick our necks out [...] We didn't see or hear a thing'.⁵⁸ As in *Evening Party*, proverbs are used to indicate the citizens' attitudes; here the one constantly repeated is 'Whoever marries our mother we call uncle'.⁵⁹

Jabir, the Vizier's slave, is now introduced. As Hourani explains, slavery was a status recognised by Islamic law, but free-born Muslims could not be enslaved. Slaves 'did not possess the full legal rights of free men, but the *shari'a* laid down that they should be treated with justice and kindness; [...] The relationship of master and slave could be a close one, and might continue to exist after the slave was freed: he might marry his master's daughter or conduct his business for him'.⁶⁰ Jabir is above all concerned with gaining his freedom and making his fortune, and, like his master, he has no scruples about the means employed, and is a complete opportunist who acts purely in his own self-interest. His relationship with al-'Alqami is not close, and he does not act out of loyalty to the Vizier. Wannous in no sense condemns him for this; why should a slave consider his master's welfare? But Jabir considers no one apart from himself and his beloved Zomorod, whom he wishes to be free to marry, and cares nothing for the other slaves or for the poor citizens of Baghdad. In spite of this, he is not an altogether unattractive figure. His counterparts can be found in folk tales all over the world: the young man of initiative who acts boldly and receives his just reward is a familiar character in, for example, the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm in Germany. But Wannous, it seems, is attempting to turn this tradition upside down by examining the context in which the adventure takes place and drawing very

different conclusions. There is no happy ending or reconciliation with the spectator; instead, as Abul-Hayja' observes, the play 'tries to rub salt in the wound so that the pain may benefit the sufferer'.⁶¹

Jabir hears that the Vizier will bestow great favours on anyone who manages to convey a letter to the King of Persia, and decides to undertake the journey. His attitude is that of a gambler: as he says to his friend Mansour, 'Every coin has two faces. The important thing is to bet on the winning face at the right time'.⁶² Mansour, an older and wiser slave, takes a very different view: his concern is with the fate of the city and its people.

MANSOUR: [...] If fire breaks out, the people of Baghdad will be the wood that feeds it.

JABIR: This fire will devour only the ones who start it [the Caliph and his Vizier]. Listen, why don't you warm yourself by the fire? You can avoid getting your fingers burned.

MANSOUR: We can't avoid it. We'll be drawn in and find ourselves in the midst of the flames. Eventually we'll pay the price.⁶³

Jabir refuses to heed his friend's warnings and presents his plan to the vizier. He proposes that his head be shaved and that al-'Alqami write the letter on his scalp. Then, once his hair has grown sufficiently to hide the message, he will journey to the Persian camp. Al-'Alqami is greatly impressed by this plan and immediately begins to execute it, and Jabir is placed in a dark room while his hair grows to prevent anyone reading the message. Zomorod secretly visits him there, and a love scene is enacted which is notable for its combination of tension, humour and direct expression of desire.

JABIR: I won't be long, and when I come back I'll embrace your sweet body and never let go [...].

ZOMOROD: [...] I'm scared Jabir. [...] I don't know why but my heart is fearful. I love you Jabir.

JABIR: Aah! I wish I was hearing this word in different circumstances! [...].

ZOMOROD: Can't you be decent?

JABIR: How can I be decent when the mere sight of you is an unbearable temptation! [...] When I come back I want to smell your perfume from the outskirts of Baghdad!⁶⁴

The Vizier promises that in the event of success Jabir will be freed, and permitted to marry Zomorod, who is a slave to al-'Alqami's wife, and given a substantial sum of money.

Jabir steals out of the city, even though, as one of his fellow slaves remarks, it is 'harder to leave Baghdad than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle – as hard as Judgment Day'⁶⁵ because the Caliph's soldiers 'will even tear bread in pieces looking for messages'.⁶⁶ Jabir reaches the Persian camp; his head is shaved, the king reads the letter, and the young man waits for further orders. He has carried out his part of the bargain; if the Vizier triumphs, he will obtain his reward. He now discovers, however, that he is to receive his reward immediately. The King whispers in his son's ear, the executioner is summoned and Jabir is beheaded in accordance with the Vizier's final sentence: 'To ensure that this matter remains confidential and secret, kill the bearer of the letter without delay'.⁶⁷ The Persian forces are let into the city and, in the words of the *hakawati*:

It was the most dreadful day that Baghdad had ever witnessed. Sorrow overshadowed the city and death spread, pervasive as air. Many were killed without knowing what was going on around them. The streets were filled with corpses, ruins and the wounded. That day night fell early on Baghdad, bringing misfortunes and horrors. Darkness spread and penetrated; it seemed like the end of the world.⁶⁸

At the end of the scene Zomorod appears, carrying the head of her beloved Jabir and bitterly lamenting.

The play is drawing to an end, and as in *The King's Elephant*, the actors address the audience:

GROUP: We speak to you from the gloomy night of Baghdad. We speak to you from the night of disasters, death and corpses. You say: 'We don't care; *Whoever marries our mother we call uncle*'. No one can prevent you from saying that. Everyone has his own opinion, and you say, this is our opinion. But if you look around some day, you will find yourselves strangers in your own homes.

CUSTOMER 4: If you are gnawed by hunger and you find yourselves without houses.

ZOMOROD: If heads roll and death welcomes you at the threshold of gloomy morning.

GROUP: If a heavy night full of woes falls upon you, don't forget that you said once: 'We don't care, *Whoever marries our mother we call uncle*'.⁶⁹

Thus the play can be seen as an appeal to Wannous's audience to free themselves of their habitual passivity and fatalism, otherwise a calamity might befall them as it befell the inhabitants of old Baghdad. Of course this message was originally intended to be delivered to the de-politicised, defeated individuals who frequented the cheap cafés of Damascus, but it applies equally well to the more sophisticated audiences of the capital's theatres.

The play is not over yet, however. As the actors leave the café one upbraids the old *hakawati*, telling him that unless he starts telling the story of Baybars the following evening the customers will boycott his stories: 'Tell us whether you'll start tomorrow or not'.⁷⁰ Moa'nis surveys the audience and calmly replies 'I don't know [...] that depends on you'.⁷¹ Wannous seems to be challenging the audience to act; according to Abul-Hayja' the play 'is an attempt at total mobilization'.⁷² This mobilization, however, is surely not a direct call to arms as *Evening Party* was; rather, perhaps it is a mobilization of the critical powers of the audience that will lead to effective collective action. *Jabir's Head* does not attempt to be revolutionary in itself, but through discharging its duty to educate and enlighten it can be 'a rehearsal of revolution',⁷³ as Boal contends the theatre can be. When Moa'nis insists that the audience is not yet ready to hear tales of heroism and victory, Wannous seems to be implying that were the *hakawati* to give the public what it wants he would be no better than the director in *Evening Party*, who attempts to deceive the audience by feeding it glorifications of the Syrian army's 'victories' in the 1967 war. Moa'nis, whose 'face is like the old pages of the old book he carries under his arm',⁷⁴ can be seen as a personification of the spirit of objective analysis. He is a prophetic figure, not because he predicts the future on the basis of some arcane vision, but because he is able to say what will happen if people continue to behave as they do. He is a witness, a reporter, illuminating present and future through a careful reading of the past.

The last lines of the play emphasise the fact that the audience's future is in its own hands.

CUSTOMER 1: Tomorrow, we will not accept any story other than the story of Dhahir Baybars.
CUSTOMER 2: Tomorrow, may God give us relief. Well, shall we go home to bed?
CUSTOMERS (*various voices*): Yes by God, it is bedtime.
WAITER (*while preparing to close the café, he addresses the real audience*): You as well, good night, and 'to tomorrow'.⁷⁵

'To tomorrow' is difficult to translate, since in colloquial Arabic it means merely 'See you tomorrow' while here, in standard Arabic, it has a connotation closer to the phrase 'Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life', embodying both a challenge and an incitement to action. Wannous seems to be throwing down the gauntlet to the audience: 'What will you do with your tomorrow? Will you begin the struggle for change?'

Although Jabir has certain traits in common with Zakaria in *The King's Elephant*, they are different in several respects. Zakaria becomes an opportunist when the people 'fail' him; his sense of his own superiority distances him from the people and he willingly becomes a servant of the regime. As for the people, they will get what they deserve. Jabir is an opportunist from the start. As a slave, he has no status and lives by his wits, owing loyalty to no one but himself, unlike his fellow slave Mansour. But while his thoughtlessness and selfishness are condemned, he is far from unsympathetic. He is not engaged in a brutal struggle for power like the Caliph and the Vizier, nor is he cold, manipulative and disdainful like Zakaria. The worlds of the two plays are also dissimilar. The regime in *The King's Elephant* is autocratic and centralised in the hands of the King; in *Jabir's Head* it is unstable, disputed and at odds with itself. In presenting a stable and an unstable regime Wannous refer to the two basic types of despotism disfiguring politics in the Arab world.

In *Jabir's Head* Wannous spells out his message in various ways. The main means of delivering his ideas is the *hakawati* Moa'nis, who is not so much a character as a representative of clear-eyed judgment and, unlike his real-life counterparts, less an entertainer than a truth-teller. But he is not a pedantic historian concerned with scrupulous accuracy, and his purpose is to reveal and underline the significance of the events presented by the actors. Like Abdulghani in *Evening Party*, he insists that victory should not be talked about in time of defeat, insisting that while it is not good to take refuge and comfort in the past, history should be used to gain an understanding

of the present. As for Baybars, Wannous seems to be implying that he will reappear when the people have the courage and determination to act together to change their fate. They will be the Baybars of the future, but first they must put aside their fantasies of Baybars the lone hero, router of the Mongol hordes. While *Jabir's Head* is a strongly didactic work – as didactic as *The King's Elephant* – Wannous treats his subject with a considerable degree of subtlety, not least in the character of Jabir himself. Jabir is no cardboard villain; as we have noted, he is seen by most of the café's customers as a hero whom they can admire for his boldness and ingenuity. In many ways, he is a typical folk hero of the kind portrayed in the *Thousand and One Nights*. His untimely death is seen by the customers as a subversion of the folk tradition and a betrayal of their expectations:

CUSTOMER 2: What is this?

CUSTOMER 3: Are they going to behead him? After all he's done!

CUSTOMER 1: It shouldn't be allowed.

CUSTOMER 2: We can't accept this.

CUSTOMER 1: It's so unfair.

CUSTOMER 3: He should be rewarded for his cleverness.⁷⁶

Here the play seems to be directly challenging the audience's prejudices and encouraging them to think critically about their reaction to such folk material. To see Jabir as a hero is to accept the political status quo and admire acts of individual enterprise that enrich the person concerned and leave society untouched. Such stories have the effect of legitimising unjust societies because exceptional individuals are able to rise to the 'top of the heap'. Wannous, it seems, wants none of this. Jabir, despite his ingenuity and boldness, is to be condemned for his selfishness and reckless disregard for the consequences of his behaviour for the poor citizens of Baghdad. Wannous said in a 1986 interview, 'It was always important in my plays to teach my audience through presenting a negative example to them. I take a vice and then magnify its consequences. In that way I present a practical lesson in my plays'.⁷⁷ Those among the customers who approve of Jabir's actions are also presented as negative examples. Nevertheless there is a danger that the audience will feel empathy with Jabir, who as al Souleman points out, is the only individualised character,⁷⁸ they may also feel sympathy for him and sorrow at his betrayal. Wannous continually attempts to prevent the audience becoming too emotionally involved by disrupting the

flow of the action. For example, actors bring on props while the *hakawati* is speaking, then begin acting on cue; the waiter pauses to gape at the action and is told to get out of the way by the customers; Jabir and Mansour argue, then Jabir addresses the customers; the executioner cuts off Jabir's head, then gives it to the *hakawati*.

If Moa'nis is hardly a character at all, and the Caliph, the Vizier and Jabir are negative examples, are there any positive examples in *Jabir's Head*? Mansour is certainly one. He is reasonable, wise and honourable, and despite being Jabir's friend, has no illusions about Jabir's proposed actions, of which he strongly disapproves. His unbending nature does not endear him to the café customers, and his remonstrations, not only with Jabir but also with the citizens, have no effect. It is hard not to see in Mansour a spokesman for Wannous's own views and a kind of self-portrait. Mansour's counterpart among the customers is Customer 4; in fact the two seem to be identical in every essential respect, despite being separated by a distance of six centuries. Customer 4 is a man of strong principles who has been persecuted for his political beliefs and actions, even being imprisoned several times. Nothing has made him falter, and he is the only customer who sees through Jabir:

CUSTOMER 2: Jabir is so clever and bold, he could win the throne of Baghdad.

CUSTOMER 4: Don't exaggerate. He is only a sharp lad seizing his opportunity.

CUSTOMER 3: What if he is? Let him be. That's the way to reach the highest positions.

CUSTOMER 4: Sometimes the lowest positions, if you did but know it.⁷⁹

Wannous seems to be arguing that when the status quo is corrupt and brutal, any individual who seeks to profit by the opportunities it provides, be he vizier or slave, will sooner or later be destroyed. The only solution, the play implies, lies in clear-sighted collective action.

What of Wannous's ideal of a two-way dialogue between actors and audience? Since *Jabir's Head* was never performed in a café this ideal was not put to the test, and indeed Wannous had abandoned the mechanical notion he had attempted to realise in *Evening Party*. In the introduction to *Jabir's Head*, he mainly focuses on the need to find similarities between events in the past and present in order to cast light upon the future. The dialogue would not be a literal one, but would be completed in the minds of the audience as long as they could be prevented from merely consuming

the drama as passive spectators. To this end *Jabir's Head* is conceived as a blueprint capable of being modified according to the circumstances of its production. But although it could have been 'performed anywhere', unlike *Evening Party*, it is in the Arab world that it would have had most resonance. It is a great pity that it has not been performed more often and was, as Abul-Hayja' remarks, overshadowed by the controversy surrounding *Evening Party*, to which it is arguably superior as drama. Some critics have found flaws in the play: Badawi, in a brief comment, remarks that it works well 'despite the author's inability to resist the temptation to bring in a series of very brief scenes depicting the abject misery of the common people, totally neglected by their rulers who are selfishly engaged in their struggle for power'.⁸⁰ These short scenes, which I have not discussed, are perhaps superfluous to the action but show the plight of the poorest citizens and provide a context for the play's arguments. Also it should be noted that the world of *Jabir's Head* is almost exclusively male – it was originally intended for customers of an Arab café, who would all have been men – and the only significant female character, Zomorod, is a passive figure who plays no part in initiating events. Nevertheless the play remains a powerful and effective counterblast to the official government-sponsored theatre of propaganda which it was seeking to challenge. For Wannous, however, the question of audience participation was still a burning issue, and he was to return to it in his next play, which addresses the relationship between the theatre and the authorities seeking to control it.

Soirée with Abu Khaleel al-Qabani (A long play in two acts)

Wannous wrote *Sahra ma' Abu Khaleel al-Qabani (Soirée with Abu Khaleel al-Qabani, 1972)*, conscious that *Jabir's Head* had been banned in Syria before the first performance and that attempts to stage it elsewhere had been unsatisfactory. Moreover, Wannous had not been able to create a movement of like-minded Arab dramatists. The first Damascus Festival of Theatre Arts, held in the Syrian capital in 1969, at which *Poor Seller* and *The King's Elephant* had been performed, had not proved fruitful: his colleagues had been generally indifferent to his promotion of the theatre of politicisation, being more concerned with their careers and the practicalities of production, and his enemies, 'Ersan among them, had criticised his project. None of Wannous's contemporaries, either in Syria or in the Arab world, has attempted to

create a theatre of politicisation. To name only Syrian dramatists: Walid Ikhlası has continued to write existentialist plays; 'Ersan produces propaganda; Muhammad al-Maghout writes political cabarets which satirise the Arab world's political situation in a general way and in unlinked scenes; Farhan Bulbul's work does not take any specific line, each play stands by itself. In addition, the introduction to *Jabir's Head*, in which Wannous had set out his ideas, had failed to generate any enthusiasm among his fellow playwrights and the play itself had not been the success outside Syria that *Evening Party* had been. Its successful performance in the GDR would not take place until the following year. Despite these disappointments, Wannous was determined to continue his efforts to politicise the theatre audience through an examination of the relevance the past might have for the present and the future. It is significant, however, that he should have chosen as his subject the difficulties one of his predecessors experienced at the hands of a vociferous and narrow-minded pressure group.

While the events depicted in *Jabir's Head* had taken place six centuries before, in *Al-Qabani* Wannous turned to relatively recent history. He regarded the Syrian playwright as an important precursor, not least because in the 1870s and early 1880s he had attempted to create a specifically Arab theatre in the teeth of opposition from socially conservative forces. Although, as the American scholar Edward Ziter points out, al-Qabani's reputation as a pioneer of Syrian theatre is now secure, to the extent that the most experimental of the National Theatre's three venues bears his name,⁸¹ during his lifetime he was a controversial figure in Syria and was eventually hounded out of the country by a group of clerics disturbed and enraged by the threat to social order embodied in his theatre. Despite early support from the Ottoman authorities, notably the reforming governor Midhat Pasha, al-Qabani fell foul of the religious establishment in Damascus and was eventually compelled to follow his predecessor al-Naqqash (d. 1855) and set up his theatre in the more conducive environment offered by the Khedive Isma'il in Egypt. The leader of the imams opposed to al-Qabani was a conservative cleric, Sa'id al-Ghabra, who considered al-Qabani's theatre 'a massacre committed against Islam's teachings, honour and virtue'.⁸² The danger was the more severe because the notables of Damascus flocked to al-Qabani's playhouse and al-Ghabra accused the playwright of promoting heterodoxy and moral corruption. Unable to persuade the governor, al-Ghabra decided to take his complaint to the Sultan in Istanbul. According to the critic Mohammad Najm, his petition ran as follows: 'Come to our aid, we beg you, oh commander of the

faithful. Debauchery and immorality have spread throughout our lands; honour has been violated, virtue has died, decency has been slain and women mix freely with men'.⁸³ The Sultan was sympathetic and al-Ghabra returned to Damascus, determined to put an end to al-Qabani's influence. He undertook a campaign of persecution, which included instigating gangs of youths to follow the playwright, jeering and singing insulting songs, and culminated in the burning down of his theatre.⁸⁴ In 1884 al-Qabani and his troupe finally left for Egypt.

In writing *Al-Qabani*, Wannous was not merely concerned to 'present life as it was in Syria towards the end of the nineteenth century'⁸⁵ and to draw comparisons with the very similar conditions obtaining in the Arab world in his own time. He was particularly interested in al-Qabani's theatre, and especially in the way that the earlier playwright had understood and catered for the mentality of the late-nineteenth-century Arab audience, which was not the well-behaved, inhibited one of ninety years later; as Wannous himself remarks in a 1977 essay, in the 1880s spectators would spontaneously comment on the events taking place on stage and even call for the ending to be changed if it did not meet with their approval⁸⁶ (they would probably have demanded a very different ending to *Jabir's Head*). Al-Qabani tolerated and perhaps even welcomed such behaviour, and although his plays were entertainments rather than the serious drama Wannous espoused, the later playwright admired the free and open reciprocity between actors and audience: '[...] improvisation and spontaneity were at their peak in those days'.⁸⁷ As the historian Mohammed Ali has noted, al-Qabani remained uninfluenced by European methods; he never travelled to Europe and mainly drew on Arab material, creating his theatre almost from scratch.⁸⁸ Like al-Naqqash in Lebanon, he made use of tales from the *One Thousand and One Nights*, and both dramatists wrote works featuring the illustrious Abbasid caliph, Haroun al-Rashid. Al-Naqqash's play was to be used and radically subverted by Wannous in *The King's the King*; al-Qabani's portrayal of the caliph was one of the transgressions that aroused the ire of al-Ghabra. It is this play that forms a part of Wannous's soirée.

It is important to understand that Wannous's *Al-Qabani* is not a play in the usual sense any more than *Evening Party* was. Wannous calls it a soirée and divides it 'into two basic levels. The first level consists of the 'play within a play'; that is, al-Qabani's *Qout Alquloub*. The second level consists of the story of al-Qabani from the beginnings of his theatrical life until the religious bigots burned down his theatre, as

we learn from the history books'.⁸⁹ Thus Wannous divides the stage into two areas: back of stage and front of stage, where levels one and two respectively take place. *Qout Alquloub* is not performed in its entirety; the first and last scenes are given, as well as a central episode. Wannous probably intended these scenes to be performed in a style as close as possible to what would have been experienced by a Damascus audience of the 1880s. Although this is not indicated in the stage directions, it is a reasonable assumption, since Wannous provides that audience: a number of actors occupy chairs next to the *Qout Alquloub* area and behave as spectators of that time would have done – shouting criticism and encouragement, eating snacks and so on – in marked contrast to the bourgeois restraint of the National Theatre audience of the 1970s. Front of stage is divided into three areas: one occupied by al-Qabani, one by al-Ghabra, and one by a group of young revolutionaries, rebels against Ottoman authority, who argue and debate in a café. Their dialogue provides the third level – that of Wannous's own political commentary.

The dramaturgy of *Al-Qabani* is decidedly non-empathetic. With each play of this middle period Wannous appears to be gaining a stronger understanding of Brecht and, more importantly, a greater confidence in using Brecht's ideas to create works that are at once more personal and more suited to his audience. Again a *hakawati*-type figure is used to mediate between stage and auditorium. However, it should be noted that Wannous does not expect any interaction between the audience and the stage, but provides a positive example of audience behaviour in the shape of the unruly yet strongly engaged nineteenth-century spectators, who would have been used to watching the bawdy 'shadow play' rather than genteel entertainment. The *hakawati* in *Al-Qabani* has several functions; he is given the Arabic title *munadi* (literally 'caller') and is a combination of barker, usher and ticket seller. While selling tickets to al-Qabani's nineteenth-century audience, who are dressed in traditional costume, he calls the real audience to enter the auditorium. When the real audience is seated, the caller announces the start of the play, which is more or less equally divided between the scenes from *Qout Alquloub* and those illustrating al-Qabani's struggles with al-Ghabra and his group. As we have said, the work can hardly be called a play in the conventional sense; Wannous himself suggests in the preface that the play might benefit from abridgement, and Badawi comments that *Al-Qabani* is a sprawling work that 'lacks the necessary dramatic concentration'.⁹⁰ This rather misses the point, since dramatic concentration was not what Wannous was aiming at. What we have instead

is a consistently thought-provoking theatrical game, much more sophisticated than those Wannous had attempted in the early part of his career, and in which instruction and entertainment are inextricably enmeshed. The audience's attention is continually being diverted from one part of the stage to another, as the action jumps from the *One Thousand and One Nights* story to the scenes featuring al-Qabani or al-Ghabra – or the discussions of the young revolutionaries. All of this is accomplished simply by means of lighting changes, some of which are very rapid, with only two or three lines being spoken before the scene changes.

The first scene is also the first scene of *Qout Alquloub*; we see a desert landscape and a cave, in which a young man is sitting - Ghanim bin Ayoub, the hero of the tale. Having journeyed from Baghdad to attend a friend's funeral, he has stayed out too late and the city gates are shut, and now he has no choice but to sleep in the cave. Suddenly he hears a confusion of voices and quickly hides, and men enter carrying a large box, set it down and exit. Ghanim opens the box and is surprised to find it contains a beautiful young woman, Qout Alquloub, a slave girl, with whom the Caliph, Haroun al-Rashid, has fallen passionately in love. Zubeida, his wife, driven by jealousy, has had the girl drugged and carried outside the city, and the effects of the drug permit an amorous conversation to take place between the two young people, which triggers a barrage of comments from the 1880s audience, and a heated argument ensues which causes the actors to halt the action until the 'audience' calms down. This uninhibited atmosphere, Wannous seems to be suggesting, is one in which the theatre of politicisation could flourish, as opposed to the stiff manners of the playhouses of his own time. The action then transfers to front of stage, which Wannous divides into three parts, as we have noted. These compartments do not have a fixed function, however, and the actors move from one to another throughout the play in order to disrupt any sense of cohesion. Moreover, any tendency towards empathy is subverted by the actors taking part in *Qout Alquloub*: they exchange opinions on their roles and rehearse in front of the audience, prepare their costumes on stage, claim to have forgotten their lines and read from the text, asking al-Qabani for instructions. A beardless young man plays the slave girl, wearing a man's costume when rehearsing, then changing to female dress when playing the role.

The action at front of stage illustrates the conditions obtaining in the Damascus of al-Qabani's time, while the action to the rear illustrates the nineteenth-century audience's reactions to the story of Qout Alquloub, which ends with the

marriage of the young couple. Al-Qabani's story ends with the burning of his playhouse, and the play examines the nature of social and cultural change and explores the motives of those who oppose change. Wannous emphasises, by analogy, that the structure and policies of the ruling regime have changed little since the late nineteenth century.

More than any of Wannous's other plays, *Al-Qabani* focuses on the role of the creative artist in an oppressive environment. Wannous is concerned with al-Qabani's attempts, as an isolated individual, to resist the pressure exerted by the religious elite in Damascus. As in all Wannous's dramas of politicisation, such individual actions are doomed to failure, since it is a central tenet of his political creed that only collective action can achieve substantial results. Thus he includes the young revolutionaries, who discuss the possibilities of collective action, and it is they, not al-Qabani, who represent the future of resistance to the authorities. They recognise that merely changing governors will achieve nothing; here the play seems to be commenting on recent Syrian history:

ABDULRAHIM: Maybe the new governor will make things better for us. The situation is very bad: the cost of living is unbearable, and trade is dead!

ANWAR: Oh, we've seen plenty of governors, and each time we hoped for a better life. Changing governors is no use if we don't change the laws.⁹¹

Anwar and Abdulrahim lament that their country is known in the West as 'the sick man of Europe'⁹² and Anwar concludes that the root of their degradation lies in the fact that they are deprived of self-determination. United action might achieve the goal of political change and bring about a measure of democracy. Wannous, however, like al-Qabani, was not an activist but a man of letters, and so he continued his efforts to reform the Arab theatre, adapting what he had learned from Brecht to an Arab context, and seeking always to politicise his audience; he still hoped that theatre could play a part in changing the world. He gives Anwar lines that can be read as expressing his own opinions:

ANWAR: Theatre resists fanaticism and encourages people to unite. This is crucial and essential for the progress of nations.⁹³

Nevertheless, according to Mua'ala, 'Wannous's theatre at this time was criticised by his rivals for its pessimism'.⁹⁴ It is difficult not to see a strong connection between al-Qabani and Wannous himself, and al-Ghabra seems to have certain aspects in common with 'Ersan. 'Ersan had indirectly accused Wannous of being overly influenced by Europe, and al-Ghabra levels the same charge against al-Qabani:

AL-GHABRA: People are blind. They quickly accept heresies, as is the case with acting in Syria now. Al-Qabani abandons his own religion, and adopts another from Europe. Islam condemns acting; it is heresy, forbidden, dissipation and shamelessness.⁹⁵

Thus *Al-Qabani* can be read as a summary of the position in which Wannous found himself in the early 1970s. He apparently saw himself as misunderstood, isolated, lacking a responsive audience and beset by enemies. He was condemned to act as an individual, yet he was convinced that individual action, no matter how principled or heroic, could not succeed. Nevertheless he was determined not to compromise his beliefs, and it was for this reason that the figure of al-Qabani held such an attraction for him. Despite the gulf separating his political views from those of the earlier playwright, who had no intention of undermining the Ottoman regime and indeed would end each performance with a song in praise of the Sultan, Wannous admired his refusal to be intimidated by the forces of reaction. It may well be that the play makes too much of al-Qabani's spirit of resistance; Badawi accuses Wannous of idealising his career in Syria.⁹⁶ Even so, al-Qabani was undeniably important as a pioneer, and significant for Wannous for two main reasons: his attempt to create an Arab theatre which accepted the participation of the audience, and the challenge his works posed to the conservative religious forces that dominated the cultural life of Damascus.

As in the case of *The King's Elephant*, Wannous strongly denied that *Al-Qabani* was negative or pessimistic.⁹⁷ In his 1986 interview with al-Hafar Wannous defended his position: 'Al-Qabani is a fighter, and I'm not presenting him as a negative figure or a failure. There are fighters in my theatre, and al-Qabani and the enlightened youths in the play are among them. [...] Yes, his theatre was burned, but he continued, his theatre continued, and the process of enlightenment continued'.⁹⁸ Wannous believed that the interventions of al-Qabani's audience helped them to learn

and appreciate the art of free speech; when such interaction occurs, he later wrote, 'the impact is greater than that achieved by the words of the text'.⁹⁹ Wannous's hopes of finding such an audience had been frustrated, and it is interesting to contrast his experience with that of Boal, who writes of his audiences in the people's theatres of Latin America:

Popular audiences are interested in experimenting, in rehearsing, and they abhor the 'closed' spectacles. In those cases they try to enter into a dialogue with the actors, to interrupt the action, to ask for explanations without waiting politely for the end of the play. Contrary to the bourgeois code of manners, the people's code allows and encourages the spectator to ask questions, to dialogue, to participate.¹⁰⁰

As for the challenge posed by a free theatre to the powers that be, Wannous believed that an important function of drama was to strip away the mask that concealed the true face of oppression, to cast down idols and to show the popular audience that their rulers were no more than human. It should be remembered that al-Qabani was working at a time when feudalism was entrenched in Syria, and that Wannous as a boy had heard many tales of the landlords' arrogance and cruelty dating from just this period of history. In the 1880s, the feudal lords and their allies among the clergy were fearful of the effect freedom of speech might have on the stability of the social order, and saw the new medium of the theatre as a threat to their privileged position. This is confirmed by the fact that, as Wannous points out in *Manifestos*, the obscenities of the shadow play were tolerated while the more chaste encounters of the new theatre were not: 'The shadow play popular in Syria was full of bawdy stories, indecent words, immoral scenes [...] and nobody ever protested, while the love scenes in al-Qabani's works were considered a grave matter, even a disaster'.¹⁰¹ Al-Qabani's enemies regarded the new medium as a dangerous import from the dynamic societies of Western Europe, and were appalled by the representation of illustrious personages on stage in stories drawn from the popular narrative tradition. Mua'ala comments:

Al-Qabani's experiment coincided with the beginnings of the Arab renaissance. It embodied the social transformation which was taking place at that time. The early bourgeoisie began to occupy their social and economic position at the expense of the feudal lords. As the feudal lords had made allies of the religious imams by giving them money and

estates, it was natural that the religious reactionaries struck al-Qabani and his theatre a fatal blow on the pretext that one of his actors had portrayed the Caliph of the Muslims, Haroun al-Rashid, in one of his works. Such allegations were an attempt to halt the process of social transformation.¹⁰²

In *Al-Qabani*, Wannous dramatises this situation:

AL-GHABRA: The most dangerous corruption is the innovation of al-Qabani. [...]

ANOTHER IMAM: I know they perform stories full of immoral things.

AL-GHABRA: No, no. That evil pales in comparison. They personify Haroun al-Rashid.

ANOTHER IMAM: Oh! Haroun al-Rashid!

AL-GHABRA: Yes. Haroun al-Rashid, the Caliph of the Muslims. Imagine! Those paupers stand and personify the Caliphs of the Muslims before the people in order to undermine their position and solemnity. If this continues, it will have the gravest consequences and implications.[...] Imagine! Those impudent and insignificant creatures dare to portray the Caliphs of the Muslims and pious people.¹⁰³

As Wannous wrote later:

Kings, ministers and princes found that being personified on stage was eroding the significance of their noble status. For that reason, acting was very dangerous and contributed, even if al-Qabani did not realise it, to undermining that decadent class.¹⁰⁴

Thus Wannous took the view that al-Qabani's theatre was potentially revolutionary, or at least subversive, in effect, even if al-Qabani himself was far from being a revolutionary.

The reverse was true in Wannous's case. Feudalism had been abolished and the reactionary clergy appeared to have been swept away, and Wannous found himself a revolutionary without the possibility of a revolution. His plays no longer provoked outrage – the ban on *Evening Party* had been lifted in 1971 – and the people were not about to rise against their oppressors. There was no danger that he would be driven out of Syria or physically attacked. While al-Qabani's work had been criticised for political reasons under the guise of moral condemnation, Wannous was subjected to ridicule by 'Ersan and his group, and, what was worse, ignored by most of his

fellow playwrights. The success that Wannous was to enjoy in the GDR was initially gratifying, but served to prove that he was no longer a danger to Assad's authority. Indeed, his work was now promoted by the Syrian government for its own interests, and was used to disseminate the illusion that Assad was a benevolent ruler who positively encouraged dissent. Three years after *Jabir's Head* had been warmly received in the GDR, *Al-Qabani* was performed at the Berlin Theatre Festival under the director who had been responsible for producing *Jabir's Head*: the Syrian As'ad Faddah. He notes that participants at the subsequent seminar, who included members of the Berliner Ensemble, were surprised that Wannous had been able to make good use of Brecht's theories without copying him. The play's use of lighting to prevent empathetic identification was a particular focus of comment; according to Faddah, the division of the stage coupled with the use of lighting changes was new to the East Germans.¹⁰⁵ The enthusiasm of the participants was all the more remarkable as the play had been performed in Arabic, with a simultaneous German commentary.

Al-Qabani was also performed in various countries of the Arab world, but Wannous appears to have become disillusioned; it seemed that the theatre of politicisation had failed in its key aim. Wannous was admired by a number of critics and fellow writers, but his work had had no impact on the wider world of Arab politics. He withdrew from writing and fell silent for five years; when he took up his pen again, however, it was to produce a work that would synthesise his main concerns in a remarkable way.

Conclusions

The three plays discussed in this chapter are all examples of the theatre of politicisation, yet each is very different and individual in its approach; taken together they show how elastic the concept was in practice. *The King's Elephant* is strongly, even crudely, didactic; *Jabir's Head* and *Al-Qabani* are far more substantial and of much greater interest for a variety of reasons. *Jabir's Head* is a richly complex piece which makes effective use of the *hakawati*, endowing him with an unprecedented importance and gravity. Brechtian techniques are used with skill and understanding, the main negative example is presented with a degree of sympathy, and the audience's expectations are subverted through a telling analysis of the significance and function of the folk-hero. *Al-Qabani* is a more personal statement; it is at once a challenge to authority, an attack on bigotry and a plea that the artist's autonomy should be

acknowledged by his or her community. It is, moreover, a call to the audience to engage more fully with the stage – in Boal's words, 'to ask questions, to dialogue, to participate'. The play is also notable for the dramaturgical innovations which so impressed the audience at the Berlin Theatre Festival in 1976.

Wannous's achievements in these two plays are considerable. In them he advanced beyond the methods and concerns of *Evening Party*, which, despite many telling moments, was tied to a specific historical context and relied on techniques which Wannous had not made his own. The scholar of theory and criticism Sarah Bryant-Bertail notes that 'The dramaturgical principles of epic theatre are often mistakenly reduced to a style, a set of familiar techniques: placards, direct addresses to the audience, songs out of character, and non-histrionic acting'.¹⁰⁶ In *Jabir's Head* and *Al-Qabani*, Wannous showed that he had profited from Serrault's advice and had managed to create a theatre that was closer to the hearts of his Arab audience and that was also original; Abul-Hayja's comments on *Jabir's Head* testify to Wannous's success in that regard. Moreover, Wannous challenges the audience by refusing to resolve the conflict articulated by the drama. In *Jabir's Head* especially, as Abul-Hayja remarks, there is no 'reconciliation in a passive world of resolved conflict',¹⁰⁷ and, to quote Boal on the epic theatre, 'the contradiction emerges with greater clarity'.¹⁰⁸ Another feature of these two plays is Wannous's democratic, cooperative approach to productions. There are no definitive versions, and they can be adapted to suit the circumstances. In this respect also, Wannous remained true to his principles.

Why, then, did Wannous temporarily abandon his vocation after completing *Al-Qabani*? Perhaps the answer lies, at least partially, in the clues to be found in the plays themselves as well as in his other writings. In the theory of the theatre of politicisation the emphasis was on politicisation, but Wannous found that in practice it was the theatre that was the focus of attention. The truth seems to be that the challenge he issued to his audience – not as playgoers but as citizens – demanded too much. They did not respond to his exhortations that they should arise from their slumbers and take collective political action. Wannous himself seems to have been aware of their unwillingness, as *Al-Qabani* is far less challenging than *Jabir's Head*. The people were not about to revolt; perhaps they would never be ready. The circumstances were not propitious; the time was not right. Wannous was to return to this theme in *The King's the King*.

While the Syrian authorities made use of Wannous's plays, they were not prepared to permit work in a more 'objective' medium to be seen by the public. Thus the documentary film, *Daily Life in a Syrian Village*, on which Wannous collaborated with the Syrian director Omar Amiralay, was banned on its completion in 1975. Wannous had written the script while working on *Al-Qabani*, and it was the newer medium of film that outraged the censor in Wannous's case, just as the theatre had offended al-Ghabra. The film is still banned in Syria.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Wannous felt he had failed. His plays were not reaching the audience he had sought to influence with *Evening Party*: the poor and downtrodden, the dispossessed refugee, the potential revolutionary. He became an unwilling tool of the regime after 1973, when his plays were used to enhance Syria's reputation abroad. This lesson in political realities must have been hard for him to come to terms with; as his widow remarked, 'In the late 60s and the 70s Wannous was a political romantic'.¹⁰⁹ Wannous wanted to found a theatrical movement that would spark a political movement. In the Middle Eastern context this was naive, and a case of putting the cart before the horse. It was surely galling for Wannous to find that as a dramatist he was becoming as useful to the state as his old enemy 'Ersan. Whatever the reason, Wannous wrote nothing more for the stage until 1977. The play he completed that year, however, has claims to be considered his masterpiece.

- ¹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), pp. 232-233. (Wannous published this interview in 1970 in *Al-Ma'rafah* Magazine issue no. 103).
- ² Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 170.
- ³ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 96.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28. (1970 essay). *Baladi ya Baldi* represented Egypt in 1969 in Damascus Arts Festival.
- ⁵ Farouq Ohan, 'Who Seats Who in the Bottle'. Syrian Ministry of Culture (Set) (1997), *The First Echoes of Leaving*. Damascus. Syrian Ministry of Culture. p. 100.
- ⁶ Mary Elias, 'Marks and Transformations in Saadallah Wannous's Journey', *Al-Tareeq* (February 1996), p. 98.
- ⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 97.
- ⁸ For an understanding of the role and function of this festival, see Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), pp. 51-53.
- ⁹ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 275.
- ¹⁰ Farouq Ohan, 'Who Seats Who in the Bottle'. Syrian Ministry of Culture (Set) (1997), *The First Echoes of Leaving*. Damascus. Syrian Ministry of Culture. p. 100.
- ¹¹ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), p. 434.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 438.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 443-444.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 445.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 447.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 449.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 450.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 450.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 451.
- ²⁰ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ²¹ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), p. 440.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 441.
- ²³ From a dialogue dated 1953; See John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001), p. 252.
- ²⁴ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), p. 440.
- ²⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 123.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ²⁷ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), p. 442.
- ²⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 127.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- ³⁰ See *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 43.
- ³¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 458.
- ³² Nawwaf Abul-Hayja', 'Something from the Theatre of Wannous', in Boullata, Issa J. (ed) (1980). *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980*. (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 353.
- ³³ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 502.
- ³⁴ See Muhammad bin Shaker al-Katbi, *Death's Losses*, Vol. 2 (Beirut: Sader Publishing House, 1974), p. 313.

- ³⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 44.
- ³⁶ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 359.
- ³⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 45.
- ³⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 117.
- ³⁹ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ⁴⁰ Issa J. Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980* (Washington D.C: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 355.
- ⁴¹ Unpublished interview with the Syrian director and actor As'ad Faddah, 20 March 2005.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Mary Elias, 'Marks and Transformations in Saadallah Wannous's Journey', *Al-Tareeq* (February 1996), pp. 101-102.
- ⁴⁴ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ⁴⁵ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ⁴⁶ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ⁴⁷ See Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 84.
- ⁴⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 42.
- ⁴⁹ Issa J. Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980* (Washington D.C: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 353.
- ⁵⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), pp. 117-118.
- ⁵¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 50.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 46.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 53.
- ⁵⁴ Nadim Mua'ala, *The Theatrical Literature in Syria: Its Evolution and Development*, (Damascus: Alwehdh Press and Publication Foundation, 1986), p. 135.
- ⁵⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 53.
- ⁵⁶ Issa J. Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980* (Washington D.C: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 355.
- ⁵⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 73.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 82-83.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 83.
- ⁶⁰ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 116.
- ⁶¹ Issa J. Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980* (Washington D.C: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 354.
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- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 63.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 134-138
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 89.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 92.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 164.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 165-166.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 166-167.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 167.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., p. 167.
- ⁷² Issa J. Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980* (Washington D.C: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 355.
- ⁷³ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 155.

- ⁷⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 50.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 168.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 162.
- ⁷⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 126.
- ⁷⁸ Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 55.
- ⁷⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head*, fourth edition (Lebanon: Al-Adab Publication House, 1989), p. 117.
- ⁸⁰ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 276.
- ⁸¹ Edward Ziter, *Theatricalized History: Perception, Expectation, Evidence and Application* (Seminar) (<http://www.astr.umd.edu/conference2003/Seminar07.htm#Edward>), accessed on 12 December 2004.
- ⁸² Nadim Mua'ala, *The Theatrical Literature in Syria: Its Evolution and Development*, (Damascus: Alwehdh Press and Publication Foundation, 1986), p. 9.
- ⁸³ Muhammad Najm, *The Play in the Modern Arab Theatre: 1947-1914* (Beirut: Al-Thaqafa Publishing House, 1967), p. 68.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 70.
- ⁸⁵ Farouq Ohan, 'Who Seats Who in the Bottle'. Syrian Ministry of Culture (Set), *The First Echoes of Leaving*. (Damascus: Syrian Ministry of Culture, 1997), p. 104.
- ⁸⁶ See Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 74.
- ⁸⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 77.
- ⁸⁸ See Mohamed Kurd Ali, *Sham's Plans*, Vol. 4 (Beirut, El-Ilm Lil-Malaen Publication House, 1970) p. 102.
- ⁸⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, volume one (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 585-586.
- ⁹⁰ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 277.
- ⁹¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 627.
- ⁹² Ibid., p. 635.
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. 654.
- ⁹⁴ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ⁹⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 628.
- ⁹⁶ See M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 277.
- ⁹⁷ Brecht too, had been criticised for negativity in East Germany after the Second World War. Willet notes that there was a 'widely held view there that Brecht's plays were not 'positive' and optimistic enough; they were not relevant to current problems'. John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001), p. 229; for Brecht's replay to criticism of *Der Hofmeister* see p. 230.
- ⁹⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 124.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 74.
- ¹⁰⁰ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 142.
- ¹⁰¹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 63.
- ¹⁰² Nadim Mua'ala, *The Theatrical Literature in Syria: Its Evolution and Development*, (Damascus: Alwehdh Press and Publication Foundation, 1986), pp. 9-10.
- ¹⁰³ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 656
- ¹⁰⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 75.

¹⁰⁵ From an unpublished interview with the Syrian director and actor As'ad Faddah, 20 March 2005.

¹⁰⁶ Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theatre: The Brechtian Legacy* (United States: Camden House, 2000), p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ Issa J. Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980* (Washington D.C: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 355.

¹⁰⁸ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 95.

¹⁰⁹ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.

CHAPTER 5

The Culmination of Wannous's Epic Theatre

It seems likely that Wannous had become so thoroughly disillusioned with the possibilities of theatre as a vehicle for social and political change that he decided to write no more plays after completing *Al-Qabani*. He wrote in 1972 that he was profoundly disappointed with the reaction to his work, admitting that his ambition to change the world had been a dream, that he was a marginal figure, and that his words were being wasted on a few cultured theatregoers.¹ He seemed to have failed on all fronts: appreciated by a small elite, his work was not reaching those for whom it was primarily intended; those who did see it were entertained and moved by it, and even perhaps made to think more deeply about the political situation in their countries, but nowhere was this increased consciousness translated into action; and his ambition to create a movement of like-minded dramatists had come to nothing. Even while at work on *Al-Qabani*, however, Wannous became involved in writing for a new medium – the cinema.

The cinema had been an important medium of communication and entertainment in the Arab world for at least a generation, and afforded access to a far greater public than the theatre ever could. In 1971 Wannous was presented with the opportunity to show his fellow Arabs the realities of daily life in a poor village. Having spent his childhood in Huseen Albahr and witnessed the harsh conditions of its people at first hand, this seems to have been a project dear to his heart.

The film was to be a joint undertaking, conducted in collaboration with his friend, the well-known Syrian director Omar Amiralay. It was to be a documentary entitled *Alhaiah fe Qariah Soriah (Daily Life in a Syrian Village)* and shooting took place in the village of Al-Moilih on three occasions: April and June 1971, and April 1972; Wannous wrote the script during these twelve months. The documentary was feature length (90 minutes) and by all accounts was an unflinching and uncompromising portrayal of the peasants' struggle for existence. Its power did not

only depend on Wannous's script; Amiralay's images also conveyed the harshness of the villagers' lives. Nadim Mua'ala has drawn attention to a particularly telling piece of editing: 'The movie shows the village's lands cracking because of the lack of water, and then the image fades to be replaced by a shot of the feet of one of the villagers, also cracked because of the hardship of his life. This scene really touched me'.²

Such naked, if poetic realism was too much for the Syrian authorities. As we have noted, the film was banned by the censors in 1975 and has never been shown.³ Apart from the government officials, the only people granted a viewing were a small circle of Wannous's and Amiralay's friends, some of whom were affronted. Wannous wrote an article, 'Memoir of a Banned Movie', shortly after the screening, which shows that *Daily Life* was made in accordance with the central ethos of the theatre of politicisation, which he had not abandoned. In this 1975 article, Wannous notes that while some of those present at the screening were enthusiastic (Mua'ala among them), 'Some attacked it harshly. They considered it a gift to [Syria's] enemies! Their attitude needs to be discussed because they don't understand Art's responsibilities'.⁴ Wannous expanded on this point:

I wonder, are we helping our enemy when we confront ourselves and reveal our flaws? Certainly not! It is the enemy who doesn't want us to progress. Confronting oneself is the first step towards developing oneself. How can we change reality if we don't probe its structure and its problems! If you really want to change reality you need to know it deeply; but if you are not interested in bringing about change, then this is just what the enemy is looking for!⁵

The article contains a sentence which could stand as a key concept of the theatre of politicisation in its battle against the officially sponsored theatre of the Arab world: 'presenting only the positive side of life is misleading propaganda'.⁶ The last line of the film states 'This is our country, and the viewer who is not willing to dip his hand into the mud is a coward and a traitor'.⁷ It is hardly surprising that such outspokenness disturbed the censors and disconcerted even some of Wannous's friends.

In 1973, Wannous travelled to France, where he worked as a journalist, interviewing many eminent cultural figures. Jean Genet was a particularly stimulating interviewee, advising Wannous to turn his back on Western models, which he

considered moribund, and to create his own culture.⁸ Translation, according to Genet, would lead to imitation as long as the models were stronger than the translators. In other words, translations of foreign works would be slavishly copied by writers who did not have a firm grounding in their own tradition. Genet's advice recalls that given by Bernard Dort in 1968, but while Dort had stressed the continuing relevance of Brecht, Genet was acerbically dismissive. Asked by Wannous whether any communist artist could serve as a model, Genet replied 'There is a playwright called Brecht, who wasted his life in a miserable way. Apart from *The Threepenny Opera* he produced nothing of importance. His plays merely repeat ideas that were already known: the ideas of the October Revolution. The artist's task is to read the future'.⁹ Genet insisted that Brecht was useless to revolutionaries in the developing world: '[...] his work doesn't provide anything new. Brecht is great, but he's a fake, and reading him is a waste of time'.¹⁰ It seems that Wannous decided to ignore this piece of advice; he can have had no wish to rid himself of Brecht's influence, which is to be felt throughout *The King's the King*.

It was probably during this stay in Paris that Wannous interviewed the distinguished actor-director Jean-Louis Barrault (the date is uncertain). Barrault had been director of the Odeon when it had been occupied by students in May 1968, 'to his despair and confusion'.¹¹ Despite Barrault's credentials as an anti-Nazi (he had hidden members of the underground on the set of the celebrated film *Les Enfants du Paradis* in 1945) and his radical sympathies (he had been dismissed from his post as director of the Théâtre de France for siding with the students and strikers in 1968),¹² Wannous conducted the interview in an extremely aggressive manner and added many damning comments.¹³ He calls Barrault's theatre 'the theatre of illusion and the lie',¹⁴ which had been exposed by the 1968 occupation and had now come to an end; he claims that, thankfully, both classical and Absurd drama had disappeared;¹⁵ and that in any case every great dramatist since Aeschylus had involved himself in his society's political struggle;¹⁶ he accuses Barrault of attempting to stand above the fray and of therefore serving the ruling class and ignoring both history and the plight of the downtrodden masses.¹⁷ Wannous's condemnation of any modern theatre other than that following the Brechtian model is evident throughout the interview; Ionesco and the other Absurdists he calls 'buffoonery', which audiences no longer want.¹⁸ As for Barrault, 'his words pretended purity but gave off the stink of corruption'.¹⁹ The interview is valuable in that it gives us a clear picture of Wannous's political

certainty, self-righteousness, genuine hunger for justice and social transformation, and scorn of those who thought differently and did not see theatre as a tool for political change. Barrault appears bewildered and chagrined by Wannous's assault, and tries to defend drama as poetry and a conception of art as 'nobler than politics'.²⁰ The lack of communication between the two men is total. Wannous likens Barrault to Sisyphus²¹ – a very ironic comment in hindsight, since Wannous was to identify himself with that hero of futility in the 1990s.

Encouraged by the success of the production of *Jabir's Head* in the GDR, Wannous returned to Syria and wrote a series of articles on Genet, Arrabal and others, while helping with the editing of *Daily Life*. The censors' banning of the film and its confiscation were a severe blow but at least resulted in the spirited defence of his principles and methods contained in the 'Memoir of a Banned Movie'. Wannous continued working as a journalist, but it seems that the theatre was beginning to call to him once again. *The King's the King* was written in Lebanon while Wannous was culture and art editor on the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Safir* ('The Ambassador'), but was published in Syria in the government newspaper *Al-Thawra* ('The Revolution'). This time he had no trouble with the censors. Wannous was now established as a cultural asset to be paraded abroad as an advertisement for the regime's cultural liberalism. Since he was not an activist and belonged to no party, not even the Syrian Communist Party, his politics seem to have been tolerated as long as his expression of them had no effect among the people. *Daily Life* had been banned presumably because it was too inflammatory and could have caused unrest if seen by large audiences. Mua'ala commented: 'Certainly [in Syria] censors are toughest when it comes to TV; then cinema. I believe this is because they are more influential media than theatre'.²² It is hard to avoid the impression that Wannous was considered a relatively harmless romantic, a utopian dreamer, whose dreams could easily be kept within bounds by the authorities, and whose international reputation among the Arab intelligentsia could be used to enhance the regime's self-glorifying image. *The King's the King* makes ironic reference to the ineffectuality of the solitary dreamer.

After the war of 1973, Syria and Egypt had come to an agreement with Israel which had been brokered by the USA. The Arab leaders had claimed victory, and both had consolidated their power. Wannous wrote *The King's the King* with full awareness of the betrayals and compromises apparently necessitated by the realpolitik practised by both Syria and Egypt. The play provides evidence that he believed that

these unhappy events were generated by the very nature of the social and political systems obtaining not only in dictatorial military states, but in every society divided into classes. The only possible solution, the play suggests, is to sweep away all such societies, to abolish hierarchies of every kind, and to progress towards a truly classless community. The play was, it seems, born of desperation, and, as we shall see, after writing it Wannous succumbed to despair.

The world of *The King's the King* is that of a state where the links between the regime and the dominant social groups, apparently stable, might turn out to be extremely fragile. As Hourani observes, this is a recurrent pattern in Middle Eastern history, and his description of the conditions obtaining during the 1970s cannot be bettered as a succinct introduction to the political world of the play: 'The classes which dominated the structure of wealth and social power in the cities wanted peace, order and freedom of economic activity, and would support a regime so long as it seemed to be giving them what they wanted; but they would not lift a finger to save it, and would accept its successor if it seemed likely to follow a similar policy'.²³ Despite its serious subject matter, the play is far from solemn, and Wannous makes use of wit, irony and farce to transform the original tale for his own purposes. *The King's the King* is based on a story from the *Thousand and One Nights* entitled *The Sleeper and the Vigilant*, which centres on a caprice of Haroun al-Rashid (764-809), Caliph of Baghdad. The original tale is as follows: one night, the Caliph decides to disguise himself and the executioner, Masrour, as two merchants, and to make a tour of the quarters of the capital in order to learn something of his subjects' conditions. During the tour, he is greatly entertained on meeting a foolish man called Abu al-Hassan, who states that if he could be Caliph even for one day, he would be capable of setting things to rights in a way that Haroun al-Rashid cannot, in spite of all his wisdom. The Caliph agrees with Masrour that they should stupefy Abu al-Hassan by drugging his food and then have him conveyed to the palace. When Abu al-Hassan wakes the next morning, he is astonished to find himself the Caliph of Baghdad; he is dressed as a king and set on the throne, and the courtiers, instructed by Haroun al-Rashid, treat Abu al-Hassan as if he were Caliph. The dupe is bewildered; the boundaries between dream and reality seem to him no longer fixed and dependable. By the end of the day, Abu al-Hassan has done nothing that a real caliph would do; rather, his disturbed behaviour reveals his perplexity, incapacity and ignorance of affairs of state and rulership. His 'caliphate' ended, he is drugged once again and

carried back to his house, and in the morning he feels torn between dream and reality, and acknowledges that reality is greater than his limited capabilities could imagine and his dreams could conceive. Thus Scheherazade's tale restores the status quo, assuring Shahrayar that he is secure on his throne, since the wise and prudent ruler cannot be threatened by the ambitions of his inferiors. Wannous's play, however, radically contradicts this comforting moral, suggesting that the personal merits or faults of a ruler cannot legitimate his rule or guarantee his power; the ruler himself is faceless, and without his 'gown and crown' he is nothing.

The structure of *The King's the King* is relatively straightforward. The play consists of nine narrative or dramatic scenes, framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue and interrupted by four interludes. There are thirteen characters in all, two of whom – the young revolutionaries Zahid and 'Ubayd – effectively have the role of *hakawati*, orchestrating the action and commenting on its significance. Abu al-Hassan the fool becomes Abu 'Izza the bankrupt merchant, and Haroun al-Rashid becomes the mighty King Fakhreddin. As in *Jabir's Head*, Wannous subverts the audience's expectations of the genre for his own purposes, here sharpening and darkening the genial mockery of the original well-loved tale, which he turns on its head to create a distancing effect, intended to make his audience think about their situation, in accordance with the principles of the theatre of politicisation. As Allen notes in his introduction to the English translation of the play, Wannous calls for the actors to use a very histrionic approach and for the costumes to be elaborate, 'with the purpose of exaggerating social differences and pointing to the play's primary message'.²⁴ *The King's the King* is a rich and complex work which contains numerous echoes of Wannous's earlier plays, but although students of Wannous's theatre may find these references interesting they are not important for an understanding of the play. The 'game' Wannous introduces in the Prologue can be fully appreciated without any knowledge of his previous work.

Posters are used throughout the play to indicate the substance of each scene (except for the Epilogue), and the first of these refers to the play as a whole; the poster for the Prologue (unaccountably omitted in the translation) reads *THE KING'S THE KING: A THEATRICAL GAME ANALYSING THE AUTHORITY STRUCTURE OF REGIMES OF DISGUISE AND OWNERSHIP*. The poster is one of a number of devices taken from Brecht's theatre and used in *The King's the King*; Wannous leaves the details of construction and operation to the director. Wannous still believed that

Brecht could serve as a useful model for a non-European playwright who sought to educate the audience politically and incite them to action. Wannous instructs that the posters should be read aloud by either 'Ubayd or Zahid or by both in unison, thus emphasising their role 'as leaders of the game'.²⁵ The idea of the game is reiterated throughout the play: either the theatrical game in which the actors engage or the game played by the King on the 'fool' Abu 'Izza.

The poster is read while the actors enter in costume 'like a group of circus players, with agile, acrobatic movements'.²⁶ Two characters, the Head Merchant Shahbandar and Shaykh Taha, who it later emerges are the powers behind the throne, 'stand in a corner pulling on puppet strings'²⁷ – perhaps a rather crude and obvious image. 'Ubayd and Zahid separate from the group and begin the game.

'UBAYD (*Shouting to be heard*): This is a game?

ABU 'IZZA: This is a game.

KING: We're the players...

*The word "game" is now repeated by everyone, in varying tones and in disorder. 'UBAYD beats on the floor with a stick he carries. Silence.*²⁸

A dialogue on the words 'allowed' and 'forbidden' ensues, in which Wannous articulates in an almost pantomimic fashion the situation confronting not only Arab societies but all class societies, and which had painful relevance to himself as a writer.

'URQUB (*Standing at the head of the first group*): Allowed!

EXECUTIONER (*Standing at the head of the second group*): Forbidden!

'URQUB: Allowed!

EXECUTIONER: Forbidden!

'URQUB: The war between the Allowed and the Forbidden is as old as Adam. We the rabble, the mob, the plebes – we have hundreds of these names – we never tire of asking for the Allowed.

EXECUTIONER: And we the great – the kings, the princes and the lords – we have a hundred such names – we never tire of asking for the Forbidden. [...]

'URQUB: To dream...

EXECUTIONER: Allowed.

'URQUB: To fancy.

EXECUTIONER: Allowed.

'URQUB: To dream...

EXECUTIONER: Allowed... but carefully!

'URQUB: To let dream become reality...

EXECUTIONER: Not allowed.

'URQUB: Or fancy become riot...

EXECUTIONER: Not allowed.

'URQUB: Or collective dreams become action...

EXECUTIONER: Not allowed.²⁹

This dialogue is followed immediately by the main section of the Prologue, in which each character presents himself or herself and speaks directly of his or her dream, which is 'allowed', although, as 'Urqub, Abu 'Izza's servant, remarks, 'these are only individual dreams, which can never unite and act'.³⁰ Abu Izza's dream is to become Sultan of the realm, in order to gain the power to wreak his revenge on his enemies, Taha and Shahbandar, who have ruined him. His language makes it clear that he is not so much a simpleton as delusional, and that he is prey to sadistic fantasies:

ABU 'IZZA: [...] Ah, Taha! That treacherous, devious Shaykh... He shall ride backwards on a donkey in the midst of everyone, and then shall be hanged in the unfurled cloth of his turban! And that great merchant, Shahbandar, along with the silk dealers who control the markets and regulate goods and trade, they shall be flogged to my heart's content and then they shall hang, but not before I've taken over all they possess, money and land.³¹

The play contains many examples of this kind of language, and an atmosphere of sadomasochism pervades the entire text, whether blatant or in the form of relationships of dominance and submission, which can be found in as early a work as *Corpse on the Pavement*. Wannous here seems to be intending to portray the unpleasant reality behind the apparent stability of hierarchical societies based on class stratification, oppression and inequality.

Abu 'Izza speaks of the 'thousand favourites' he will exchange for his 'hag of a wife',³² who then has her turn to complain of his drunken illusions, their poverty, and her daughter's ruined marriage prospects. If only, she dreams, she could obtain an audience with the King. The King himself and his Vizier speak next.

VIZIER: I am Barbir, the famous Vizier. My only wish is to stand by the King: to help and accommodate, direct policy and offer advice.

KING: I am the dream, the dream itself. What do I want? (*Languidly:*) Absolutely nothing. My Vizier, I'm bored. (*King withdraws, followed by vizier.*)³³

After Maymun, the chamberlain, has revealed that his dream is to 'cross my Lord's mind when he's bored',³⁴ 'Izza, the young daughter of Abu 'Izza and Umm 'Izza, speaks 'shyly, with dreamy eyes' of the advent of her hero.

'Izza: [...] He'll come from far, far away and enter the city like the wind or a storm. His face will be sun and marble, and his glances will glint like daggers. [...] Like the wind or a storm he shall cut his way to me. His face then will be a green meadow, and his glances wet grass. We'll exchange no words: just passion meeting passion, two locks of hair in a braid... then we'll go away – where to I don't know, but far, far away, to some place where the air is clean, where there's joy and light, where people are equal and don't die by the score like dogs, of hunger and insults...³⁵

'Izza's language here is unlike that of anyone else in the play, and recalls the poetic utterances of Khidra in *Unknown Messenger*; her fate is to be as dismal as that of Khidra at the hands of Hassan, although unlike Khidra she is a 'real' character, not a symbolic one. Wannous later makes clear that her fantasy of a lone warrior who will 'cut through the city, purging its pestilent air and purifying its cruelty'³⁶ can never become reality; the only hope lies in collective action, which, of course, is 'not allowed'.

The executioner now has his turn, and his speech, as is fitting, exults in the sadistic enjoyment – and the status – he derives from his calling.

EXECUTIONER: [...] Oh the ecstasy of it all, when I let fall that ax of mine, when the head goes tumbling off, when the blood spurts out in gushing fountains! It's more than ecstasy... The sensual pleasure is absolutely indescribable... The King himself had a taste of this pleasure once. I don't know what gave him the idea of playing executioner, but the smoothness of his movement showed that he was enjoying that ecstatic moment no end. I could see his face lit up with jealousy... If I lose this job I'm finished... What else can I be? ... Nothing: shadow or mere dust.³⁷

The reference to the King's enjoyment will be grimly echoed in a later scene, after Abu 'Izza has assumed power, and the play contains many ironic echoes of this kind, which serve to enhance its coherence as drama and to increase the audience's pleasure

in recognising them. They also reinforce the main theme: that social being determines thought and action.

‘Urqub tells how he has remained faithful to Abu ‘Izza, who has exploited him and swallowed up all his savings. ‘Urqub, as a prudent man, has recorded all these debts, although it is by no means clear how he has managed to amass enough to pay for his master’s heroic consumption of alcohol. Abu ‘Izza, like ‘Eleawah in *Gush of Blood*, is a drunkard and so highly unsympathetic to a Muslim audience. ‘Urqub, like his master, has ideas above his station: ‘[...] it’s just ridiculous that he should be the master and I the servant’.³⁸ ‘Urqub, however, has one overriding reason to stay with Abu ‘Izza: he is ‘burning with desire’ for Abu ‘Izza’s daughter.³⁹ Unfortunately for ‘Urqub, Izza finds him repulsive.

Taha and Shahbandar, the representatives of religion and commerce, have no dream other than that their power should continue to control events and persons – even the King himself.

SHAYKH TAHA and MERCHANT (*Together*): We, from
pulpit and *souk*, / Hold the string and hook.

SHAYKH TAHA: One string for the rabble...

MERCHANT: Another for trade and crops...

SHAYKH TAHA and MERCHANT And third for palace,
King, and politics. We, from pulpit and *souk*, / Hold
the string and hook.⁴⁰

All the characters have now presented themselves, with the exception of the Police Chief, whose confrontation with Abu ‘Izza as King is a key scene, and Zahid and ‘Ubayd. These two now don their disguises, and the notion of disguise is central to *The King’s the King*; the play suggests that every member of a class society is consciously or unconsciously – or both simultaneously – in disguise. It is the dream of these revolutionaries that someday we will all, as free people, enjoy life without disguises.

‘UBAYD, *helped by ZAHID, places a cushion up the back
of his shirt to look like a hunchbacked beggar.
ZAHID slings a porter’s rope around his shoulder.*

‘UBAYD: As for us, we’d better sew our lips together and
not part with a single thought that crosses our minds.
ZAHID: In this tale we’ll keep to a corner, as we do in life.

'UBAYD: We'll appear here and there, but only in brief interludes, and certainly outside the movement of the game.

ZAHID: Our lips will be closed tightly on our dreams, which we'll never reveal. At least, not now... (*Police whistles are heard.*)

'UBAYD: Let's go.⁴¹

Scene One takes place in the throne room, which, apart from the ornate throne on its dais, 'is cold and empty, exuding an atmosphere of barren magnificence, unreal and inhuman'.⁴² This atmosphere is enhanced by the appearance of the King and his Vizier, who look like bundles of coloured cloth. These costumes emphasise the impersonality of their roles. Maymun stands by attentively, eyes cast down. The King dismisses the royal band; he is bored. The early part of this scene emphasises the King's arrogance and complacency, his vanity and love of luxury, which he feels is only his due: 'How often has this land had a king like me?' [...] 'Sometimes I feel this country doesn't deserve me'.⁴³ If *The King's the King* were the tragedy of an individual, the King's complacency would be the flaw that leads to nemesis; he dismisses the Vizier's warning:

VIZIER: The notables met yesterday to choose gifts for Coronation Day. They also drafted a few suggestions regarding the next stage...

KING: Don't they ever get tired of drafting suggestions?

VIZIER: They're concerned over the laxity they see in things. They're afraid that it might grow and pose grave danger to His Majesty and themselves.

KING: His Majesty has long left grave danger behind. He will not allow a few bubbles here and there to disturb him.⁴⁴

It is made clear later that the King took power by force; now he clearly believes that merely by occupying the throne he can guarantee his state's security. He has forgotten that the price of tyranny is eternal vigilance, and has convinced himself that he is ruler by virtue of his own personal qualities. Throne, sceptre and crown take their lustre from his personality; without him they are nothing. The play, however, demonstrates the precise opposite. With nothing to do, the King finds life tedious. Chess, concubines, parties, even the attentions of Maymun – the epitome of the sycophantic parasite – none of these can relieve his ennui. Then the King has an idea. To the Vizier's consternation, he proposes going into the city in disguise. Barbir is

worried, but he masks his anxiety and accedes to his sovereign's order, and the King decides that he wants to visit a certain person they have both met before:

KING: Do you remember that man we promised to call on,
for an evening of singing and fun?

VIZIER: That fool who dreams of power and revenge on his
many enemies?

KING: That's the one! What is his name?

VIZIER: Abu... Abu 'Izza, I think.

KING: We'll visit him tonight. You'll see what fun the King
has in store for you...⁴⁵

The King is ready to be amused by Abu 'Izza's wretched condition, because, as he says, such people's 'stinking lives are more interesting than anything a court jester could imagine or invent'.⁴⁶ Now it is not clear, and it is not explained, what form the 'violent savage fun' the King is envisaging will eventually take. If he is merely intending to act maliciously, like Haroun al-Rashid in the original tale, the statement does not make sense. Perhaps the fun will be at his courtiers' expense; perhaps he intends to punish Abu 'Izza. We do not know, and this is surely a flaw, albeit a minor one. The savage fun, of course, will be enjoyed by Abu 'Izza in his role as king – and by the audience who witness it.

The King must remove his cloak in order to disguise himself, and at this point Wannous alludes to a key theme: that the trappings of power are not merely symbolic of the power of those in authority. In a sense they actually constitute that power. They are the disguise which is universally recognised as conferring authority, and without them the King is no longer the King and the Vizier is no longer the Vizier. Barbir understands this, the King does not. Throughout the play Barbir acts as a kind of *hakawati*, not directly like 'Ubayd and Zahid, but indirectly. He never steps outside the action as they do, but his comments show that he is very aware of the significance of what might appear to be trivial events.

VIZIER: How does my Lord feel when this awe-inspiring
cloak slips off his shoulders?

KING: A little lighter.

VIZIER: Is that all?

KING: What a question! Yes, that's all.

VIZIER (*Taking his cloak off*): I – I must admit that when I
take my cloak off I feel ... well, like my body's
softer. You may laugh at me, but the fact is that my

legs give way – or rather, the ground becomes less solid beneath me.⁴⁷

The next scene does not take place in Abu 'Izza's house, as the audience might expect; rather, it is an interlude, the first of four, in which Zahid and 'Ubayd discuss the progress of the revolution. These two characters are in some ways problematic, because of the way Wannous presents them; they are both inside and outside the action, and Wannous seems to have difficulty resolving this dual role. This applies particularly to 'Ubayd, who is fond of 'Izza, in whose house he is staying. The girl has taken pity on him and he is able to use the house as a convenient hiding place. It should be remembered that he and Zahid are members of a clandestine revolutionary organisation, and that he is disguised as a hunchbacked beggar. In this first interlude Zahid and 'Ubayd are both in character; neither addresses the audience directly. The function of the interlude is to present certain ideas important to the play as a whole. The problem is that, compared with the vitality of the preceding scene, the presentation of the ideas is wooden and, as characters, the two revolutionaries are the least interesting of any in the play. Although in Paris in 1968 Wannous had become familiar with the speech of revolutionary activists, their dialogue seems unconvincing and is on occasion even clumsy; 'Ubayd has the unfortunate tendency to talk like a textbook:

'UBAYD: I'm fairly certain we won't be able to count on any servants. They're a special, complicated case. It would be the logical thing for them to be on our side but in actual fact they're not. Their masters' lives fascinate them and leave them in a state of imbalance, swinging between humble obedience and secret longing to become copies of their masters... but we're not here to discuss that. What have you got for me?⁴⁸

Servants are being discussed here because 'Ubayd has told Zahid that 'Urqub, obviously enraged by Izza's kindness toward the poor beggar, hates and would like to trap him in some way. His opinion is that servants in general are not to be trusted.

Zahid and 'Ubayd continue to plan their group's tactics. 'Ubayd begs alms from a passer by, who angrily pushes him away with the words 'Some day you'll be begging with knives and daggers!⁴⁹ Zahid comments, 'That'll be the end of begging' and 'Ubayd replies 'And the end of a long history of painful masquerade'.⁵⁰ The idea

of the masquerade, closely related to that of disguise, will be elaborated by 'Ubayd in the second interlude. Towards the end of the first interlude 'Ubayd is given a speech which seems to be applicable to Middle Eastern politics, although its implications may be more general in scope:

'UBAYD: [...] There *is* a feeling of hardship and disillusionment. The people are becoming more and more resentful; their fear and misery are growing worse. But the contradictions aren't yet *ripe* enough! I'm telling you – and please pass this on to our doubting friends – that the King has only one course to follow: more terror and repression.⁵¹

'Ubayd's words point forward to events later in the play.

After this lesson in politics, the action moves to Abu 'Izza's house. The King and the Vizier have not yet arrived; 'Urqub attempts to woo 'Izza, but she rejects his advances with loathing. A dialogue now ensues between 'Urqub and Abu 'Izza, who announces that he has just ascended the throne; this part of scene two broadly prefigures what will happen when Abu 'Izza ascends the throne in reality. The tone is farcical, and the dialogue emphasises that Abu 'Izza's deranged fantasies are, to any sane observer, clear evidence of madness. But the play suggests that the perceptions of an observer are determined by social conditions, and one passage in particular looks forward to the point in the play when Abu 'Izza, unchanged physically, is glorified as the mighty monarch Fakhreddin, all his defects having become invisible. In hindsight the irony of this exchange is obvious:

ABU 'IZZA: [...] Examine my features, my eyes... Tell me what you see. ('URQUB *holds* ABU 'IZZA *by the ears and turns his face harshly to the right and left.*) Take a good look, 'Urqub...

'URQUB: Ah yes...What do I see?... Two distraught eyes, inhabited by two giants and a retinue of *djinn*. I see dusty skin, with pores that exude the Yellow Disease. I see a beard that...

ABU 'IZZA: Forget my beard. Tell me about my features.

'URQUB: The only features I can see are those of disease and old age.

ABU 'IZZA: (*pulling his face back and pushing him away*): This man's blind! These are royal features! Can't you see them? Look at them! ...The cheeks are shining

like stars... Light radiates from the eyes... When I saw them in the mirror I nearly went blind!

'URQUB: Plebs can't perceive such features.

ABU 'IZZA: Now I understand! You've been blinded by anger! I never thought the truth could hurt so much... You know how I feel about commoners and crowds. Their very smell in the marketplace makes me sick. Touching them gives me a rash all over my body. Nevertheless, for old time's sake, His Royal Majesty has decreed that you be the Vizier.

'URQUB: Master! Please hold me! I'm about to faint with joy!

ABU 'IZZA: Man, pull yourself together.

'URQUB: Well, it isn't every day that a person becomes a Vizier... (*Looking at his master's face*): These features...

ABU 'IZZA: What about them?

'URQUB: They're radiating such a light and fire... I don't mind being burned by them.

ABU 'IZZA: You mean you see them?

'URQUB: Yes, ever since I became Vizier.⁵²

Several details elsewhere also prefigure later events, and Wannous's skill in this respect is one of the pleasures the play offers its audience. Another is the humour with which Wannous presents his characters, which grows darker and darker as the play progresses, and which adds to, rather than diminishes, the sense of danger that makes the piece so compelling. Only Zahid and 'Ubayd are exempted from this comedic treatment. Their roles as educators (*hakawati*) and revolutionaries are, Wannous implies, too serious for that. 'Izza too is not in any sense a comic figure. She is a victim of circumstance: her life is hateful to her, her dream of a heroic rescuer cannot be fulfilled, and her fate will be to be given to a man even more loathsome than 'Urqub.

'Urqub and Abu 'Izza now negotiate over a further loan, which the servant hopes will secure his marriage to 'Izza (it can be seen that 'Urqub and Jabir have certain features in common). While 'Urqub is away buying wine, Abu 'Izza fantasises on his bloody revenges on Taha and Shahbandar. 'Urqub returns and Abu 'Izza opens the bottle; at this point the mistress of the house, Umm 'Izza, returns. Berating both husband and servant, she complains that not even her own brother would help them; instead he wanted to rob them and turn them out of their house. Family loyalty evidently comes a poor second to the prospect of financial gain. Now the King and the Vizier arrive disguised as 'Mustapha' and 'Mahmoud'; it is arranged that Abu 'Izza

and 'Urqub are to go along with the two visitors, and Umm 'Izza and 'Izza are to present their grievances to the King the following day.

The second interlude takes place in Abu 'Izza's house, mostly between 'Izza and 'Ubayd. It might be called a love scene, except that 'Ubayd acts more like 'Izza's elder brother than a lover, although it is clear that the girl loves him. Wannous does not develop this relationship, and no more is heard of it; it seems to be superfluous to the action and its function is not clear – perhaps Wannous wishes to show that even dedicated revolutionaries are capable of tenderness. 'Izza herself could be dispensed with without doing violence to the play, since she is almost entirely passive and her function seems to be to demonstrate the futility of romantic dreams. She is connected in this respect to the customers in *Jabir's Head* and their fascination with the hero Baybars, but 'Ubayd does not attempt to dispel her illusions, merely speaking vaguely of the revolutionaries: 'No doubt they'll have a carefully worked-out plan, and they'll appear at the right time ...'⁵³ The notion of 'the right time' recurs at various points throughout the play.

The focus of this scene is not on exploring the young people's relationship but on the articulation of an important concept central to the play. 'Izza has seen through 'Ubayd's disguise and this gives him the opportunity to discourse on the masquerade. This speech is worth quoting in full, since it is possibly the most important in the whole play.

'UBAYD: Once upon a time – and that was a long, long time ago – there was a community of people who led a life that was as simple as a lovely song. They were all equal, and all free. They worked together on land they held in common; they worked as one hand, and as one family they all partook of the common wealth. They had all they needed to eat and wear. In those days, men's faces were lucid, and their eyes transparent. What was inside was outside: no one was devious, or malicious, or envious. Life, simple as it was, flowed like a clear stream, or a harmonious melody... But one day – and that day is already history – the song went off-key. One man – a stronger man, or, say, a craftier man – broke up the community's land and kept the larger share for himself. He set himself off from the others and stood apart. He was different; he got himself a fine, colourful gown; he changed the way he looked and adopted a new demeanour; he took a disguise; he

turned into a landowner. That was the beginning. Then he put on even finer garments and surrounded himself with pomp and magnificence. The landlord now turned into an overlord, a king: a logical extreme of the masquerade. From this developed an endless series of disguises. The simple, translucent life fell to pieces. The united community now became a host of masks divided: men disguised as princes and officers; other disguised as servants or slaves, as beggars or destitute vassals. Countless groups wore different masks and costumes and played a variety of roles. Some took on disguises in order to rule; some were forced into theirs so that they might serve and be ruled. And at the top stood the king – the noble descendant of that ingenious first inventor of the masquerade – who is the most attentive of all to his disguise. All this, my dear ‘Izza, happened a long time ago but has continued ever since. But it can’t last forever.⁵⁴

Here ‘Ubayd is articulating the view – albeit cast in heightened language – held by Marxist historians and anthropologists and espoused by Marx and Engels,⁵⁵ that the earliest human communities practised various forms of primitive communism, and it seems reasonable to suppose that this view of the development of history was strongly held by Wannous himself; ‘Ubayd here, although speaking to Izza, is playing the role of *hakawati* to the audience. ‘Izza responds with a question, which ‘Ubayd answers with his solution to the problem:

‘IZZA: (*Contemplatively*): But now how can this masquerade end? Will people’s eyes and faces ever be clear again?

‘UBAYD: We’re told in history books of one group that did get fed up with misery, hunger, and injustice ... They went into a furious rage, slaughtered their king, and ate him.

‘IZAA (*shocked*): Ate the king?

‘UBAYD: That’s what the history books tell us.

‘IZZA: Didn’t they get poisoned?

‘UBAYD: At first some had upset stomachs and got sick; but after a while they recovered and settled down to enjoy life without masks or disguises.⁵⁶

Wannous noted that he took the idea of killing and eating the king – the representative of the entire system of masquerade – from an anthropological work on the history of Fiji. Licentious and transgressive ceremonies were held whenever the islanders’ king

died. His death was considered to mean the temporary death of authority and the collapse of all laws and regulations, and so the people would hold celebrations in which all customary prohibitions were themselves prohibited. These purgative rites were confined to a few days, after which order was restored by the ascension of the new king to the throne.⁵⁷ 'Ubayd's parable presents the practices of a very different culture in the light of his own revolutionary aspirations: only by killing and eating the king, by sharing his power equally in a classless society, can the masquerade be finally abolished. Wannous intended this key idea to apply to all class societies, as he made clear in an article published in 1978: 'In *The King's the King* 'disguised regimes' and ownership mean class societies, especially contemporary bourgeois ones, whether the ruling system is military or civilian. It is wrong to think that I'm only criticising despotic [Middle] Eastern societies'.⁵⁸

In scene three we find ourselves back in the royal palace, Abu 'Izza is snoring loudly in the King's bedchamber, sleeping off the effects of the drug given him by 'Mustapha' and 'Mahmoud'. 'Mustapha' informs 'Urqub, much to his astonishment, that tomorrow his master is to be king for a day and that he, 'Urqub, will wear the Vizier's clothes. Barbir, for reasons explained earlier, is not at all happy at this news: 'Forgive me, sire. But even when I have my cloak on, I feel insubstantial ... How will I feel when I see that man wearing it?'⁵⁹ The King is unperturbed; the game is all the more interesting for being dangerous, and it will teach his courtiers that he alone is fitted to be king. '[...] come evening I'll laugh in everybody's face; and I'll have taught them a lesson about how important it is that the sovereign should fit his sovereignty, and that his sovereignty should fit the sovereign...'⁶⁰ Barbir is still nervous, but the King dismisses his objections. The Vizier, however, has a strong premonition of what is about to happen.

KING exits. MAHMOUD looks at him angrily and contemptuously as he goes.

MAHMOUD: The beginning of the end ... No king can afford to forget his ribbons, or to treat his robe and crown lightly ... Still, I mustn't allow the strings to slip from my fingers. What I must do is keep my robe; he can go to hell. I must think of some contingency plan...⁶¹

The poster for the third interlude reads REMEMBER, THIS IS A GAME. PLACE YOUR BETS⁶² – an echo of Jabir’s gambling with fate. As in the Prologue, ‘Urqub and the executioner are engaged in acrobatic movements,⁶³ while Zahid and ‘Ubayd oversee the proceedings, which are very brief, and consist of a fight between ‘Urqub and the executioner over the ‘new king’s’ loyalty – whether it will be to the commoners (‘Urqub) or to the elite (executioner). In scene four part one, Abu ‘Izza wakes up as a king. He is disconcerted to find himself in a splendid bed, dotingly attended by Maymun, who, it is clear, has been completely fooled by the substitution. Abu ‘Izza is convinced he is still dreaming and, of course, wishes never to wake up. Now ‘Urqub arrives dressed in the Vizier’s clothes; he assures his bewildered master that he is the mighty King Fakhreddin, and that ‘Urqub is not ‘Urqub – a ‘vulgar name’ – but Barbir, his Vizier. Unable to believe his senses, Abu ‘Izza (henceforward ‘the King’, while Fakhreddin and Barbir will be referred to as Mustapha and Mahmoud) asks ‘Urqub to slap him. Now fully awake, he begins to accept that he is indeed King, and in the following short scene, having been dressed as the monarch, he ceases to fear for his sanity; he assumes his role; his dream has come true.

ABU ‘IZZA: The light! The faces! I’m beginning to see ...
(places the crown on his head). [...]

ABU ‘IZZA: it seems as though I’ve just arrived here ... As though I’ve just been born ... I’m entering a huge hall, empty and spacious, flooded with a light that’s as fierce as daggers ... I’m alone!

‘URQUB: And here’s the mighty King’s sceptre.

ABU ‘IZZA *holds the sceptre; his feature assume a sombre look; his body becomes erect and his demeanour firm*. [...]

KING *(Beats on floor with sceptre [...])*: Now We shall proceed to the Throne Room, where We shall see to the affairs of state.⁶⁴

This moment of transformation is the turning-point of the drama, signified in the text by the replacement of ‘Abu ‘Izza’ by ‘King’ (‘‘Urqub’, however, remains ‘‘Urqub’).

In the first three parts of scene five, the new King grasps the reins of power with greater energy, determination and ruthlessness than the ex-king (for that is what he now is) ever displayed. In the first part, Maymun, emerging from the bedchamber, fails to recognise Mustapha and Mahmoud. Mustapha, who cannot believe that his

chamberlain has been so easily fooled, asks him to think again, in an exchange that recalls the one between Abu 'Izza and 'Urqub in scene two:

MUSTAPHA: Tell me, Maymun, did you look hard into
your Master's face?

MAYMUN: The questions you ask, sir! Who would dare
stare into the sun while it's shining?

MUSTAPHA: Well, my face then. Look at it carefully.
Look...

Maymun (*Impatiently*): I have, sir, and for much longer than
my time permits.

MUSTAPHA: And you don't recognise me?

MAYMUN: I'm sorry, but I don't remember seeing you
before.

MUSTAPHA: And these fingers? (*Showing him his hand*)
Don't you remember ever having touched them?

MAYMUN (*To MAHMOUD*): What is it with your friend?
Has he gone (*Pointing to his head*) round the bend?
Next he'll be telling me that he's the King ... Now
may I leave? My Lord and Master will be here any
minute. (*Moves away, shaking his head.*)⁶⁵

Mustapha, enraged, swears that he will be revenged on Maymun, calling him a fool and a prostitute (this is omitted in the translation). Maymun is obviously homosexual; this would indicate to a Muslim audience the decadence of the court. The comic treatment of Maymun is very different from that found in Wannous's late play *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (1994), where homosexuality is treated respectfully and sympathetically.

The King and 'Urqub now appear, and Mahmoud remarks on the King's confidence and 'Urqub's vulgar posturing. He cannot bear the sight of 'Urqub in his robes: 'He's wearing my skin ... I've lost my very skin ... I feel so weak...'.⁶⁶ 'Urqub introduces Mustapha and Mahmoud as 'two dervishes', and the King, not recognising them, agrees to take them into his service as jesters. There follows a dialogue between the King and 'Urqub, showing that the King has assumed the attitudes of a King by putting on the royal robes. He no longer thinks as Abu 'Izza did. 'Urqub broaches the subject of taking revenge on the King's enemies; that is, Taha and Shahbandar. The King, however, recognises that the Imam and the Head Merchant are his friends, supporters of his authority:

KING: What's come over you this morning? Are you trying to tell me that the very pillars of this realm are my archenemies? Do you want my state to collapse?

'URQUB: Heaven forbid, my Lord. But somehow I thought I once heard you speaking of revenge on certain enemies...

KING: When?

'URQUB: Yesterday, perhaps.⁶⁷

The influence of Brecht is obvious here. Circumstances have effected a profound change in Abu 'Izza; he is no longer who he was. Comparisons with Shen Te or Galy Gay, however, reveal significant differences, which will be discussed in due course; but it is worth mentioning here that while it is arguable that Shen Te never ceases to be Shen Te even when disguised as Shui Ta,⁶⁸ Abu 'Izza as king has completely forgotten his former life (although, with a strange inconsistency, he continues to call his Vizier 'Urqub). His psychological structure, however, is unaltered. Mahmoud makes the point that the King is not acting, since he is now completely identified with his role, and alludes to Mustapha's own transformation when he seized power:

MUSTAPHA: Who would have thought that he'd be such a good actor?

MAHMOUD: Who said he was acting?

MUSTAPHA: What is he doing then? Can a man change completely overnight?

MAHMOUD: Sometimes you don't need that long. Remember what happened some years ago?

MUSTAPHA: What happened?

MAHMOUD: More or less what's happening now...⁶⁹

Mustapha is encouraged by the arrival of the 'insolent and indifferent' Chief of Police, who he feels is sure to discover the substitution; but the King easily outwits the Chief by displaying the concern for the security of his realm that the ex-king had neglected. As he says, 'A king without suspicions is like a king without a throne'.⁷⁰ From this point onwards Mustapha becomes increasingly desperate, and his fears increase until he can no longer trust his senses and his mind gives way. Mahmoud, on the other hand, while commenting as a quasi-*hakawati* on the significance of the events, and criticising Mustapha's laxity when king, feels himself inexorably drawn to the new ruler. He admires his ruthlessness and acute understanding of the realities of power, and eventually abandons his former master. The King discovers the duplicity of the Chief of Police, who is unaware that the ex-king has been usurped, and gives

him the choice of either restoring order by capturing every last revolutionary or forfeiting his life. Mahmoud is delighted, and gives the now half-crazed Mustapha a lesson in politics:

MUSTAPHA: Can it be true? My own Chief of Police is double-crossing me! What's happening in my kingdom?

MAHMOUD: There are things happening that should make a king hang on tight to his sceptre and stay close to his vestments.

MUSTAPHA: You mean you've known all along?

MAHMOUD: Well, when I was Vizier and you were King, I often felt like slapping your face.

MUSTAPHA (*Failing to control himself any longer, grabbing him by the collar*): Slap me! You, Barbir?

MAHMOUD: Calm down, Haj Mustapha, or you'll give us away. The ones who set you up don't like a King who gets bored or a Vizier who doesn't know what going on in the state.⁷¹

The slap that would have brought the King back to reality is foreshadowed in the slap given by 'Urqub to the new king; 'The ones who set you up' refers to the religious and commercial powers behind the throne, represented by Taha and Shahbandar.

Mustapha hopes that at least the executioner will notice the change when the King summons him, but the axeman too sees nothing but kingly qualities in the former merchant. Mahmoud comments on this development: 'A king has no face and no features'.⁷² The new king's attitude to the instrument of execution is the same as the ex-king's, as described in the Prologue, but intensified: Here Wannous seems to be arguing that the business of governing may appear to be a matter of cold calculation, but beneath the surface lie psychosexual pathologies:

KING (*Feeling the blade sensuously*): That's better. That's the way I want it – within my reach ... I love the solid feel of its blade ... I want that steel to break through these fingers and into my veins, to go up through my arms and into my heart ... I want to unite with it, become one with it ... Stay where you are, Executioner. Let that ax support my hand, penetrate my body ... Let the King and his blade be one.

EXECUTIONER: Yes, my Lord.

'URQUB: My God, I can hardly recognize him! Who is he? And what about the game, and all the fun our Lord's waiting for? ... 'Urqub doesn't understand any more.

MAHMOUD: My heart's racing. I want my gown so badly that I can hardly breathe. This is the moment when a minister wants to be close to his lord and king. I can feel his radiance from here...⁷³

Mahmoud is decidedly not a dispassionate observer and interpreter of events, as is Moa'nis in *Jabir's Head*. He does not merely admire cunning and ruthlessness in a ruler, he is in love with power and is drawn – one might even say erotically attracted – to cruelty. Moreover, if we are to take seriously Wannous's statement quoted earlier, he believed that these pathological impulses underpin social relations in all societies of the masquerade, not only in despotic regimes, and are certainly revealed in the conflict between capital and labour.

Mahmoud having decided to abandon Mustapha and recover his position as Vizier, the fourth interlude articulates, through Zahid and 'Ubayd, the proposition that the individual is of little importance in the game of power and that conditions determine behaviour. Conditions now demand of the ruler more terror and repression.

MUSTAPHA (*Turning around*): Not one person has looked at his features or his face! Can it be true, or have I gone mad?

'URQUB: He put on the gown, and then he was King. That's quite a normal, natural transformation.

ZAHID: In any regime of masquerade, / This is the rule you should postulate: / Give me gown and crown, / And a king you will have.

MUSTAPHA: What's happening? What's true and what's false? What's dream and what's reality?

ZAHID: It isn't a matter of dream and reality. The whole story is that the gown has changed its stuffing. Details may differ but not the essence.⁷⁴

This is, of course, not a new theme in Wannous's theatre, and can be found, for example, in the dialogue of the young revolutionaries in *Al-Qabbani*.

Now Umm 'Izza and her daughter arrive, quaking with anxiety. Mustapha pins his last hope on them, but again even they fail to notice that the former Abu 'Izza is King and his former servant is Vizier. 'Izza, it is true, is struck by the resemblance, but she is scolded by her mother, who knows that such a thing is impossible. Umm 'Izza, calling the king 'Sovereign Lord of All Times' – an echo of *The King's Elephant* – lays her grievances before him, and with an admirable outspokenness very different from the mute terror of the people in the earlier play, she explains how the machinations of Shahbandar and Taha have ruined her 'witless and helpless' husband.

Taha in particular is excoriated: '[...] he would sell his own beard, along with his religion, for a handful of coins'.⁷⁵ Here the play seems to be attacking those clerics who ally themselves with power, not to protect their religion, but to personally profit from the relationship.

'Urqub seizes his chance and begs the King to give 'Izza to him. The King agrees, though by now he suspects that 'Urqub is not all he seems (this aspect of the narrative is problematic, as we have pointed out, and is one of the play's weaknesses). Before doing so, however, the King refuses to take Umm 'Izza's part against the pillars of his realm, asserting that Abu 'Izza alone was responsible for his own downfall and did not behave as his situation demanded. Things are as they should be, he insists, and to criticise any aspect of the regime is to criticise the king, the throne and the whole state. The King's argument summarises the nature of the struggle between competing economic interests:

KING: [...] The moment your husband opened that shop of his without reaching an understanding with Shahbandar, he made himself a rival and an enemy. No one ever robbed him or cheated him. He simply entered into a duel that he had little chance of winning. No wonder he lost: after all, the other had the right to win as well.⁷⁶

The King, however, is merciful to Umm 'Izza despite her presumption. Announcing that he is 'only one of the people', he orders that his former self be put to public shame, that Umm 'Izza should receive an annual allowance to be paid by the Vizier, and that in return 'Izza is to be given to the Vizier to 'make use of, as his wife or as a slave-woman, in his palace'.⁷⁷ The irony and absurdity of this judgment is a brilliant stroke on Wannous's part. Umm 'Izza is pleased with the decision, though she observes that the King, the imam [Taha], the judge and Shahbandar all speak with one voice: '...you'd think they were all one man, one tongue, one family...';⁷⁸ an ironic reference to the 'one family' of the prelapsarian community praised by 'Ubayd in the second interlude. 'Izza is horrified, but her mother has no patience with her objection that she is already engaged.

Mustapha makes one last desperate attempt to stave off disaster. He will force his way into the Queen's presence; surely she will recognise him. Mahmoud, meanwhile, sends a letter to the King via Maymun, informing him that 'Urqub is indeed an impostor and that the real vizier is waiting to resume his office. 'It

shouldn't be too difficult to get rid of a Vizier who isn't totally convinced he is Vizier...'79 Whatever happens, Mahmoud observes, '[...] the grip of the state will be firmer, and the Vizier shall be more powerful still'.⁸⁰ Mahmoud commiserates with the executioner, who feels his axe slipping away from him, and then 'Urqub rushes in with the latest news. The King has read the letter delivered by Maymun and has exploded with rage, calling for his executioner. As for the Queen:

'URQUB: The Queen? The Queen herself, in the flesh, was fondling him and feeding him with her own hands. When he stood up shouting, she threw her self down on the floor before him clutched his feet, and kissed them, saying, 'Do what you wish, my lord and Master! Torture me, if you want to! You alone are my Lord and Master...'

MAHMOUD (Sensuously ecstatic): What a moment to watch! ... And what about Haj Mustapha?

'URQUB: Mustapha! He's some courtier! ... In he walked, in a fury, to declare that he was the King! We all burst out laughing. Then the Queen took her sash and put it around his neck. Now he's spitting insults and walking on all fours at the end of a leash...⁸¹

As well as advancing the narrative, this passage is notable for its descriptions of sadomasochistic behaviour and for Mahmoud's response. Leading a man on a leash and thus treating him like a dog is a proverbial symbol of humiliation in both the Arab world and the West, and the play suggests, as we have noted, that in a society of masquerade all relationships are based on forms of dominance and submission, though these may be negotiable or rigidly enforced by law or custom, depending on the stability of the hierarchies in question. The greater the force needed to consolidate such relations, the greater the force needed to destroy and replace them – hence the need for revolutionary violence. In the play only Zahid and 'Ubayd have an equal relationship, although it is hinted that 'Ubayd has seniority in the organisation. Love might be able to shatter the bonds of the masquerade, but it is apparent that 'Izza is not looking for an equal partner but – in the language of Arab as well as European romance – for a knight on a white horse.

Mahmoud informs 'Urqub that his ('Urqub's) life is now in danger, and that the only course left open to him is to give up both cloak and girl; 'Urqub unwillingly agrees. In the final scene, which leads directly into the Epilogue, the King, 'raging with fury', cries:

KING: Steel! ... Only steel can protect this throne! This ax shall be my hand, my arm, my heart! My gown and my bed! (*To EXECUTIONER:*) From now on you'll be able to rest! [...] For Kings, nothing cleanses like blood! I shall bathe in it! It shall be my incense and perfume! ⁸²

The King is determined to tighten his grip on power and Mahmoud seizes his chance. He is reinstated as Vizier (this is indicated in the text in the same way as Abu 'Izza's transition to king) and at this point Taha and Shahbandar enter. The King makes clear his determination to work with them and to rule with, as the Vizier says, 'a hand of steel'.⁸³ They are delighted and exit, rejoicing that, as Taha says, the King has become 'more of a king'.⁸⁴

In the brief Epilogue various characters recount what, if anything, they have learned from the game. Mustapha, deranged, laments for his identity; his mirrors are now shattered 'into a thousand thousand pieces'.⁸⁵ 'Urqub regrets that he didn't know how to stick to his own kind, or how to climb any higher, while Umm 'Izza has learned that perhaps 'they're all a part of one and the same family', recalling her earlier speech. The executioner has become 'dust, a mere shadow ... what can a shadow learn?'⁸⁶ 'Izza, ever the victim, bewails her fate: '[...] I don't know anything, except that I'm being crushed between a bed and a worm'.⁸⁷ The play closes with two reiterations of earlier material. The first echoes the Prologue, but with a significant addition: now even dreaming is forbidden, and the two *hakawatis*' crumb of hope is surely not encouraging.

KING: A game? It *may* have been a game ... (*Assumes commanding tone*) You may not play!

GROUP: You may not play...

KING: You may not fancy!

GROUP: You may not fancy...

KING: You may not imagine!

GROUP: You may not imagine...

KING: You may not dream!

GROUP: You may not dream...

SHAHBANDER *and* SHAYKH TAHA *applaud.*

ZAHID: Even when a King is exchanged, the only way open to him is more terror and repression.

'UBAYD: We must wait for the right moment: not a second too early or too late.

ZAHID: This *right moment* – is it any nearer now than before?

‘UBAYD: Anyway, it can’t be too far off...⁸⁸

The play’s final lines are delivered by all the actors out of character, separately at first, then in unison. They quote ‘Ubayd’s speech to ‘Izza in the second interlude in which he recounts the story of the killing and eating of the king. This is repeated for emphasis.

The effect of the Epilogue is rather weak in comparison to what has gone before. Once again Taha and Shahbandar pull on puppet strings, reinforcing the impression that Wannous does not quite trust his audience to appreciate the message of the play. While the speeches of Mustapha and ‘Izza – who is now, needless to say, a slave-woman and not a wife – are powerful and moving, the others are perfunctory. The ‘lessons learned’ tell us nothing new, and ‘Urqub merely repeats the analysis of his class provided earlier by ‘Ubayd. Generally, the Epilogue emphasises the didactic nature of the play as a whole, and the means used to point the moral too often weaken the force of the drama. There can be no doubt about Wannous’s intention to educate his audience; in his 1978 essay, quoted earlier, he states: ‘In *The King’s the King* I meant by the phrase ‘This is a game’ that we are actors, and that we are presenting a tale to help you to understand the existing state of affairs. Our aim is not to portray reality but to [help you] to take a specific attitude towards it’.⁸⁹ In his notes to the fourth edition of the play, published in 1983, Wannous wrote: ‘The word ‘game’ in the play means lesson [...] The characters of Zahid and ‘Ubayd are *hakawati* [...];⁹⁰ and ‘Zahid and ‘Ubayd’s scenes are simply educational, written to explain the context and goal of the game. Their revolutionary activity consists in enlightening [the audience] and analysing the authority structure. During the stages of struggle, education is not merely important, it is primary in achieving the revolution’.⁹¹ This may help to explain Wannous’s curiously unsatisfactory and unconvincing presentation of ‘Ubayd in the role of a lover.

Conclusions

Although in certain respects *The King’s the King* belongs to the group of plays which make up Wannous’s theatre of politicisation, the playwright himself did not include it in that canon, perhaps because there is no interaction between stage and auditorium; the issue is not even raised, as it is in *Al-Qabani*. Wannous had not

abandoned his belief that Brecht was the only European writer who could serve as a model for revolutionary dramatists in developing countries, and perhaps in this play Wannous drew closer than ever to Brecht, adopting the position he had taken with regard to *Jabir's Head* (using and subverting a tale from the Arab tradition of popular narrative) but adding further elements from the epic theatre. It is not clear why Wannous should have chosen to retreat from his earlier experiments, notably *Jabir's Head* and *Al-Qabani*, which were more personal and more innovative, and adopt a mode of composition that treated epic theatre as a style; that is, as a type of dramaturgy that could be used more or less as a 'given', on the assumption that it would suit the purposes of the dramatist. Perhaps it was because he felt that the new play, being essentially a didactic work, required a form that would emphasise this function. Thus he made use of, in the words of Bryant-Bertail quoted in the previous chapter, 'a set of familiar techniques'.⁹² While these certainly have the effect of disrupting the action and preventing an empathetic reaction on the part of the audience, it is surely in the dramatic scenes that the power of the play lies, and in which Wannous's gifts as a playwright are more clearly apparent.

The shortcomings of his text can be partly accounted for by Wannous's practice. He did not, as Brecht did, test his plays against audience reaction. He was, as we have noted, a man of letters who wrote for the theatre rather than a dramatist immersed in and fascinated by every aspect of theatrical production, as Brecht was. In the *Theaterarbeit*, published in 1952, Brecht (or perhaps another member of the Berliner Ensemble, writing with his blessing) outlines fifteen 'stages of a production', which include '*Previews*: To test audience reaction. If possible the audience should be one that encourages discussion, e.g. a factory or student group. Between previews there are correction rehearsals, to apply the lessons learned'.⁹³ Although the purpose of such previews was to sharpen the acting style and address other practical matters, Brecht had always greatly valued, and benefited from, collaboration, not only with his colleagues but with the audience he sought to reach – the politically aware and active proletariat. Brecht claimed that this audience was essential in informing his aesthetic: as he wrote in 1938, 'The workers were not afraid to teach us, nor were they afraid to learn'.⁹⁴

Wannous was utterly unlike Brecht in this respect. Once completed, the text would be given to producers and directors to do with as they wished – within the limits prescribed by the playwright. We have seen that Wannous made one attempt –

unfortunately aborted by the authorities – to direct one of his own works. This did not, however, prevent him from being continually dissatisfied with the efforts of others. As he wrote in his notes to the fourth edition of *The King's the King*: 'The play was produced in Damascus, Baghdad [where it was lauded as an attack on Assad's regime], Cairo and Tunis, but I managed to see only the Syrian production. Regrettably, although they did their best, it did not attain the hoped-for clarity and depth'.⁹⁵ This failure, according to Wannous, lay in the director's lack of political awareness: 'In my opinion, any directing of this play that lacks a precise understanding of its structure and real message will only lead to a disjointed and chaotic production'.⁹⁶ But Wannous never attempted to rectify these faults by involving himself directly in the practicalities of production. He remained aloof from such matters, and inevitably – given his aims and ambitions – his work, and its relation to his audience, suffered as a result. *Daily Life* remains the only example of true collaboration in Wannous's career, and it is significant that here again he was in sole control of the text, since Amiralay was a creator of visual images, not literary ones.

Wannous wrote *The King's the King* partly as a response to what he considered was the mistaken position adopted by other Arab playwrights after the disaster of June 1967. In his notes to the fourth edition he wrote:

The political plays written during the last two decades, and especially after the defeat of 1967, were one of the motivations that prompted me to write *The King's the King*. Arab playwrights endeavoured to expose the existing systems but they criticised only the senior officials! For them the fault lay with the retinue, while the 'king's' mistake lay in his ignorance of their misdeeds! These plays fail to address the core of the problem. Perhaps this is because these political playwrights were short-sighted. [...] perhaps also they wanted to avoid censorship. But the harshness of the censor doesn't justify their intellectual error.⁹⁷

This explanation recalls the words of Zakaria in *The King's Elephant*: 'And who knows? Maybe the king doesn't realize what his elephant's doing to us. [...] Maybe they don't tell him, because they don't want to upset him'.⁹⁸ But Wannous himself, in the later play, was also guilty, if not of error, at least of inconsistencies that mitigate the force of the play as an intellectual argument, weakening its power as drama and

leading to a misunderstanding of its political message. This does not concern the relatively minor discrepancies involving precisely how much is perceived or remembered by various characters, but relates to certain key issues.

First of all there is the issue of the masquerade. Here the play conflates two separate arguments – that concerning private property and that concerning the system of disguise, both of which, it is argued, prevent human beings from constructing a nourishing community of equals. The paradisiacal Eden before the fall into private proprietorship is evoked in language almost as poetic as that of ‘Izza’s dream. But private property cannot be equated with hierarchy, since ownership – particularly of land – is not the same as hierarchical social organisation, which can exist independently of such ownership. Indeed, it is probable that every human society – even the most ‘primitive’, has always involved hierarchies, usually based on age and gender. Equality and the absence of private property are not the same thing. This is not a disastrous flaw, since Wannous immediately moves on to propose a drastic solution, that of killing and eating the king. This can only be achieved when the time is ripe – that is, when conditions permit it – and ‘Ubayd articulates Wannous’s belief, as an orthodox Marxist, that the classless society of the future will be born, as a consciously achieved organisation, from the contradictions of capitalism according to iron laws of social development. The difficulty is that for non-Marxists the history lesson presented by ‘Ubayd is not convincing and recalls the myth of a ‘golden age’ that cannot be recaptured. The uncommitted spectator would be likely to see ‘Ubayd’s argument as merely the opinion of a particular character and find his solution utopian, despite the emphasis given it at the end of the play. Such a spectator would therefore misunderstand the message of the play, and as we shall see, several critics failed to grasp its significance.

The second problem is more serious, since it concerns the essence of Wannous’s argument that the king is his gown and crown, and nothing more. We have already noted that the transformation of Abu ‘Izza is very different from that consciously undergone by Shen Te. It is also different in nature from the mechanical dismantling and reconstruction of Galy Gay in *Man Equals Man*, although this did not stop a friend and colleague of ‘Ersan, the critic and academic Ahmid al-Hamo, from drawing spurious comparisons between the two plays and obliquely accusing Wannous of plagiarism. The fatuity of al-Hamo’s arguments can be gauged from Wannous’s remark ‘[...] al-Hamo’s essay implies that the story of *The King’s the*

King is the same as that of *Man Equals Man* and all I did was to Arabicise the names, places and actions'.⁹⁹ The central difficulty is that Abu 'Izza does not change; he is merely presented with the opportunity to fulfil his dream; circumstances allow him to indulge fantasies he already has. This is not to take issue with either the rapidity of his transformation or his sudden grasp of political realities, particularly in relation to his former enemies Taha and Shahbandar; these are dramatically effective and justifiable from the perspective of the play's arguments about the nature of power. The point is that Abu 'Izza's psychology qualifies him to be a tyrant. His transformation from drunken, henpecked buffoon to ruthless despot is shocking, but not in the end surprising, since Wannous has skilfully signposted this development earlier in the play. Abu 'Izza's transformation is wonderfully effective as drama, but it does not make the point that Wannous seeks to make in the fourth interlude, for Abu 'Izza usurps the throne precisely because he is eminently fitted to occupy it. Had Wannous stayed closer to Brecht in this respect he might have made 'Urqub king, but then we would have had a very different play. Wannous seems to have been unwilling to argue through the play that a peasant could have become king; he explains his decision to make Abu 'Izza a member of a particular class in his notes to the fourth edition: 'Abu 'Izza easily managed to unite with 'crown and gown' because, although he is bankrupt, he is intellectually a member of the same class [of owners]'.¹⁰⁰ This is plausible but contradicts the slogan of the fourth interlude, and as we have argued, it is Abu 'Izza's psychology, not merely his class identity, that qualifies him to be monarch. Despite Wannous's detestation of the bourgeoisie, he surely cannot be arguing that every bourgeois is a potential tyrant. If he is, this is not made explicit in the text.

Regarding the characters' ability to recognise the substitution of Abu 'Izza for the king, Wannous has a slightly naïve explanation (again from the fourth edition):

The characters are able to discover the disguise according to the level of their awareness. Umm 'Izza is unable to recognise either her husband or her servant. 'Izza is about to recognise them but she is shaking [with fear]. The Queen, Maymun and the executioner also lack the necessary awareness, but they are dangerous because they uphold the regime. The Chief Merchant and Shaykh Taha cultivate the fruit of this situation.¹⁰¹

Accepting that this explanation is a fair account, it would perhaps have emphasised the point had the play made clear that Shahbandar and Taha recognise that Abu 'Izza is not Fakhreddin but readily accept and even welcome the change of ruler, since Abu 'Izza is indeed 'more of a king' than Fakhreddin was. Regarding Barbir, Wannous asserts, in an essay written in response to al-Hamo's criticism, that 'The Vizier in the play embodies pure awareness'.¹⁰² This can refer only to Barbir's understanding of his class position, and his intellectual grasp of the political world he moves in. His gloating enjoyment of displays of cruelty is very different from the objective dispassionate awareness of Moa'nis in *Jabir's Head*.

It is important in this context to discuss Wannous's attitude to the Soviet Union and to religion. Wannous belonged to no party; Mua'ala has commented that the playwright hated despotism 'and Stalin was a symbol of despotism'.¹⁰³ According to Mua'ala, Wannous was a free Marxist, and he supported the Soviet Union only because he did not wish to witness the global triumph of capitalism. In his later years 'he accused Gorbachev of destroying the Soviet Union with the encouragement of the United States and the West generally. He predicted that Russia would become fertile ground for the mafia and money-laundering, and what he predicted proved to be true'.¹⁰⁴ This view sits well with what we know of Wannous's politics; *The King's the King* cannot be read as an apology for the Soviet Union as the only state advancing towards a classless society. Faiza al-Shawish, Wannous's widow, has corroborated this view. According to her, 'Wannous was critical towards communist parties. He disagreed with Stalin's 'iron fist' ideology, but was sad when the Soviet Union collapsed'.¹⁰⁵

Omar Amiralay, however, provides a different viewpoint. After collaborating on *Daily Life*, the two men became estranged, and were only reconciled when Amiralay learned of Wannous's terminal illness. Amiralay made a documentary about the playwright's last years entitled *Une Mort Éphémère (An Ephemeral Death, 1996)*, and in a later interview spoke of his friend's political stance: 'Saadallah was a true militant, he saw everything through the lens of politics [...] [He] was an orthodox communist, sympathising with a pro-Soviet political party, while I was anti-Stalinist to the marrow'.¹⁰⁶ Here Amiralay equates pro-Sovietism (or anti-Americanism) with Stalinism, but possibly Wannous's view was that, despite the crushing of the Hungarian revolution and numerous instances of oppressive action, the Soviets had to be supported against American ambitions for global dominance. Wannous, of course,

also deeply deplored American meddling in the politics of the region, and condemned its continuing support of Israel.

As for Wannous's attitude to religion, it is clear from *The King's the King* that Wannous detested those Islamic clerics who allied themselves with the ruling class for their own benefit, but does this indicate a general anti-clericalism or even a hostility towards Islam itself? Faiza al-Shawish remarked that while Wannous had retained a strong religious culture 'he was secular to the backbone; he was intellectually opposed to all religions. In his works he presented only the negative side of the clergy because he was against religion. I disagreed with him about this'.¹⁰⁷ Here we have the picture of a man, not necessarily an unbeliever, who could not accept the Islam offered to him and believed that a secular state could better guarantee the freedom of its citizens. But his widow's words could also be taken as evidence of a more radical position, and in an interview given late in his life Wannous confessed that he was an atheist.¹⁰⁸ Apparently he had abandoned his faith as an adolescent, since he paid tribute to his family's tolerance: 'I was able to declare my atheism openly when I was sixteen without facing enormous difficulties'.¹⁰⁹ He was indeed 'secular to the backbone'; in the interview he confirmed that 'As an atheist, I don't believe in religion and cannot envisage how we can build a modern state on religious principles'.¹¹⁰ This was a serious admission in a society where loss of faith is considered a matter for execration, but it should be borne in mind wherever Wannous considers religion in his works. His view seems to have been the orthodox Marxist one that religion is 'the opium of the people' – witness his treatment of the pious cliché in *The Glass Café* and *The King's Elephant*.

Both the original tale and the drama derived from it play upon our perennial fascination with the theme of substitution and the impostor, a fascination that continues to this day in numerous television programmes and popular Hollywood movies such as *Tootsie* (1982). But while the original celebrates the wisdom of the ruler and restores the status quo, the play strikes at the very root of rulership, exposing it as a sham, and looking forward to the day when all shall be free to live 'without masks or disguises'. It is difficult, however, to believe that Wannous was an optimist in this regard, since 'Ubayd's final comment, 'Anyway, it can't be too far off...'¹¹¹ is almost a throwaway. The political landscape did not offer an encouraging prospect: all around were the signs of Arab disunity and obeisance to US foreign policy, while

the dictatorial regimes in Syria and elsewhere were seemingly consolidating their power through 'more terror and repression'.

Instead of concentrating on the political landscape of the Middle East, therefore, Wannous chose to address a wider issue – that of the origin and future demise of the entire system of class stratification and its twin concomitants, private proprietorship and the disguises which prevent the development of free social relations. Without positing a human 'essence' which is distorted by this system, Wannous dramatises this theme by subverting the original tale, as he had in *Jabir's Head*. We have noted certain flaws in Wannous's conceptualisation of the theme, but the play remains a powerful attempt to address issues of fundamental importance. Wannous believed that he had presented the audience with an intellectual schema that would enable them to comprehend their situation and act to change it, with an eye to the glorious future. This was his dream, born of his 'political romanticism', as his widow put it: in his notes to the fourth edition he wrote:

In class societies, replacing the king's retinue or toppling him while keeping his entourage is useless. To say that this view frustrates the audience is incorrect, because I gave them the genuine alternative, which is to demolish the disguise system and ownership by eating the king, who symbolises the whole system. [...] eating the king means to share him; that is, everyone will be a king in a society without classes or disguise.¹¹²

Part of the aim of the play seems to be that an audience is to be made aware, by what amounts to a kind of dramatic 'shock therapy', that they, and every citizen of a class society, are in disguise, playing a part determined by their circumstances. This is painful in itself, quite apart from the inequality evident to all, especially in dictatorial regimes. To change these circumstances for the better one must first become aware that one is wearing a mask; only then can one work, in collaboration with others committed to the struggle, to free oneself and others from its constraints. The struggle is political, not psychoanalytical, for psychological cures can do nothing to change 'the existing state of affairs'. Wannous would surely have agreed with Brecht's opinion that 'In modern society the motions of the individual psyche are utterly uninteresting'.¹¹³

Such a conception might lead to a theatre of automata 'utterly uninteresting' to the spectator. Brecht avoids this even in *Man Equals Man*, which charts the

disassembly of Galy Gay and his reassembly as Jeraiah Jip, by means of wild humour, striking parodies of Kipling's soldier language, and a dramatic structure bordering on chaos. Wannous treats the notion of disguise through subtle variations. The new king, as the Vizier remarks, is not acting; he is a slave to his disguise; what is more, as Brecht remarked of the leader in the interview quoted above, he is deluded in believing that he holds ultimate power: 'Far more than he himself imagines he is the tool and not the guiding hand'.¹¹⁴ The old king is aware that he is acting a part, and has grown bored. At the beginning of the play he is already mentally separated from crown and gown and seeks other diversions, ones which will be 'dangerous', involving as they do the excitement of role-playing, and the remote possibility of surprise. He fails to realise the importance of the masquerade, an importance Barbir understands completely; it is in this sense that the Vizier 'embodies pure awareness'. Barbir knows that the masquerade is a construction, a fiction: he also knows that it is absolutely essential to his survival, and to the survival of the entire system that supports the ruling class and their hangers-on. It is the old king's ignorance, born of his arrogance and complacency, that allows him to indulge a whim that brings about his downfall. The masquerade is a universal phenomenon, and in this sense Wannous is right to claim that the play applies to all class societies. It is not necessarily true, however, that all class societies must rely on ever more terror and repression. Bourgeois democracies have other means of ensuring stability and compliance. Boal remarks in this connection:

[...] the ruling classes pretend kindness and become reformist [...] in the belief that a social being will be less revolutionary to the extent that he is less hungry. And this mechanism works. It is not for any other reason that the working classes in capitalist countries show so little revolutionary spirit, and rather prove to be reactionary, like the majority of the proletariat in the United States. They are social beings with refrigerators, cars and houses [...].¹¹⁵

The 'message' of *The King's the King* was not understood by its audiences or by many Arab critics. The play's critics can be broadly divided into two camps: the uncritically enthusiastic and those who simply failed to grasp the work's significance. Among the former can be counted Ali al-Rai, whose appreciation is couched in the language of public relations: 'In my opinion, *The King's the King* is the sweetest drink produced by an Arab playwright from the legacy of the *Thousand and One*

Nights ¹¹⁶[...] At last popular art has found someone who uses it in a fascinating and attractive way. The audience will surely be amused. This is undoubtedly true literature'.¹¹⁷

The second group, those who did not grasp Wannous's purpose, or who misread the play in some way, include Subha Alqam, who asserts that Wannous used a tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* in order 'to outwit the censorship system',¹¹⁸ despite the playwright's criticism, noted earlier, of those writers who allowed the censors to affect their work. Alqam also overlooks the fact that at this stage of his career Wannous's plays were not considered a danger to the regime, and *The King's the King* was performed in Damascus without cuts or alterations – a performance the author himself attended. This study has already explained why Wannous chose to use a tale from the Arab tradition, and Alqam's comment must be regarded as misguided. More worthy of attention is Abdullah Abu Haif's remark that '*The King's the King* is not a revolutionary play; it is merely a condemnation of the regime'.¹¹⁹ This can be coupled with the impression recorded by 'some studies and articles that the struggle depicted in the play is that between the old king and his usurper'.¹²⁰ In order to reach such conclusions these critics must have ignored the Prologue, interludes and Epilogue, or seen a production that failed to emphasise the play's revolutionary content; we have noted that Wannous was dissatisfied with the efforts of the Syrian company.

It is legitimate to ask, however, whether these misapprehensions were entirely due to the critics' lack of intelligence. It must be admitted that, despite the play's great strengths, it is an uneven work and that, as we have remarked, generally speaking Wannous's gifts as a playwright shine most brightly in the dramatic scenes, which forcefully express the contention that the licence conferred by absolute power is always destructive. The problem is that these scenes do not in themselves carry the message of the play and can be interpreted in a variety of ways, partly because of the questions relating to the character of Abu 'Izza which we outlined earlier. Therefore other scenes must be interpolated to make sure that the audience grasps what the play is – and is not – about. The parts that most directly deliver the play's message – its 'lesson' – certainly interrupt the action and prevent empathy in a Brechtian manner. But while Brecht's audience might have paid close attention to such scenes it was unlikely that Wannous's audience would do likewise, being unfamiliar with the forms and techniques of epic theatre. Even the translators fail to recognise the significance

of a reference to a 'tannery', which is probably intended to emphasise Zahid and 'Ubayd's credentials as proletarian revolutionaries. The word is omitted and the sentence in which it appears is merely rendered as '[...] we've got to work harder!'¹²¹, instead of '[...] We've got to organize our activity in the tannery'.¹²² It is worth quoting here from a note Brecht wrote concerning *Die Mutter*:¹²³ 'Where the workers reacted immediately to the subtlest twists in the dialogue and fell in with the most complicated assumptions without fuss, the bourgeois audience found the course of the story hard to follow and quite missed its essence. [...] The worker [...] was not at all put off by the extreme dryness and compression with which the various situations were sketched, but at once concentrated on the essential [...] his reaction was in fact a political one from the first'.¹²⁴

Wannous expected much of his audience, and in hindsight it seems that he expected too much. Perhaps he was misled by the apparent ease with which *Jabir's Head* and *Al-Qabani* had been understood in Berlin, and by the enthusiasm that had greeted the Brechtian elements and innovations of these works. In an interview given in 1986, he admitted that he had miscalculated: 'Although I'm still extremely enthusiastic about Brecht's statements, I think one would have to make very good adaptations before one could present them to a Damascus audience. Europeans can easily understand his techniques and hidden signals but it is different here [...] the difficulty lies not in his plays' contents but in their form'.¹²⁵

It is interesting that Wannous speaks of 'Brecht's statements' rather than his theatre. In a fascinating conversation with members of the Berliner Ensemble probably held in 1953, Brecht responded to a question about the accounts of his theatre 'which give no idea at all of what it is really like', acknowledging his responsibility for these misunderstandings. Brecht remarked:

My whole theory is much naïver than people think, or than my way of putting it allows them to suppose. [...] If the critics could look at my theatre as the audience does, without starting out by stressing my theories, than they might simply see theatre – a theatre, I hope, imbued with imagination, humour and meaning – and only when they began to analyse its effects would they be struck by certain innovations, which they could then find explained in my theoretical writings. I think the root of the trouble was that my plays have to be properly performed if they are to be effective, so that for the sake of (oh dear me!) a non-Aristotelian dramaturgy I had to outline (calamity!) an epic theatre.¹²⁶

Here is Brecht speaking at the end of a long and eventful career, and had Wannous been familiar with, and taken to heart, this passage and others in a similar vein, he might not have experienced the disappointments that dogged the development of the theatre of politicisation. Had he noted Brecht's practice as a playwright with as much assiduity as he studied his theories he might have avoided that over-reliance on epic elements which caused his audiences to suffer from theatrical indigestion and fail to absorb his lessons. The examples were there to be learned from in the German master's own works: *Galileo*, *Mother Courage*, and *The Good Person of Setzuan* are hardly epic in the sense that the young Brecht would have recognised, and it must be reluctantly admitted that in this important respect *The King's the King* is a backward step towards an epic 'orthodoxy' that had a very mixed effect on its Arab audiences. But even if Wannous had succeeded in transplanting the epic theatre into Arab soil and securing its popularity, that would not have guaranteed that his theatre could have 'politicised' his audience or changed his society. It says much for Wannous's integrity and tenacity that he did not abandon his experiment after his disappointment with the reception of *Evening Party*, but it seems that disappointment meant that he could no longer trust his audience to understand his meaning; and so they had to be instructed, they had to be made to understand. This is one of the other tragedies of the failure of the theatre of politicisation: Wannous, despite his great qualities as a dramatist, despite his fearlessness and his honesty, seems to have been too much in awe of his model to write plays that could themselves be models for a new Arab theatre; perhaps he should have followed Genet's advice. *Jabir's Head* comes nearest to this possibility, being perhaps the most original and the most daring of this group of plays. Wannous had all the qualities necessary to create a theatre 'imbued with imagination, humour and meaning', for we find these in abundance in the best of these works. But the conditions that impelled him to write also prevented him from realising his potential as an Arab dramatist capable of synthesising what was most alive in the traditions of Arabia and Europe.

Wannous's theatre of politicisation was born in the aftermath of the catastrophe of June 1967, and developed in response to the events that succeeded that shockwave. Hourani notes that after 1967 there was a pervasive sense of a world gone wrong. 'The defeat of 1967 was widely regarded as being not only a military setback but a kind of moral judgement'.¹²⁷ If the Arabs had been defeated so quickly and

completely might it not be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and the moral system they expressed? This question preoccupied those educated and reflective Arabs who were aware of the vast and rapid changes in their societies. Those who, like Wannous, were concerned with finding a means of expression that would speak directly to their fellows, discovered that a gap existed 'between them and the masses [...] giving rise to a problem of communication: how could the educated elite speak to the masses or on their behalf?'¹²⁸ Hourani also remarks that this problem of Arab identity was expressed in terms of the relationship between the heritage of the past and the needs of the present: 'Should the Arab peoples tread a path marked out for them from outside, or could they find in their own inherited beliefs and culture those values which could give them a direction in the modern world?'.¹²⁹ Wannous's theatre of politicisation charts his continuing engagement with this issue, but he came to believe that he, and Arab playwrights in general, had deferred too much to European influence and become dependent on Western models without understanding the conditions that had created the theatre they admired and sought to learn from. In an article written in 1976, 'An Attempt to Speak in a Suffocating Life', Wannous wrote mockingly of this dependence on European models: 'Newspapers were full of articles about Absurd theatre, Ionesco, Beckett, and whether Aristotle could be considered a playwright or not! Hakim wrote avant-garde plays, and they began to present Ionesco and Beckett in Cairo, just like they did in London and Paris! Hurrah, ignorance has ended! We are not part of the Third World any more; we are enlightened and cultured like the Europeans'.¹³⁰

Wannous is writing about the pre-1967 period, and it is significant that he does not include Brecht in his tirade, since Brecht was still for him the pre-eminent model of a political playwright. Boal is very acute on this subject, although his strictures must be applied with caution to the case of Wannous: 'In the underdeveloped countries [...] the custom was to choose the theatre of the "great cultural centers" as a model and goal. The public at hand is rejected in favour of a distant public, of which one dreams. The artist [...] tries to absorb alien traditions without having a firm foundation in his native tradition; he receives a culture as if it were the divine word, without saying a single word of his own'.¹³¹ Wannous did not seek a distant public, but his obsession with the theory of the epic theatre made his attempts to reach the audience at hand more difficult, and they did not succeed, and surely could not have succeeded, in the way he desired. He was aware that his experiments were not having

the intended effect, and his sense of futility grew throughout the seventies, exacerbated by the developments occurring in Middle Eastern politics. As early as 1972 he wrote, in an article entitled 'A Writer in a Backward Country': 'A writer thinks that [...] he can change the world, but then he discovers that it is only a dream. To feel that you are marginal and that your words are wasted is painful. [...] To know that only a few cultured people hear what you're saying, this is a disappointing discovery'.¹³² And in 1978, after completing *The King's the King*, he wrote 'The serious playwright cannot write if he discovers that his theatre is useless'.¹³³

We suggested early in this chapter that *The King's the King* was 'born of desperation'. When Wannous wrote the words quoted immediately above he had undergone a personal crisis brought on by his increasing sense of frustration and impotence. The final straw was the visit paid by President Sadat of Egypt to his counterpart in Israel, Menachem Begin; Sadat's purpose was to offer an opening for peace by direct negotiations. The visit took place in November 1977, and Wannous was not alone in regarding it as a betrayal of Palestinian hopes and a humiliating submission to an occupying power; Sadat's initiative was to lead directly to his assassination. Wannous, however, did not attack the betrayer, he attacked himself. The visit must have seemed to confirm all Wannous's darkest forebodings, some of which he had just articulated in his latest play. *The King's the King* had been written in a void empty of hope, and events seemed to indicate that 'the right moment' was further away than ever. Wannous's dream of changing the world had turned into a nightmare, and not even his love for his wife and daughter could prevent him from succumbing to despair. Sadat's visit prompted him to write *I Am the Cortège and I Am the Condoled*, a brief poetic account of his feelings. In Amiralay's documentary *An Ephemeral Death*, Wannous spoke of his immediate reaction to Sadat's betrayal; he was stunned, but it was something he had half expected: 'I didn't know how to describe my feelings ... but I can't say that this visit surprised me!'¹³⁴ After completing *I Am the Cortège*, Wannous was very tired but on going to bed found he was unable to sleep. Tense and desperately anxious, he took a sleeping draught, which worked for only two hours. On waking Wannous felt that he was suffocating. It was then that he 'made a serious attempt to commit suicide'.¹³⁵ He took an overdose of sleeping pills, but fortunately the attempt was discovered and he did not die. His career as a writer of overtly 'political' drama was over, however, and more than ten years were to pass before he wrote another play. In this work, which ushered in a new phase of his life as a dramatist, he returned to the subject of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but in a very different spirit from that which had informed *Evening Party*.

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- ¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 381.
- ² Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ³ The film is not accessible for private viewing. According to Nadim Mua'ala, Omar Amiralay has a copy, but he lives in France and it was not practical to visit him.
- ⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 363.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 363.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 364.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 364.
- ⁸ See Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 268.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 284.
- ¹¹ (www.cyranos.ch/sbarr-e.htm), accessed on 24 October 2004.
- ¹² (www.video.barnesandnoble.com/search/biography.asp.ctc=574285), accessed on 20 December 2004.
- ¹³ See Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), pp. 261-286
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 273-275
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- ²² Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ²³ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 454.
- ²⁴ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology*, from Allen's introduction to *The King's the King* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 78.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

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- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 87.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 87.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 87.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 90.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 97.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 98.
- ⁵⁵ See, for example, Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Jack Cohen, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), pp. 122-123; Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), pp. 162-163.
- ⁵⁶ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 99.
- ⁵⁷ See Saadallah Wannous, *The King's the King*, fourth edition (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983), p. 117.
- ⁵⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 175.
- ⁵⁹ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 100.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 100.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 101.
- ⁶² Ibid., p. 101.
- ⁶³ It is not clear why Wannous gives this instruction, but he may have wished to enhance the distancing effects used in the play. Also see Brecht's comments on 'Alienation effects in Chinese Acting', John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001) p. 92.
- ⁶⁴ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 104.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 105.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 105.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 106-107.
- ⁶⁸ Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Shen Te is 'torn in two' by the need to be Shui Ta when circumstances require it. See Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, trans. Eric Bentley (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 104.
- ⁶⁹ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 107.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 108.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 109-110.
- ⁷² Ibid., p. 110.
- ⁷³ Ibid., pp. 110-111.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 111.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 113.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 114.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 115.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 115.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 115.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 116.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 116-117.
- ⁸² Ibid., p. 117.
- ⁸³ Ibid., p. 118.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 118.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 118.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 119.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 119.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 119.
- ⁸⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 174.
- ⁹⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The King's the King*, fourth edition (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983), p. 118.
- ⁹¹ Ibid., p. 119.

- ⁹² Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theatre: The Brechtian Legacy* (United States of America: Camden House, 2000), p. 18.
- ⁹³ Dresdner Verlag, Dresden, 1952 – cited in John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001) p. 242.
- ⁹⁴ 'Volkstumlichkeit und Realismus', *Sinn und form*, Potsdam, 1958, No 4 – cited in John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001) p. 111.
- ⁹⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The King's the King*, fourth edition (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983), p. 112.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 112.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 116.
- ⁹⁸ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), p. 443.
- ⁹⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 156.
- ¹⁰⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The King's the King*, fourth edition (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983), p. 119.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 121.
- ¹⁰² Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 177.
- ¹⁰³ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁵ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Il y a tant de chose à raconter» ou les regards croisés d'Omar Amiralay et Saadallah Wannous* (<http://www.babelmed.net/index.php?menu=268&cont=701&lingua=fr>), accessed on 9 November 2005.
- ¹⁰⁷ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ¹⁰⁸ Abdulaziz Al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*, PhD thesis (University of Manchester, 1993), p. 85.
- ¹⁰⁹ B. Yasin and N. Suleiman, *Literature and Ideology in Syria 1967-1973* (Damascus: Ibn-Khaldun Publishing House, 1974), p. 68.
- ¹¹⁰ Abdulaziz Al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*, PhD thesis (University of Manchester, 1993), p. 85.
- ¹¹¹ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 119.
- ¹¹² Saadallah Wannous, *The King's the King*, fourth edition (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983), pp. 116-117.
- ¹¹³ Interview in *Exstrabladet*, Copenhagen, 20 March 1934 – cited in John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001), p. 66.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 67.
- ¹¹⁵ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 97. For a description of the operation of this mechanism in Saudi Arabia see Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), pp.40-41.
- ¹¹⁶ Ali Al-Ra'i, *Theatre in the Arab World* (Kuwait: Ministry of Information, 1980), p. 185.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 189.
- ¹¹⁸ Subha Alqam, *Wannous's Political Theatre*, MA thesis (Amman: Jordanian University, 1999), p. 27.
- ¹¹⁹ Abdullah Abu Haif, *Establishment - Articles in the Syrian Theatre* (Damascus: Publications of the Arab Writers Association, 1979), p. 179.
- ¹²⁰ Isma'il Fahad, *Word-Action in the Theatre of Saadallah Wannous*, second edition (Damascus: Al-Mada Publishing House, 1996), pp. 137-138.
- ¹²¹ Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 87.
- ¹²² Saadallah Wannous, *The King's the King*, Fourth Edition (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983), p. 27.
- ¹²³ First given in January 1932 – the note is undated
- ¹²⁴ *Schriften zum Theatre* 2, p. 213 - cited in John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001) p. 62.

¹²⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 114.

¹²⁶ ('Notate zu 'Katzgraben',) from *Junge Kunst*, East Berlin, 1958, No 1 - cited in John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001) p. 248. For an eminent director's view of this subject see Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 86.

¹²⁷ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 442.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 442-443.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

¹³⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 420.

¹³¹ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 174.

¹³² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 381.

¹³³ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 88.

¹³⁴ *Une Mort Éphémère* (1996). Documentary film. Directed by Omar Amiralay. France. TV5 Production.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 6

The Late Plays – A New Freedom

When Wannous awoke from his coma, which had lasted three days, he was, his widow recalls, 'in complete shock'.¹ He emerged into a world which, he realised, had no place for the writer he had been. The violence of his response to Sadat's visit to Israel revealed unequivocally the extent of his despair. There could be no question of simply returning to his former methods and writing another example of the theatre of politicisation. *The King's the King* had been his last attempt to bring the unchallengeable truth before the people; now that truth itself had disappeared like a dream. 'At the end of the seventies', he told the Lebanese critic Hassan Salama, 'we reached the point of desperation, the point of nihilism, where history appeared savage and terrible. Our dream melted. Our dreams melted away before our eyes'.²

In *I Am the cortège and I Am the Condoled*, the short prose lament Wannous had completed before attempting suicide, he gave voice to his rage and disillusionment, his guilt and grief:

The cortège is proceeding and we walk behind it, dragging the defeat. We are the cortège and also the condoled. Part of me is inside the coffin and the other half is being dragged behind it in disappointment. The rhythm of the cortège is time and history. The days have been wasted and our feet are sinking into sand and sadness. [...] Oh, when will the radio and the hired singers stop howling? Oh, when will the Arab leaders stop their speeches? [...] My life is fading away and I am still waiting to say the word 'No'. [...] 'No' to the lies, ignorance, hunger and massacres. Because of my chopped-off tongue the defeat began and the cortège departed. Because of my oppressed 'No' the enemy invaded and we collapsed. [...] Because of my muzzled 'No' Kissinger wove my shroud. [...] Inside me there is a little Sadat, because my 'No' has been suppressed! I am doomed to be the victim, the witness, the cortège and above all – a collaborator! [...] And

until I regain my oppressed 'No' the cortège will keep moving and we will walk behind it, defeated.³

Although Wannous continued to write and work as a journalist he abandoned his chosen calling as a playwright and devoted himself to a radical reassessment of all he and his contemporaries had struggled to achieve. As al Souleman notes, The grand narrative of the class struggle, which had ignored and marginalised the individual, was called into question, and Wannous came to realise that the great project of modernisation – social, cultural and political – to which he had devoted his energies, was no longer relevant to his society.⁴ He was also forced to acknowledge that the theatre was no longer the locus of debate that it had been in the 1960s and 1970s, and, more importantly, that the ideology that had underpinned and given impetus to that theatre had been discredited. He and his fellow writers had been guilty of oversimplification and naivety; in their absolute certainty that they were in possession of the truth they had turned a blind eye to the developments that were occurring around them with inexorable force. 'There were obscene transformations which I was unprepared for, and I believe that many Arab intellectuals, like me, were unprepared to confront, acknowledge and express those transformations',⁵ he said in an interview published in 1986. The sense of disillusionment and loss which Wannous shared with many of his contemporaries caused him to refrain from writing drama for over a decade.⁶ He realised that he would be able to continue as a playwright only after the most rigorous and searchingly honest re-evaluation of everything he had ever thought and believed, and that his new theatre, whatever it might be, would have to be an unflinching expression of his new understanding of the realities confronting his nation. This long and arduous process he faced with a determination born 'in the vaults of depression'.⁷

Wannous, believing that the Arab nation was 'still capable of creating new generations that can make history',⁸ turned away from his preoccupation with relations between ruler and ruled and from providing answers based on 'a ready-made awareness',⁹ which was 'something negative and to be avoided',¹⁰ as he said in an interview given in 1986 to Nabil al-Hafar. 1986 was the year Wannous broke his silence and gave interviews for the first time since his attempted suicide eight years before. The interview with Nabil al-Hafar is of considerable importance, since it is the

longest and most revealing of those he gave that year. In it Wannous articulated his ideas about the new role the theatre should adopt.

I believed that theatre could open the door of change, [...] but now I think that the theatre can't bring about instant political change. The theatre should lay down its illusions. [...] The theatre should join the movement of enlightenment which I consider is our last refuge. We need to change our life first, through enlightenment. Currently, the importance of theatre does not lie in sparking revolution; [...] in any case it can't achieve revolution quickly. [...] It is a tool of knowledge.¹¹

This change of heart and mind, Wannous acknowledged in the same interview, was prompted not so much by an abandonment of all his former principles but by a bitter recognition that the world had changed. '[...] life, thinking and taste have changed under the storm of consumerism. All the dreams of union, modernisation and socialism have collapsed. These ideologies, which fed writers' ideas from the end of the nineteenth century, have become ineffective'.¹² This admission is significant, but Wannous was not yet willing to create a new and personal theatre that would depart from the ethos of the theatre of politicisation, which he believed had failed because it had been 'blocked by many obstacles [...] and therefore couldn't grow'.¹³ At this stage in his reconsideration of the cultural position of the Arab theatre he continued to look to Brecht as a model, as we noted in the previous chapter, believing that Brecht merely needed to be properly adapted to the tastes of the Damascus audience. He still spoke of attacking the 'snake-like opportunist class'¹⁴ whose cunning had prevented him from unmasking it and fully exposing 'its social and political dominance'.¹⁵

The truth of the matter seems to be that Wannous was not yet ready 'to confront, acknowledge and express those transformations' that he was later to speak of. His new theatre, which was to attain a startling fruition in the 1990s and which would challenge his audience as never before, was not even present in embryo. Wannous must have been aware that in 1986 he lacked the means to create such a theatre, and his statements of that year should be seen as revelatory of an intellectual work in progress. When, in 1989, he felt ready to return to drama, it was with a work which indicated the direction in which he was moving and which is notable mainly for its challenging political stance and for the inclusion of the author as a character engaging in sympathetic dialogue with an Israeli citizen. That Wannous should have

found the courage and daring to have written such a scene shows how far he had moved from his stance of the 1960s and 1970s. In this play, *The Rape*, Wannous begins to reconsider his attitudes to history, politics and the individual. Although still a Marxist, he considered the renowned and influential Egyptian writer Taha Hussein (1889-1973) a more appropriate model of enlightened thinking.¹⁶ In *Theatrical Margins II* (1992) Wannous praised Hussein's uncompromising secularism and commitment to modernisation – 'From the first he continued the battle which his precursor [Mohammad Abduh] had started. It is the battle to uproot the theological thinking that depends on belief and the teaching of worn-out memorised material. [Hussein] aims at spreading historical thinking, freedom, modernity and innovation'.¹⁷ In the same article Wannous wrote 'No knowledge and refreshment of mind without freedom, and no freedom without secularism. No secularism, however, without modernising the state and spreading democracy! Modernising the state and spreading democracy, however, demand the establishment of civil society, whose core should be fair distribution, both economic and political'.¹⁸

Wannous's theatre of the 1990s is very different from that of the 1960s and 1970s. It is marked by an astonishing freedom in its subject matter and boldness in its themes and language. Wannous, though still intending to influence his fellow Arabs, is writing to please himself. The audience and the theatrical space cease to be central concerns and the project of collective action is abandoned. The individual and his or her relations with society now take centre stage. This new-found freedom had been hard won through a long process of merciless self-examination and intense analysis of the social, cultural and political developments taking place in the Arab world over the previous decade, but it would almost certainly not have been achieved without the impact of a personal event of the utmost gravity. By the time Wannous wrote the passages on Hussein quoted above he had been diagnosed with cancer of the pharynx, which later spread to his liver and then consumed his body. The honesty of his last plays is the honesty of a man who knows his death is fast approaching and who is writing on borrowed time. This knowledge gave Wannous the opportunity to write without constraints; as his widow remarked, 'In the nineties he became bolder than ever; there were no red lines for him at all'.¹⁹ Death as protest and liberation became one of the central themes of Wannous's drama of this final period. Now there are no certainties; many voices speak their own truths in a polyphonic dramaturgy of great subtlety and power; and these late works have a human richness and complexity

absent from Wannous's earlier works, which, however various, were dominated by the authorial voice.²⁰ Wannous returned to the theatre with a play on the theme of the Palestine-Israel issue. Thus the Arab-Israeli conflict was the impetus that initiated the third phase of his development as a dramatist, just as *Evening Party* had marked the beginning of the theatre of politicisation. We should remember also that among his early works was the short play *Gush of Blood*, which dramatised the internal struggle of a young would-be freedom fighter determined to play a part in liberating his land and people from the yoke of the oppressive Israeli occupation.

In the 1990s he wrote six plays: in 1992 *Historical Miniatures*, in 1993 *A Day of Our Time*, in 1994 *Miserable Dreams* and *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, and in 1995 *The Mirage Epic* and *The Drunken Days*. In 1996 he published an important anthology of autobiographical writings, *About Memory and Death*, which contains an extraordinary work of self-confrontation, *A Journey through the Obscurities of a Passing Death*, written during his last days. All these will be discussed in the following pages.

In 1986 Wannous had been reluctant to abandon the principles and methods of the theatre of politicisation, as can be seen from the interview he gave that year. But it is clear from other remarks made in the same interview that he was beginning to question his self-imposed submission to a programme of his own devising, especially as he had become painfully aware that the project of national renewal undertaken by his generation of progressive playwrights had failed to bring about significant change. He admitted,

Whenever I think about my life so far I feel dismay. I can hardly remember any occasion when I expressed myself freely! [...] I was disheartened by the lack of democracy; I felt sorry for myself and all those generations condemned to live and die without being able to flourish in a free atmosphere in which one can live in dignity and honour [...] when the writer understands that he can't bring about change he loses the motivation to write. We shouldn't forget that I am one of that group of writers who made a huge mistake by fundamentally linking the effectiveness of their theatre to its political effectiveness.²¹

The Rape

(A long play in three acts)

The play which signalled this new phase was *Al-Ightisab (The Rape, 1989)*. Wannous adapted the plot from that of *La Doble Historia del Doctor Valmy (The Double Life of Dr Valmy, 1978)* by the Spanish playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo. Vallejo's play, as indicated by the title, contains two narratives. The more important concerns the secret policeman Daniel Barnes, whose castration of a political enemy leads to his own impotence. His wife, driven out of her mind by sexual frustration, finally kills him. Dr Valmy, who attempts to treat Barnes, criticises the regime that allows such brutality. Vallejo's play is set in Franco's Spain and is a condemnation of Fascist rule; Wannous brings the story up to date and sets it in the occupied territories. He also makes the two stories equal in importance (Vallejo's second story is not much more than a framing device) and adds a long and important final scene. The structure incorporates 'two narrators and two stories: a Palestinian narrator and an Israeli narrator, a Palestinian story and an Israeli story. The two stories intermix and interpenetrate in their development. I dream of an exceptional performance that will give as much significance to the Israeli story as to the Palestinian one',²² Wannous wrote in the introduction to the play. It is clear even from this comment that Wannous had left behind the certainties of *Evening Party* and was beginning to engage with a dramaturgy based on the articulation of a variety of viewpoints.

The play opens with a prologue in which Al-Fari'ah, a Palestinian woman, is talking to her baby nephew, who is lying in a cradle by her side. She is making bread and speaking of her father, who died as a freedom fighter resisting the Israeli occupation. 'Only the odour of the land matches that of bread. [...] When you were born the occupiers were knocking down five houses in the neighbouring district'.²³ Thus we are briefly introduced to the situation underlying the events of the play.

The next scene is an 'Opening Chant' in which Abraham Munohin, the liberal Israeli psychiatrist who will later be consulted by Ishaq and who appears again in the final scene, speaks of the psychological disease plaguing the occupied territories. He withdraws and is followed by a group of some of the Israeli characters, all of whom

rejoice at the sound of explosions now filling the theatre, while an Israeli troop destroys some Arab houses. They all urge the soldiers to spare no one. Their language is shocking in its extreme violence, and the Shin Beth chief officer, Meir, makes it clear that in his view the Palestinians have no place in Israel: 'Don't leave anyone alive [...] God has promised you your share';²⁴ Arab culture must be destroyed, after which 'We will build our civilisation on its ruins'.²⁵

The relationship between three of the Israeli characters: Ishaq's mother, Ishaq and Meir, is a complex one and is gradually revealed throughout the play. Some knowledge of it is essential for understanding the dynamics of Ishaq's neurotic behaviour. Briefly the situation is that Ishaq's parents were European Jews who emigrated to Israel before Ishaq was born. His mother, Sara, was a committed Zionist while his father, now dead, had strong reservations about Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. Meir became friendly with Sara but despised her husband, even attacking him physically for what he considered his cowardice and traitorous opinions. Meir became Ishaq's godfather, and Sara was increasingly drawn to him because of his uncompromising patriotism. After Ishaq's father died in dubious circumstances Sara invited Meir to become her lover, but he proved to be impotent, disguising his humiliation by telling her he had religious scruples and that in any case their love of Israel transcended a merely human love. Later in the play Sara tells Ishaq that although he was conceived legitimately she wishes Meir had been his father.

The narrative scenes begin with a dialogue between Al-Fari'ah and Dalal, her younger sister-in-law, in the house they share. Dalal's husband Isma'il has been arrested and is being interrogated by the internal security service. Dalal fears for his safety; Al-Fari'ah tells her the police will not be able to break him: 'He is a rock'.²⁶ A loud knocking announces the arrival of Meir's subordinate, Jadoun, who has come to arrest Dalal. Al-Fari'ah tells Dalal to be brave: 'Keep your head up, and don't be afraid of them. You're stronger than they are'.²⁷ She then gives her nephew his milk and his first lesson in politics: 'This is your story. The hen has a house. It is called a coop. The rabbit has a house. It is called a burrow. The bird has a house. It is called a nest. The Palestinian has no house. The tents and houses they live in are not the Palestinians' homes. The enemy of the Palestinian lives in the home of the Palestinian. Who is the enemy of the Palestinian?'²⁸ Isma'il has so far resisted the inhuman torture inflicted on him by Meir, and so the security chief orders his officers to rape Dalal in front of him because, as he says elsewhere, the Palestinians 'are

animals. They place their dignity in the honour of their wives'.²⁹ Extreme measures must be taken to force the freedom fighter to confess and provide information because, as Meir says, 'pity in our work is treason'.³⁰ Both sides refuse to accept the possibility of co-existence; Isma'il tells Meir that it is an illusion to hope, as some Palestinians do, that one day Israelis and Palestinians will be reconciled, living together in 'a state where our rights are equal and our freedom is guaranteed'.³¹

The Israeli story centres on Ishaq, a security officer under Meir's command, and his wife Rahil. Ishaq is a racist who believes that 'the only good Arab is a dead one';³² here a clear parallel is drawn between the Israelis and the American colonisers of Native American lands. Ishaq has been present at the rape of Dalal, and now he has become impotent. He cannot understand why he is so afflicted and rejects Rahil's suggestion that for both their sakes he should consult her friend Dr Munohin. Later, however, his inner torment leads him unwillingly to visit the psychiatrist. Dr Munohin, like Ishaq's father, is a moderate who believes in peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians. Embarrassed by the psychiatrist's initial questions (Munohin asks if he is a sadist and whether he has homosexual tendencies), Ishaq insists that he and Rahil have a 'normal' sexual life, but then confesses that he recently witnessed an appalling scene at the Shin Beth interrogation centre, and that he not only witnessed it but took part in it. 'I got turned on when I saw my colleague Jadoun raping her, then suddenly I went soft and was satisfied just to watch. After a while I became infuriated – I went crazy – and I slashed Dalal's pubes and breast with a razor. I was running with sweat'.³³ The torture of Isma'il and the rape of Dalal are enacted on stage. The light fades on Ishaq and Munohin and Ishaq joins the group of security men, who perform their monstrous tasks under full illumination. This technique is used several times in the play, recalling Wannous's experiments in *Al-Qabani*.

Dr Munohin tells Ishaq that he cannot help him: 'You need to confess consciously that you perpetrated an unjustifiable and horrible crime',³⁴ and that he cannot countenance what he has done. He cannot salve his conscience by arguing that the security service is acting within the law:

My loyalty is to justice, not to the law; there is no justice in what you are doing. There is no justice in occupying another people's land and there is no justice in the Zionist severity on which the Israeli state was established ... I refuse to accept what you are doing, no matter what the justification.³⁵

For Ishaq this judgement is too challenging, and he counterattacks, accusing Munohin of betraying the nationalist cause, and asserting that moderate Israelis are not real men.

Issues wider than Ishaq's sexual malfunction seem to be in question here. To some extent Ishaq appears to represent the confused Israeli citizen, brought up as a Zionist and corrupted and made impotent – in a general sense – by becoming complicit in the racism and sadism of his leaders and in their crimes against a subject people. Unable to resolve the dilemma confronting him and afraid to go against his superiors, he vents his rage and frustration on the helpless victim the state has put at his mercy. Munohin's advice is surely intended to apply not merely to Ishaq but to every Israeli citizen whose conscience is still active. It is clear, however, that Ishaq is presented as an individual; he does not represent a class, nor is he a 'typical' security man. Moreover, this is true of all the characters; all are seen as individuals with their own idiosyncratic psychology. For this reason among others *The Rape* represents a new departure in Wannous's drama.

Meir has no such moral qualms; he is a true fanatic. The pleasure he derives from torture and rape is, he says, 'an ecstasy of a religious kind ... yes, religious'.³⁶ His god is not the God of the Jews but the Israeli state restored to its Biblical boundaries – or rather, the two are inseparable. He is consumed by hatred and contempt. As for Jadoun, he is proud of what he has done and accepts that his actions have isolated him from humanity: 'I have no friends. Strength is my only friend. I am from the Sabra generation, one of those who have learned that a real man doesn't need friends and should trust no one'.³⁷ Jadoun is not only referring to Dalal's rape here; he has committed another rape since then, one that is not sanctioned by the authorities. In the scene after Ishaq's confrontation with Munohin, Jadoun rapes Ishaq's wife, Rahil. He has always lusted after her and has lured her to his house, insisting that he only wants to be her friend. Rahil trusts him, if only because she cannot believe that he would do anything to jeopardise his career. Her trust is misplaced; Jadoun attacks her. Like Dalal's rape, the assault is shown on stage and would have to be handled with great discretion by any director. Jadoun tells Rahil that her anger and curses excite him, and that her disgust and loathing are misplaced, since her husband is doing the same to Palestinian women in detention. He gloatingly describes their work for Shin Beth: 'Nothing is more effective than parting a woman's thighs in front of her

husband'.³⁸ Rahil is devastated by this news, and as the lights fade Jadoun rapes her again.

The next scene finds Rahil pale and drained. Ishaq enters and tells her about his meeting with Munohin; he confesses his part in the rape of Dalal and that Isma'il now possesses him, crushing his virility as Isma'il's had been crushed. After his wife had been taken out Isma'il had been tortured to death, and now, Ishaq says, 'he's inside me, punishing me and holding down my virility'.³⁹ He asks Rahil to go away with him, to find a place where they can be together with their child. Rahil will have none of it: 'Your noble colleague, Jadoun, raped me. [...] He did to me what you have done to Arab women in your glorious work'.⁴⁰ Bitterly, Rahil tells Ishaq that she is leaving him to go and live with her aunt in America. 'If I stay I'll go mad. This life is disgusting, a nightmare [...] I can't stand this house, seeing you, your mother, my body [...]. I must get away or I'll die like an animal'.⁴¹

His life in ruins, Ishaq rushes to confront Meir and Jadoun; he is determined not to let Jadoun go unpunished. The racism implicit in his thinking is obvious: while Dalal's rape and the murder of Isma'il have left him deeply disturbed and riven with guilt they were, technically speaking, within the law; regrettable but necessary acts. Now Jadoun has overstepped the mark. Ishaq not only threatens to denounce Jadoun, but also accuses Meir of killing his father and taunts him for hiding his impotence behind a cloak of piety and patriotism. In Meir's eyes Ishaq has become a liability, disloyal and a traitor – he is a weakling like his father and a danger to the security service. Meir does his duty to the state: he draws his pistol and executes Ishaq. The death, he says, will be recorded as an accident; Ishaq was careless while cleaning his gun. When Rahil and Munohin are told of Ishaq's death they agree that a murder has been committed and that they will expose Meir as a criminal – Rahil in America, Munohin in Israel.

The play appears to be over, but Wannous wishes to reinforce the liberal, conciliatory attitude represented in the play by Dr Munohin. In the final scene Wannous brings the doctor back on stage for a dialogue; Munohin's interlocutor is Wannous himself. Through this distancing device Wannous is able to use the authorial voice overtly and directly to comment on the situation in Israel. 'Wannous' tells Munohin that the doctor's noble character was the product of wishful thinking, but having examined the condition of politics in Israel he was encouraged to believe that this wish might be realised. Both characters agree that despite the deeply rooted

hatred poisoning relations between the two sides there are grounds for hope as long as there are people like Munohin working, however marginally, for reconciliation and co-existence. Both also agree that their mutual enemy is Zionism, and that Zionism, moreover, is not a phenomenon confined to Israel. There are also 'Arab Zionists': the rulers of the Middle East who abuse and oppress their own people, and the servants of those regimes who profit in various ways from the monopolisation of power. Wannous knew that by equating the oppressive Arab regimes of the Middle East with Zionism, the hated enemy and the anathema of all 'right-thinking' Arabs, he was inviting censure and vilification. Merely by daring to present a sympathetic Israeli character and calling on his fellow Arabs to consider the possibility of peaceful co-existence with Israel he was risking the reputation he had gained through his plays of the 1960s and 1970s. After the spilling of so much blood his change of heart would be seen by many as the act of a traitor.

DOCTOR: So you believe that people like me do exist.

WANNOUS: If that isn't so our history will be very dark.

[...]

DOCTOR: You don't know how brave I would have to be, to be a Jew who rejects Zionism.

WANNOUS: I can imagine. I myself need to be brave enough to present you.

DOCTOR: Is it hard to present characters like me?

WANNOUS: I needed to overcome so many obstacles. The denial of your existence. Political demagoguery. The fear of the defeated side that they would be deceived. The sea of blood and wounds [...] yes, I had to overcome all these obstacles to present Doctor Munohin.⁴²

The dialogue between Munohin and 'Wannous' is interrupted by Jadoun, Moshe and David, who seize Munohin and strap him into a straitjacket. 'Wannous' tells Munohin that, like Jeremiah, who prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, it is his fate to be persecuted by those in power. As he is being dragged away, Munohin calls out to his creator.

DOCTOR: And you Wannous, what is waiting you?

WANNOUS: The enmity of the Israeli and Arab Zionists.

DOCTOR: So let us feel pity for each other.

WANNOUS: Pity, and perhaps hope.⁴³

Conclusions

Broadly speaking, the theme of *The Rape* is the hatred between the two sides of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. This hatred has deep historical roots and is perpetuated and exacerbated by each successive generation, as Munohin explains to Ishaq. The story Al-Fari'ah tells her nephew is an example of this bitter indoctrination, and Sara, Ishaq's mother, recites to her infant grandson the story of David and Goliath, in which the Philistine giant is transformed into the direct ancestor of the Palestinians, thus emphasising the chauvinistic reading of Jewish history.

Despite the play's emphasis on sexual malfunction, sadism and neurosis, Wannous is attempting to bring reason and a diagnostic intelligence to bear on the conflict. The lurid symptoms are produced by the distorted politics of mutual incomprehension. Mua'ala recalls that Wannous accused those who attacked the play of having 'a 1948 mentality'⁴⁴ and of being stuck in entrenched positions. Wannous was charged with advocating peace at any price by 'Ersan and others, while many on the left could not understand why, in their view, he had abandoned the theatre of politicisation for psychoanalysis. The Syrian Marxist critic Hani al-Rahib has criticised the play, arguing that it 'depicts such an important historical problem with a vision that lacks any logical perspective. History is absent from the play, and one is amazed when a Marxist writer like Wannous resorts to Freud and discards history in all its forms'.⁴⁵ This judgement is surely flawed, since Wannous was deeply concerned to present the conflict in the light of a historical awareness that recognised the individual and took full account of his or her joys and sufferings. As he said in an interview given towards the end of his life,

I had illusions at every level, especially the human level. Now for the first time I feel that writing is a form of freedom. In the past I imposed on myself a kind of self-control, an internal control that disregarded legitimate concerns in favour of what I mistakenly considered important issues. For the first time I take pleasure in writing. I used to see the suffering of the self or individual characteristics as artificial, bourgeois or trivial matters which could be disregarded.⁴⁶

Although Wannous is speaking here of his work of the 1990s his comments may be justifiably applied to *The Rape*, which attempts to explore the roots of fanaticism

through an examination of how historical processes are expressed in the psychology of individuals. Wannous strives to be even-handed in his treatment of Israelis and Palestinians; although the Israelis are generally condemned, so is the greed of the Palestinian merchants and the treachery of the collaborators with the Israeli forces. Furthermore, both sides are censured for their brutality: 'Wannous' admits to Munohin in the final scene that 'our jails are no more humane or less barbarous than yours'.⁴⁷

In *The Rape* and in Wannous's theatre of the 1990s, dialogue is a central concern. The true creativity of the theatre lies in its being 'a place for reflection and the exercising of dialogue',⁴⁸ as he remarks in the introduction. The audience should be helped 'to carefully concentrate and enjoy the ideas presented by the play'.⁴⁹ The word 'enjoy' is significant; Wannous has already moved away from his notion of the theatre of politicisation, although surely Brecht would have wholeheartedly agreed with this formulation. But Wannous is no longer seeking to inspire revolutionary acts; he wishes to shake his audience out of their complacency and induce them to re-evaluate their circumstances in the light of a historical understanding that does not seek to relegate the individual to insignificance, or to dehumanise the enemy. In an interview published in 1994 Wannous argued that 'The first condition for making progress in the conflict is to face it with a historical awareness comprising the self and the other'.⁵⁰ In the same interview, given five years after writing *The Rape* and three years before the convening of the Madrid peace conference, Wannous stated that the essential precondition for dialogue was that the Israeli must reject the Zionist structure of his state and oppose Israel's policy and oppressive actions towards the Palestinians. 'When an Israeli [does this], I will exchange sympathy and hope with him. Regardless of any theological, racial and psychological prejudices, we are both oppressed and each of us finds himself in a dilemma he has done nothing to bring about and has had no share in creating'.⁵¹ In *Dr Munohin* Wannous created a liberal and humane Israeli who rejects 'the Zionist structure of his state' and uses his diagnostic skills to anatomise, and tentatively offer a painful but necessary remedy for, the deeply rooted hatred dividing Israeli from Arab. In a sense the dialogue between 'Wannous' and the psychiatrist is an internal one taking place within the playwright. It is an attempt to reach and understand the other through an effort of sympathetic imagination, but the effort cannot be merely emotional. In an interview given in 1991 Wannous said 'We are dealing with history, and this requires historical awareness. This awareness

demands that we understand both sides of the problem, its complexity, its conditions and its comprehensive nature, and what is pivotal and what is marginal'.⁵² One of the striking features of the play is the clear distinction it draws between Judaism and Zionism. In 1992 Wannous was interviewed by the American journalist Judith Miller. He told her that Syrian officials tolerated some of his more critical work because it enabled them to show the West that Syrians enjoyed freedom of expression. 'My very existence is propaganda', he explained. He pointed out that the Syrian censors had banned *The Rape*, and that *al-Thawra* and *Al-Baath* newspapers had been barred from publishing his name; like Israel, he was 'an abstraction'. The regime's displeasure had been aroused by the play's final scene. But Miller comments that Wannous 'could not bring himself to create a sympathetic Jew who believed in Israel's right to exist'.⁵³ Miller's point is well made and shows the limitations of Wannous's willingness to engage in dialogue. His 'essential precondition' meant that he was not prepared to talk to any Israeli who did not to a large extent share his own views on the political status and policies of the State of Israel: yet surely dialogue, if it is to have any real effect, must involve attempting to reach and argue with those who do not share one's premisses. Nevertheless the creation of Dr Munohin was a bold and controversial act which angered many in the Arab world.

The majority of responses to the play ranged from bewilderment to hostility and outrage. There can be little doubt that the Wannous of the 1960s and 1970s would have condemned the play, and those who retained 'the 1948 mentality' attacked it vehemently 'as if it were a scandal or treason'.⁵⁴ Some, it is true, admired the play and welcomed its challenges; others were appalled. Mua'ala comments that 'When Wannous first wrote *The Rape* critics in Syria were divided. Some were for, others were against the play. However, after the Madrid peace conference the strength of a great deal of this criticism diminished'.⁵⁵ Particularly hard to accept was the idea that, in Mua'ala's words, 'there is a Zionism that is still more offensive – the one that builds its nest in the Arab regimes'.⁵⁶ The prospects of peace muted the hostile voices, and, as Wannous sardonically remarked in 1994, 'ironically, those who condemned *The Rape* didn't condemn the negotiations, and if they did their voices were as low as a cat's mew'.⁵⁷

In 1986 Wannous was beginning to be aware of his new direction. Declaring his admiration for Chekhov, he spoke of the theatre he had yet to create: 'An art containing a new beauty is more progressive and positive than a work full of extreme

political statements'.⁵⁸ He still believed that the theatre of politicisation could be revived and developed as an experimental framework, although 'the *hakawati* could no longer serve a useful function'.⁵⁹ He remained committed to a 'realistic and rational historical project'⁶⁰ that would, through enlightenment, revive 'the democratic spirit'.⁶¹ But he acknowledged that he had had to abandon his earlier ambitions: 'This project might seem insignificant in comparison with achieving the modern state, unity, the liberation of Palestine and the triumph of communism, but I believe that this project is more profound and more urgent, and will have a great effect on the cause of history'.⁶²

Although al-Abdulla's thesis categorises *The Rape* as belonging to Wannous's theatre of politicisation, this judgment is surely misleading, since in many respects the play marks a departure from Wannous's work of the 1960s and 1970s. He is no longer concerned with the relationship between stage and auditorium, and no longer seeks to politicise the audience by providing them with a single incontestable truth. There is no absolute moral distinction between ruler and ruled, and while the play is set in a clear political context the emphasis is not on the big issue but on the individuals caught up in the current of events, on their passions, loyalties and choices. Neither side has a monopoly on truth, which is only to be discovered through honest dialogue, identification with the other, and historical thinking. In a 1986 interview with the Palestinian magazine *Al-Huriah*, Wannous emphasised the importance of this last prerequisite: 'Abdullah al-'Arawi [a Moroccan contemporary of Wannous] was right when he said that cultured Arabs need 'historical thinking'. Our relation with history is deficient in addressing the actions of history as a complex process socially and politically'.⁶³ This complexity is evident in *The Rape*, as is Wannous's new-found concern with individual psychology. In 1990 he modified some of the Palestinian scenes 'to give individual particularities to the Palestinian characters and to deepen both their individuality and their humanity'.⁶⁴ The play shows Wannous exploring a hard-won freedom, extending the boundaries of what was considered permissible to present on stage, and boldly challenging the taboos of his society. He had begun to liberate himself from the self-imposed constraints which had shaped his work in the 1960s and 1970s, but he would not break those bonds decisively until the 1990s, after he had been diagnosed with cancer. Being forced to confront his own death was a critical turning-point in Wannous's life; as decisive as the stunning blow of the 1967 defeat. In the 1990s he realised that although the theatre's revolutionary function had

proved illusory it could still be a place of intense reflection on the human condition. It could also be a place where, throwing off all conscious constraints, the imagination could be given free rein.

The Theatre of the 1990s

The Rape represents a radical modification of the theatre of politicisation and heralds a new phase in Wannous's writing, but it cannot truly be said to fully belong to that phase. Although Wannous is beginning to develop a dramaturgy in which several contesting voices speak their own truth and reveal themselves through dialogue, the play is concerned to present a rational framework through which a 'historical awareness' of the situation of the Arab peoples can be achieved. This emphasis on enlightenment and historical thinking indicates that Wannous was still loyal to the principles of his theatre of the 1960s and 1970s while recognising that his earlier approach was no longer adequate to address the political, social and cultural developments of the preceding decade. Thus in 1989 Wannous is still concerned above all with the movement of history and with a rational and scientific schema that will elucidate its dynamics. The key differences from his earlier work, among those already discussed, are *The Rape's* concern with individual psychology and its insistence that there is more than one interpretation of any phenomenon. In other words the play gives value to personal experience and attacks fanaticism and intolerance, whether the fanatic is a Jewish fanatic or an Arab one. Despite this bold innovation, however, Wannous does not permit the characters full freedom to develop; he, as author, is still the controlling voice, keeping a tight grip on the meanings that can be extracted from the events, and even appearing on stage in a dialogue with his Israeli counterpart. In this way the audience is directed by the playwright, who instructs them in how they are to react, challenging them to disagree and thus demonstrate their complicity with reactionary or unrealistic attitudes. The shocking and transgressive scenes of torture and rape disguise the play's connections with Wannous's earlier work, which are revealed by the final scene's emphasis on the vital role that must be played by courageous intellectuals committed to human values.

Wannous was still a Marxist, but he realised that revolution through class struggle had become a stillborn hope, and it seems that it was not Marx the revolutionary but Marx the acute diagnostician of social ills and the analyst of

historical change that he now looked to, possibly seeing in him a precursor of Taha Hussein, the Arab thinker he most admired and the ideal type of the humane, rational, secular intellectual. Of Marx Wannous wrote in 1991:

Personally I don't see any chance for historical awareness, or for understanding the structure of any society and the mechanisms governing its development, unless we use Marx's method and explanations. Regardless of what has happened in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, I believe that Marx has not lost his importance for us. No country that needs to understand its history and change its reality can afford to neglect his theories.⁶⁵

This passage appeared in *Qadaiah wa Shahadat (Issues and Testimonies)*, a quarterly edited by Wannous and two friends: the Palestinian critic Faisal al-Daraj and the Saudi novelist Abdulrahman Munif. Only seven issues were published, and the first, written by Wannous, concerned Taha Hussein. In these quarterlies Wannous wrote a great deal about Hussein, taking the opportunity to discuss the Egyptian thinker's ideas, developing his own views on global capitalism and consumerism, and attacking the reactionary Islamic clergy, who he saw as his real enemy, especially when the religious right allied itself with the political right. The influence of those clerics, he argued, was harmful to historical awareness, since it perpetuated pious myths about the past and obfuscated any understanding of contemporary events. These concerns are dramatised in Wannous's plays of the 1990s.

Wannous had praised Hussein in 1986 for his rational critique of Islam, which, like that of Abduh, provided the opportunity to understand Arab history 'as a history, not a holy and ambiguous incantation'.⁶⁶ In the Winter of 1990 issue of his quarterly he wrote that Hussein had employed Descartes' method of hyperbolic doubt, since it was necessary to distance oneself from all nationalist and religious bondage, and submit only to research based on scientific method. He went on to say that this would not be an easy task, 'because the backwardness of the medieval forces will be disturbed'.⁶⁷ Wannous noted that 'Hussein wanted to untie the politico-religious coalition since this is the only way freedom will be attained, knowledge will prosper and society will progress. The problem lies not in religion but when religion rules or becomes a tool of the authorities'.⁶⁸

In 1990 Wannous was diagnosed as suffering from cancer of the pharynx (he had always been a heavy smoker). Although a temporary cure was obtained, the remission did not last and in 1992 the cancer returned, attacking his liver. Given six months to live he began to write 'frenziedly' for the theatre; this, he said in his 1996 address to UNESCO, had been his strongest weapon in the battle against the disease. He went on to say that 'for me to abandon writing for the theatre as I stand at the outer limits of my life would be tantamount to an act of betrayal that would only hasten my departure'.⁶⁹ His awareness of his approaching death was to change his work. *The Rape* ends on a note of hope despite the arrest of Dr Munohin; from now on hope would be absent from Wannous's work, or, rather, it would be a hope against hope, for to despair would be capitulation. This bleakness infuses all Wannous's works of the 1990s, but he placed his faith in the survival of culture and his hope in the future of the theatre. In the Autumn 1990 issue of *Issues and Testimonies* he wrote of his determination to follow his chosen path even if it should prove to be a fruitless task.

The cultured nationalist who loves his country is living an irony today! He is marginalised both domestically and internationally, yet he is asked to accomplish tasks of great complexity in the face of capitalism, the absence of democracy, poverty, illiteracy and trivial propaganda. He is like Sisyphus rolling his stone up the mountain. He is doomed to roll it with no reward. He must accept his marginalisation and continue his work. He might be only a witness, a voice crying in the wilderness, but it is vital for him not to let defeat sneak through his defences and defeat his awareness. So let's push that stone...and carry on.⁷⁰

Historical Miniatures

(A long play in three acts)

If *The Rape* marks the beginning of the third and final phase of Wannous's career as a playwright, *Munamnat Tarikhiah (Historical Miniatures)* is a transitional work, for it too is concerned with 'historical awareness' and, while presenting a narrative that conforms to the generally accepted facts, offers a revisionist view of the Arab philosopher of history Ibn Khaldun that seeks to overturn the myth of the disinterested scholar. Thus the play is in certain respects the

counterpart of Brecht's *Life of Galileo*. But Ibn Khaldun is only one figure among the play's many characters, and *Historical Miniatures* also looks forward, in its complex structure and innovative technique, to the plays that follow it. The development of this new approach to drama would reach a peak in what is perhaps Wannous's most astonishing achievement, *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*.

Historical Miniatures takes as its subject Tamerlane's conquest of Syria in 1401, and specifically his siege of Damascus. Wannous is drawing comparisons with Israel's 1982 siege of Beirut in order to throw light on current experience;⁷¹ in this respect the play is similar to *Jabir's Head*. But the play is also an attempt to illuminate a particular historical event, and in doing so to call into question Ibn Khaldun's coldly objective stance, which – according to Wannous – placed disinterested enquiry above all other considerations. The action covers two months of the scholar's life, from his arrival in Damascus from Cairo to the sack of the city by the Tartars. Ibn Khaldun has travelled with Faraj Ibn Barqouq, the Sultan of Egypt, who has come to help defend the city against Tamerlane's approaching forces. Ibn Barqouq, however, quickly returns to Cairo in order to put down a rebellion against his authority and Ibn Khaldun decides to remain in the city, driven by his intense curiosity to witness a decisive historical event. Ibn Barqouq places the safety of his throne far above the danger threatening Damascus. Told that if Tamerlane is defeated with his help his throne will be supported by love and loyalty, he replies 'I can't sit on love and loyalty. I want my throne'.⁷² The parallel with the Middle Eastern despots of Wannous's own time is obvious. Tamerlane besieges the city and the elite are divided on the matter of resistance. The governor of the castle and a few of the elite decide to resist the siege; they are supported by the great majority of the citizens. The merchants, however, backed by most of the religious elite, fear for their status and possessions and wish to open the city to the invaders.

Ibn Khaldun takes a neutral position in this debate. It is not for the scholar to intervene in the course of history, he explains to his student Sharaf al-Din; nor should he be diverted from his position of strict objectivity by emotional or moral considerations. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun is eager to witness the vindication of his theory concerning the rise and fall of dynasties. The fall of the Arab dynasty in Syria is inevitable, and Ibn Khaldun can see no point in resisting the inevitable; he is also keen to meet and study the conqueror who is founding a new dynasty. Tamerlane crushes the resistance and Ibn Khaldun meets him, bearing gifts. The city, now in the

hands of the men of religion who had opposed resistance, is sacked and burned, and appalling atrocities are committed against the people.

Historical Miniatures is a work of epic proportions with a large cast of characters. It investigates, according to Wannous, '[that real] Arab history [which] has not yet been written; our ancestors were human beings and it is our right to know them as human beings who made mistakes or did the right thing; [we are not concerned with] sanctification and infallibility'.⁷³ The intention is not to politicise the audience, as Wannous had attempted to do in *Jabir's Head*. Instead, he wrote, it is to create 'a crowd of human beings'⁷⁴ and 'to cover these characters with flesh and blood and create for them a language, position and interest. [...] In *Historical Miniatures* there are no good or bad people [the play is not about good versus evil]; rather there are conflicting interests and different viewpoints'.⁷⁵ The evidence, however, does not support Wannous's claim that 'there are no good or bad people' in the play.

The use of the word 'miniatures' is significant, since it connotes a number of features relating to Wannous's method of construction. The play consists of three miniatures or acts, but the word 'act' is not used since it tends to denote the progression of a linear narrative. Similarly, instead of the usual 'scene' Wannous uses the word 'detail'. Thus he emphasises that the dramatic structure of the play is not that of plot development, but of a narrative interwoven with and interrupted by details which delineate in sharp focus the 'conflicting interests and different viewpoints'⁷⁶ the play is concerned to present. These relationships are not confined to those existing in the same miniature but are mirrored and cross referenced in others. Thus characters who never meet can conduct a dialogue which is articulated across all three miniatures.⁷⁷ Despite this 'democratic' schema, however, it is obvious that, for all Wannous's protestations to the contrary, the play contains, if not 'good' or 'bad' people, characters who are admirable and others who are despicable. Since his subject is the fall of Damascus and the betrayal of its people to a brutal horde, Wannous does not mince matters when apportioning blame and separating the guilty from the innocent.

The first miniature, which is divided into twelve details, is entitled 'Imam Tathli, or Defeat'. The first voice we hear is that of the Old Historian, whose role is to present a narrative describing the events dramatised in the play. He may represent the 'official' version of events that the play's structure of multiple voices seeks to

undermine, since ‘the real history of the Arabs has not yet been written’.⁷⁸ He appears to be a *Salafi*; that is, a traditionalist who looks back to the lifetime of the Prophet as the golden age of Islam, after which each successive generation has brought a new degeneration.⁷⁹ After his narrative the action begins. The citizens of Damascus are overjoyed that the army of the Egyptian Sultan has come to their aid, but the leading merchants fear the coming conflict will affect their trade and prefer to surrender the city to Tamerlane. The voice of Dulamah is representative of their fears: ‘[if war breaks out], we’ll be obliged to feed people from our stores ... we’ll lose our wealth and our position’.⁸⁰ Opposed to the timorous and grasping merchant is the senior cleric al-Tathli, who urges the citizens to defend their country and honour, and tries to get them to enter into a binding covenant that they will never surrender. Al-Tathli is a patriot, and were the play to limit his role to that of a hero he would be no more than a stock character from the pious myth of Arab history Wannous detested. In the event we learn that he has a darker side: his patriotism is nourished by a fanaticism that leads him to persecute any opinion that deviates from the strictest orthodoxy. In this respect he is the counterpart of al-Ghabra in *Al-Qabani*. He debates with Jamal al-Din al-Sharaiji, an enlightened cleric, who seeks to bring reason to bear on such theological issues as the nature of fatalism. To Jamal al-Din’s argument that ‘God has endowed us with minds to think, reflect and draw lessons from what we see and hear’,⁸¹ al-Tathli replies that ‘[...] argument in religion is sedition’⁸² and orders his followers to imprison and flog the unbeliever. It is surely no coincidence that the two clerics’ dispute should centre on the issue of fatalism, a vexed subject in Islam. If all is preordained, is one free to choose a course of action? Should one regard the flow of events as inevitable and submit to one’s fate? Islam regards this paradox as transcending human understanding and holds that human beings must behave as though they were free. However for al-Tathli even to dare to question an issue of dogma is tantamount to heresy. This debate seems to have a direct bearing on Ibn Khaldun’s theory of the rise and decline of dynasties and whether the scholar should intervene in the flow of history or merely observe and analyse it. There is also, surely, an oblique reference here to Marx’s famous remark about the need to change history rather than merely interpret it. In any case it is history, not theology, that is at issue in this play – or, rather: historical awareness is essential if we are to change history.

In *Historical Miniatures*, as in *The Rape*, Wannous does not shrink from portraying rape and torture on stage. One of the most harrowing scenes in the play

concerns Rihana, the young daughter of the refugee from Aleppo who has brought news of the atrocities committed by Tamerlane's army in that city. After witnessing the army's killing of her mother and brothers, Rihana has become mute. Her father, penniless and starving, seeks out the merchant Dulamah. He has disguised Rihana as a boy in order to protect her from violation, and now requests the respectable and wealthy merchant's help. Dulamah, learning that the mute boy is actually a young girl, agrees to buy her. Having paid 'a great deal of money'⁸³ for the girl, Dulamah binds her hands behind her back and assaults her:

(Rihana and Dulamah alone in his house)

DULAMAH: Now I will harvest my profits - by picking your honey-like fruits.

(He lies on top of her and starts to touch her body with his hands)

RIHANA: *(After a great effort to speak)* Ta..., Ta..., Ta..., *(loudly)* Tartar, Tartar.

DULAMAH: *(Engrossed in his sexual desire)*: Glory to the One who makes you speak.

RIHANA: Tartar, Tartar.

*(Lights fade)*⁸⁴

Dulamah has no redeeming features; he is a paedophile and a rapist, a miserly traitor who puts his wealth before the welfare and safety of his city and its people. He is probably the most despicable of all the representatives of that 'snake-like class' so often castigated in Wannous's drama, which contains not a single sympathetic portrayal of a merchant. While the clergy are often condemned, it is the reactionary clerics who are criticised, and in *Historical Miniatures* even al-Tathli is shown to be a patriot as well as an obscurantist, while Jamal al-Din al-Sharaiji, the progressive cleric and theological opponent of al-Tathli, is presented as an enlightened and cultured scholar and a martyr for the cause of reasoned debate and honest dialogue.

Wannous's detestation of the bourgeoisie stemmed not only from his own experience but also from the Marxist dictum that the history of the world is the history of class struggle. He saw no difficulty in finding correlations between the Israelis' siege of Beirut in 1982 and the Tartars' siege of Damascus over five hundred years earlier. In *Historical Miniatures*, as in *Jabir's Head*, Wannous is concerned with the

contemporary Middle East. The violence attending political conflict is graphically depicted in *Historical Miniatures*, as it had been in *The Rape*, and rape itself permeates the play. Most of Wannous's late plays protest against sexual subjugation of all kinds as abuses of power, and rape often has a socio-political and economic dimension in these works. Dulamah's rape of Rihana can be read as representing his class's exploitation of the people of the city. Wannous seems unable to extend to the merchant class the understanding he shows to the clergy and to other hitherto unsympathetic figures. It is surely a weakness of the play and an indication of its nature as a transitional work that Dulamah is not only a representative of his class but also has none of the 'duality' evident, for example, in al-Tathli. He is a character belonging to the sharp black and white dichotomies of melodrama. The play draws explicit parallels between the brutalities of the Tartars and those committed by Dulamah and his ilk. As Rihana later remarks to the madman Sha'ban, 'They are all Tartars, Sha'ban. Our people are Tartars and the Tartars are Tartars. It won't make any difference to us which of them kills us. They are all Tartars and you and I are strangers'.⁸⁵ Rihana and Sha'ban are minor characters, but it is a feature of the play that their voices are given almost as much emphasis by the dramatic structure as those of 'important' characters like al-Tathli and Ibn Khaldun.

Just as the act of rape has wider resonances, so the act of betrayal occurs in both the public and private spheres. The city is betrayed by the merchants and their allies among the clergy, and the wife of Jamal al-Din, the enlightened cleric, betrays him with another man. It is her lover, moreover, who betrays Jamal al-Din to the religious authorities. The theme of betrayal is central to the second miniature, 'Ibn Khaldun, or the Ordeal of Science'. In this miniature Wannous reviews the famous – or infamous, depending on one's viewpoint – meeting between the father of Arab historiography, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) and the ruthless conqueror Tamerlane (1336-1405). It is not necessary here to consider the career of either in any detail, but it is worth noting that Tamerlane claimed descent not only with justification from Genghis Khan but also spuriously from the family of the Prophet.⁸⁶ His early life and career are surrounded by legend, but what is clear is that his life was spent in warring against his enemies, often posing as a warrior of Islam, and that he 'used terror as a weapon, systematically massacring his enemies in hideous ways, and in terms of numbers of victims he outdid the Mongols'.⁸⁷ Ibn Khaldun's life was also highly eventful and marked by many vicissitudes. He worked as a scholar and teacher, and

later was appointed to and dismissed from the Cairo judiciary several times. His experience of the unstable politics of the Islamic West led him to formulate his theory of the historical development and decline of Islamic societies, in which the concept of 'asabiyya (group solidarity) was key. In his greatest and most influential work, the *Muqaddimah* or *Prolegomena*, completed in 1379, he elaborated this theory with an insight and rigour that later led to the establishment of his reputation as one of the supreme figures of Arab intellectual history.⁸⁸

In *Historical Miniatures* Wannous attempts a revision of Ibn Khaldun's reputation as a great intellectual figure whose theories fertilised such later disciplines as sociology and political science, and challenges his public image as a disinterested scholar. Al Souleman notes that most of the critical accounts and reviews of the play 'have been preoccupied with the unfamiliar and striking representation of Ibn Khaldun',⁸⁹ but this is testimony more to the ignorance of the play's critics than to the status of his theories among academics, since 'Ibn Khaldun remained a controversial figure even after his death', and his *Muqaddimah* was 'both respected and reviled by later scholars'.⁹⁰ Moreover, according to *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Ibn Khaldun's life has in general been judged severely, and 'There is certainly no doubt that he behaved in a detached, self-interested, haughty, ambitious and equivocal manner. [...] He has been accused of fickleness and a lack of patriotism'.⁹¹ Thus Wannous's 'revision' of Ibn Khaldun is no such thing; but the play's attack on the idol constructed for political purposes by pan-Arabist apologists provides a sharp lesson in 'historical awareness'.

Ibn Khaldun is presented as the epitome of the technical intellectual, the blinkered expert who pretends to an objective scholarship which is unmoved by notions of human sympathy, loyalty or compassion. It is illuminating to compare him in this respect to Dr Munohin in *The Rape*, who refuses to countenance the barbarisms practised by the Shin Beth: 'I can't hide behind the cold, detached mask of the physician'.⁹² Wannous noted that this self-inflicted intellectual myopia had become endemic among Arab intellectuals over the past two decades. Influenced by Western intellectual fashion, they had 'imprisoned themselves in the narrow confines of their academic specialisms for year upon year'.⁹³ Wannous began to radically revise his opinion of Ibn Khaldun when he read in the historian's own writings that obedience to power is necessary, and that Ibn Khaldun, himself a North African, humbly and obsequiously provided Tamerlane with detailed maps of his homeland's cities and

terrain. In 1366 Ibn Khaldun had conducted himself in a way that seems to foreshadow his actions in Damascus. He was at this time serving as chamberlain to his friend Abu Abdullah Muhammad, King of Bougie in North Africa. When Abu Abdullah was killed in battle by the Amir of Constantine, Ibn Khaldun, refusing suggestions that he should continue the struggle in support of one of Abu Abdullah's younger sons, handed over the town to the conqueror and himself entered his service.⁹⁴ Wannous puts the arguments against Ibn Khaldun's cold detachment into the mouth of the scholar's secretary, the patriotic Sharaf al-Din:

SHARAF AL-DIN: Do you understand the dangers of mapping North Africa?

IBN KHALDUN: What dangers? This is my task as a scholar.
[...]

SHARAF AL-DIN: But that doesn't justify helping him. I had rather God cut out my tongue before saying this – but this knowledge involves treason.

IBN KHALDUN: Be silent or I'll abandon you. Tamerlane himself has charged me with the task; how can I refuse? Besides, this is only a scholar's job after all; the maps I'm going to prepare contain no armies.
[...]

SHARAF AL-DIN: Does knowledge require me to lose my self-respect, flirt with every ruler regardless of his brutality, and sell my family and country?⁹⁵

Ibn Khaldun refuses to encourage the citizens to defend themselves against Tamerlane, and takes the merchants' side against the declaration of a *jihad*: 'Don't you realise that the nature of the religion has changed, and that the Arabs' *'asabiyya* has vanished? *Jihad* is impossible ... No ... Anyone who talks about *jihad* these days is either senile or a deceiver'.⁹⁶

Although the play refers to the Israeli siege of 1982, it should not be seen as applying only to a single event. Tamerlane, after all, was a Muslim, and Ibn Khaldun is surely meant to be understood as an example of those compliant intellectuals who 'imprisoned themselves in the narrow confines of their academic specialisms', the better to serve those 'Arab Zionists' castigated in *The Rape*. The central miniature is to a large extent the exposition of what Wannous meant by 'historical awareness'; and since Ibn Khaldun is generally regarded as the father of history as a science, it is clear that scientific understanding alone is not enough. Wannous conducts a debate, in the form of a dialogue between scholar and secretary, on the role of the intellectual in the

modern Middle East. If, in doing so, he is less than fully just to Ibn Khaldun, portraying him as a cowardly opportunist, it is to provide a 'negative example' of the kind to be found in his earlier work, notably *Jabir's Head*. In this respect also, *Historical Miniatures* is to be seen as a transitional work.

Wannous appears to have been unimpressed by the excuses made for Ibn Khaldun's behaviour, for example that in the fifteenth century the notion of allegiance to a country scarcely existed in the Muslim world,⁹⁷ and turns to more positive examples in the third miniature of the triptych: 'Azdar the Prince of the Castle, or Death'. In this miniature Azdar, the Caliph's sub-deputy, leads the resistance within the castle, which is the last remaining stronghold in the city. His watchwords are 'loyalty and obligation'.⁹⁸ He is a principled upholder of the Sultanate system and cares nothing for his own interests, being prepared to sacrifice himself 'for the sake of the country I belong to'.⁹⁹

As a man of intellect and imagination Azdar is far inferior to Ibn Khaldun, but there is no doubt where the play's sympathies lie, and the treatment of his character shows how far Wannous has travelled since the 1970s. Azdar is a loyal servant of the regime; twenty years earlier he would surely have been presented as a villain, with not a trace of the altruism and spirit of heroic self-sacrifice he displays here. His view that coups against the established order are 'conspiracy [...] and treason'¹⁰⁰ and his insistence on the virtues of stability and continuity are not mocked or condemned. Azdar is eventually forced to surrender, under pressure from the alliance of those working for capitulation, and the city is occupied. The conquerors behave as they had done in Aleppo, slaughtering the inhabitants without mercy and making no distinction between those who had opposed resistance and those who had sought to repel the invaders. Dulamah does not escape; he meets his end in a scene which mingles horror and the blackest humour in a way difficult to convey in a translation. The Tartar soldiers dangle him upside-down from his own ceiling over a fire, in an attempt to force him to reveal where his gold is hidden:

TARTAR: Where is your money?

DULAMAH (*croaking*): I've given you everything I have.

TARTAR: You are a pimp and a liar. (*To his men*) Blow the fire!

The soldiers stir up the fire. Dulamah cries and screams

DULAMAH: I don't have any! Haven't you checked the whole house?

TARTAR: Liar ... Liar (*Speaking to other soldiers*) Take his son and rape him.

Two soldiers drag the boy off stage

SON (*terrified*): Father! Father! Help me!

DULAMAH: Have patience, son. Show firmness.

TARTAR: [...] We will rape your entire family if you don't tell us where the money is.

DULAMAH: Do whatever you want; I have no money.

RIHANA: [...] You are all Tartars. He's hidden the money under the toilet floor.

DULAMAH: (*with his the last breath*) You've killed me you bi.....

*Rihana laughs and cries at the same time, while lights fade.*¹⁰¹

The play ends with a general massacre as the city burns. Wannous now creates an extraordinary and almost blasphemous image: Jamal al-Din appears on stage crucified and delivers a monologue describing his experiences since the fall of Damascus:

JAMAL AL-DIN: I am sheikh Jamal al-Din al-Sharaiji who believed in the importance of using the mind instead of parroting and copying. I believed that God, the most just, does not ordain weakness and humiliation for his slaves. [...] All of Damascus' imams and judges, the deputy Caliph and Azdar, who was kind to me but feared he would be blamed if he freed me, stood against my release. When Tamerlane prevailed, they took me to him, where I saw a number of imams and scholars sitting at his feet, among them imam Ibn 'Izz and Ibn Khaldun. [...] He asked what the charge was, and when they told him, his face became grim. He ordered that I be lashed and then crucified until the fate of God [death] should be fulfilled. I am bewildered by their unity on my case, in spite of the war and bloodshed that had divided them.¹⁰²

Jamal al-Din has been condemned to be executed as a criminal, but it is surely clear that he is to be seen as a martyr, and the reference to Jesus, one of Islam's most illustrious prophets, is inescapable. The parallel with Munohin/Jeremiah is obvious, as is the lesson: those who stand against the forces of reaction and plead for reason and

dialogue will be crushed. There can be little doubt that Wannous included himself in that company.

Conclusions

Although Wannous criticises Ibn Khaldun's arrogance and cold neglect of the people in *Historical Miniatures*, he wrote the play at a time when 'group solidarity' was at a low ebb in the Arab world, just as it had been in 1401. Had this not been the case, the play would not have been so readily applicable to the Middle East of the 1990s. Wannous stresses that fear, greed, self-interest, injustice and cowardice were the internal enemies that permitted Tamerlane to take Damascus with such ease and that those who sought to heal the wounds of division and thus indirectly strengthen the people's will to resist were persecuted and destroyed. In *Historical Miniatures* Wannous once again concerns himself with the relationship between past and present in order to draw lessons from the comparison. While not belonging to the theatre of politicisation, the play addresses above all the political situation in the Middle East in the early 1990s, and looks back in several respects to Wannous's theatre of the 1970s. Conditions had changed, however, and the play's central preoccupation is the problem of the role of the intellectual in this new situation and his struggle against ignorance and deliberate falsification.

In *Historical Miniatures* Wannous contrasts the cold detachment of Ibn Khaldun with the passionate patriotism of his secretary and student Sharaf al-Din, and the closed mind of al-Tathli with the questioning spirit of Jamal al-Din. Ibn Khaldun refuses to criticise Tamerlane in his works 'because the writing of history should not be based on emotions and prejudices'.¹⁰³ Although Ibn Khaldun is absorbed in the study of history, he qualifies as a technical intellectual because he is not one of those 'who tie their destiny to the destiny of their nation'.¹⁰⁴ In an interview given in 1994 Wannous elaborated on this idea. While the technical intellectual is concerned only with his specialism the [committed] intellectual 'is engrossed in his history, committed to his reality and conscious of the pressing need for cognitive enrichment and creative renewal, and his role is of great importance in these grim times'.¹⁰⁵ His duty is to shoulder 'the task of embracing the principles and ideas of the European Enlightenment . [...] of course, participation in this crucial task is not among the technical intellectual's concerns and he absolutely disdains it'.¹⁰⁶ In spite of all the

efforts of the Arab regimes to buy, co-opt, contain, threaten, tame and marginalise the intellectual, Wannous insisted that the intellectual must resist and persist. He rejected Ibn Khaldun's position and refused to tolerate 'neutrality in moral position in the name of neutrality in scholarship'.¹⁰⁷ This uncompromising opposition to any dilution of the role of the intellectual reflects his lifelong opposition to capitalism, represented in *Historical Miniatures* by Dulamah and the merchants.

Capitalism was for Wannous the prime agent separating intellectual achievement from humane and moral considerations, and he could see this process at play in the Arab world, where increasing numbers of 'technical intellectuals' were placing themselves at the service of globalised capital, particularly in the fields of technology and science. Wannous observed bitterly in 1994 that,

Recently capitalism has won the battle for dominance, and the overwhelming power of its media is vindicating its crimes, spreading its trivialities and selling the thrills of its consumerism under the motto of the free market. This ideology has emptied the noblest values such as democracy, freedom and human rights of their true meaning. It is being used as a tool to blackmail countries and governments to serve capital's political and economic interests.¹⁰⁸

In *Historical Miniatures* Ibn Khaldun's 'objectivity' serves the interests of Dulamah and the merchants, and despite his claim to have renounced his earlier involvement in politics, his provision of maps and information to Tamerlane is shown to be a political act, and a treasonable one.

The play also refers to the growing power of religious fundamentalism and the attempts of religious conservatives to ally themselves with the centres of power in the Arab world. The clerics refuse to join the resistance, believing that nothing can stand in the way of the Tartars' power; ironically the only religious scholar to oppose Tamerlane's forces is the ultra-conservative al-Tathli, whose actions bring about the martyrdom of Jamal al-Din. Wannous wrote in 1990 of the destructive influence of Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), the foremost ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, who argued that for Muslims, unlike Christians, there was no gap between faith and life.¹⁰⁹ Wannous saw Qutb as leading a flight from modernity and recognised that fundamentalism attracted many who had previously embraced a progressive and rational ideology centred on the power of the state. The failure of the project of

modernisation and national renewal had led many disillusioned intellectuals to put their faith in a rigid form of Islam and take refuge in a fantasy of a pre-modern Islamic society.¹¹⁰ Wannous vehemently opposed this tendency; hence his promotion of those Arab thinkers whose ideas could give an impetus to the establishment of a civil society founded on individual and human rights. It was necessary also to replace the pious myths of Arab history, and the wishful thinking that had led Wannous and many others astray in the 1960s and 1970s, by a clear-eyed reinterpretation and a rigorous investigation of past and present. This investigation, however, should not ignore or marginalise the individual or see all social phenomena in terms of the struggle to the death between the two classical Marxist antagonists, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Thus *Historical Miniatures* does not (with the exception of Dulamah) present characters who are no more than representatives of their class. Instead it attempts to provide, through a dramaturgy new in Wannous's theatre, a kaleidoscopic multiplicity of voices, each revealing its own struggle, tragedy or triumph. The 'pictorial space' of these miniatures is, dramatically speaking, a kind of open forum where each actor speaks his or her own truth. This multiplicity of voices includes the most marginal: Rihana and Sha'ban reveal the reality concealed by the Old Historian's complacent narration, which excludes compassion in the name of objectivity. Rihana and Sha'ban, though neglected by 'official' histories, show true humanity in their dealings with each other: Sha'ban gives Rihana a piece of bread, and his cry 'Mother, give me your breast; I'm hungry'¹¹¹ exposes the naked suffering buried by the historian's impersonal chronicle and the theorist's grand formulations.

Historical Miniatures takes place in a godless world. No comfort is to be found in religion; Jamal al-Din is martyred for his questioning of established 'truths', not for his faith. We should not leave our discussion without mentioning perhaps the most interesting of all the individual heroes presented by the play; she is Su'ad, the daughter of al-Tathli and the lover of Sharaf al-Din. She chooses to work with the resistance after her father's death and takes her own life before the surrender of the castle to the Tartars. As al Souleman points out,¹¹² her suicide is a final act of resistance which affirms her right to dream and to love in the face of the overwhelming historical forces that annihilate the ontological and the individual. Her awareness of the contradictions between the personal and the social dimensions of human existence makes her a precursor of characters in Wannous's later plays,

notably Almasah in *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*. Su'ad cannot share her father's rigid and comforting faith:

SU'AD: Where is God O Sharaf al-Din?

SHARAF: I don't know...

SU'AD: Are you having doubts like me?

SHARAF: I don't know...

SU'AD: Why doesn't He see us! Why has He abandoned us?

We are the righteous [...] Didn't He promise us
victory?¹¹³

Historical Miniatures is a Janus-faced work. While offering certain exemplary characters for the audience's judgment and thus looking backward to earlier works, those characters are, for the most part, realised in the round. The individual's contradictions and 'dualities' are given due weight, although the mosaic is too rich for any character development to take place. On the other hand the play looks forward to *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* and other late works in which any idea of the 'truth', of consensually agreed reality, vanishes into radical uncertainty and in which the individual becomes a flux of memories and potentialities. *Historical Miniatures* is thus to some extent a forum in which Wannous debates with himself, affirming the role of the committed intellectual and the virtues of patriotism in a world in which the old certainties were disappearing; a world, moreover, both illuminated and darkened by one particular inescapable certainty: his approaching death.

A Day of Our Time

(A long play in one act)

Between *Historical Miniatures* and *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, Wannous wrote two plays, *A Day of Our Time* and *Miserable Dreams*. *Yawm min Zamanuna (A Day of Our Time)* was written in 1993. The action takes place in the present and within a single day; a cold, murky winter's day described, as in the opening paragraph of a novel, by the narrator, identified by Wannous as the Author. On this perfectly ordinary morning, a commotion occurs in the headmaster's office of a girls' school. Farouq, a teacher of mathematics, erupts into the office 'like a storm',¹¹⁴ bringing alarming news. He has witnessed a fight between two girls,

Maysoon and Haifa, which has caused a disturbance among other girls, some of whom are making obscene jokes. Haifa has accused Maysoon of pimping for Fadwa, the prosperous madam of a local brothel, and of luring many female students to work for her. To Farouq's astonishment the headmaster is unconcerned; what worries him is that someone has written words on the walls of the school toilets insulting 'the Pr...'.¹¹⁵ The 'Pr...' is the president, whose portrait, showing the great man in full general's uniform, hangs in the head's office. The president is so awe-inspiring a figure that the head cannot even utter the title in full, merely pronouncing the first sound and gesturing towards the portrait. The head fears for his future if the perpetrator is not discovered, since his most important duty is not pedagogic or administrative but consists in 'protecting the school from the virus of politics and teaching the students the importance of loyalty and obedience'.¹¹⁶ The head regards Farouq's story of the girls' squabble as a trivial matter, and is anxious to know if any mention was made of the insults to the President.

Farouq cannot believe his ears, and is bewildered by the remarks of his colleague Thurayah, who says to the head that Farouq should turn a blind eye to what happened in his class, as 'They are mature girls, and their loyalty is beyond suspicion. Their fathers are influential people and hold high positions'.¹¹⁷ The head declares that he will call on the services of a graphologist to discover the culprit, and refuses to investigate the girls' prostitution at Madam Fadwa's. After Farouq leaves, Thurayah returns with a student who has been caught reading *The Attributes of Tyranny*, by the Syrian writer Abdulrahman al-Kawakibi (1855-1902), who is well known in the Middle East for his hatred of despotism.¹¹⁸ He called for the total reform of public life and spoke out against the autocracy of the declining Ottoman Empire, and Wannous respected him as one of the cultural heroes of the Arab renaissance. He is far from a hero, however, in the eyes of Thurayah and the headmaster, who immediately suspect the girl, Mona, of being the author of the offending graffiti. The head has banned al-Kawakibi's book and destroyed the library's copies; he is outraged that Mona should have brought it into his school. According to him al-Kawakibi was engaged in incitement and destabilisation. When he reads the passages underlined in Mona's copy he is scandalised:

HEADMASTER (*scanning the book*): The despotic ruler!
He muzzled the people's freedom! The enemy of the

righteous! He wants his subjects to be like a flock of sheep and loyal dogs! [...] (*As if electrified*) I seek refuge in God; this is disgraceful! [...] Open the interrogation, Miss Thurayah... No... My school will not become a den for the opposition and traitors!¹¹⁹

This first scene sets the tone for the rest of the play, which consists of a series of encounters in which the hapless Farouq discovers the realities of life in contemporary Syria. Farouq is comparable to Ibn Khaldun: though an insignificant figure, he is, like the great theoretician of history, a 'technical intellectual', albeit of a minor kind. He has hitherto been content to pursue his specialism – the teaching of mathematics – oblivious of the true nature of his society. The play exposes the corruption endemic in Syrian life, opening the eyes of the naïve Farouq through a series of darkly satirical episodes recalling the education of *Candide* in the ways of the world; but there is no happy ending in store for Farouq. Incidentally, Wannous's choice of his protagonist's name is significant: Farouq means 'one who distinguishes truth from falsehood'. In the second scene Farouq seeks the advice of the local imam. He wants to know if it is 'permissible for a believer to be silent in the face of abominable acts'.¹²⁰ The imam is being interviewed for the local radio and is giving his opinions on the minutiae of religious observance. When the interview is over the imam asks for his fee; to an Arab audience this is hardly a sign of devoutness. To Farouq's question the imam replies that of course one must speak out against sinful behaviour, but at the mention of Fadwa's name he changes his tune, accusing Farouq of malice and slander. Fadwa is a pillar of the community; her donations to the mosque far exceed any other benefactor's and her charitable projects benefit the whole quarter. She is a more worthy citizen than Farouq, who in the imam's opinion is corrupting his students by teaching secular subjects and distracting them from their religious studies.¹²¹

Farouq staggers out of the mosque, the Author tells us, 'sweating in spite of the freezing weather'¹²² and uncertain whether these experiences are real or 'merely a dream or hallucination'.¹²³ He decides that rather than go home he will visit Maysoon's father, 'Adnan al-Qadi, the city's administrator. Al-Qadi welcomes him, as his daughter and her friends consider Farouq an excellent teacher, and then tells him the story of one of his 'idealistic' employees, who has become insane and is about to be removed to a psychiatric hospital. Having been a model employee for twenty years, this employee has become disturbed, grabbing his manager's and

colleagues' testicles and shouting 'Our leader hasn't any balls'.¹²⁴ Only the lowliest employee, the tea-man, is spared these assaults. Even al-Qadi has been subjected to this offence, but has been prepared to overlook the matter. That very morning, however, the man has begun to shout 'Death is better than living in this fucking state!'¹²⁵ He uses the word *ta'rees* which literally means whoredom and pimping but it is also used as an obscene expletive. Referring to the state in this way is a step too far. Al-Qadi explains that the man's problem is that he has failed to conform to the demands of the new society.

All the principles and values we learned from our ancestors are fading like smoke. [...] We are living in a time of deep revolutionary change. Yes, teacher, unlike those that depend on slogans, [...] real revolution is opening our doors to the world market. [...] This great man (*he gestures towards the President's picture*) is the one who understand the importance of this openness. [...] Those who can't be flexible will end up in a mental hospital.¹²⁶

Al-Qadi is referring to the *infatih* (policy of the open door), so called after a law promulgated in Egypt in 1974. As Hourani explains, a number of causes led to it: the power of the United States, the need for foreign loans, an increasing awareness of the limitations of state control over the economy, and the pressure of private interests. The *infatih* consisted of two closely related processes: a shift from the public to the private sector (even in 'socialist' Syria) and an opening to foreign, and specifically to Western, investment and enterprise.¹²⁷ For Wannous the *infatih* had led directly to the triumph of capital in the Arab world and to the universal worship of consumer goods. Arab societies had prostituted themselves in the name of economic prosperity, abandoning in the process any commitment to democracy and human rights.¹²⁸ He saw all around him a submission to market forces that amounted to a moral collapse; the 'freedom of choice' offered was a parody of meaningful choice in the public sphere.

This 'insane' employee had been a model functionary, like Farouq, and like Farouq he appears to have undergone an experience which has changed his outlook radically. The parallel between his 'madness' and Dr Munohin's idealism is obvious, and their fate is identical. Farouq now hesitates to speak, but screws up his courage

and broaches the subject of Madam Fadwa. Al-Qadi's response is totally unexpected, and devastating.

FAROUQ: [...] Do you know that your daughter visits
Madam Fadwa's house?

CITY ADMINISTRATOR: Oh yes – and she likes your
wife, Najat, very much.

FAROUQ: My wife!

CITY ADMINISTRATOR: They meet at Madam Fadwa's.
She tells me your wife is the only one there who
deserves her friendship.

FAROUQ: [...] O the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth
– my wife is at Madam Fadwa's!¹²⁹

Al-Qadi tells Farouq that he is lucky to have such a wife, since his daughter and Madam Fadwa are highly discriminating in their choice of friends. Farouq rushes out blindly, and makes his way to Fadwa's. Her boudoir is described in some detail, an important element being the multitude of mirrors. Like the throne room in *The King's the King*, the boudoir has a symbolic significance: its seductive surface conceals the ugly reality of love reduced to a commercial transaction. Farouq feels no desire for her, and she tells him she has been waiting for the man who could speak to her openly and without restraint. She tells him her story: she became a madam because of her father's insistence that she reject her lover, who was not of her class, and marry a stupid, jealous man. Her husband destroyed all her hopes, dreams and yearnings, and threatened to defame Fadwa's reputation unless her father gave him half his fortune. Fadwa's father yielded to the blackmail and Fadwa resolved to harden herself and gain her revenge. She is now rich and dominates her husband, who has become one of her employees. Fadwa tells Farouq that she has learned to live in the real world, the 'harsh and violent world'¹³⁰ which she contrasts with the world of 'illusion and hypocrisy'¹³¹ inhabited by Farouq. As for his wife, she comes to the house because she wants to escape the endless economic difficulties Farouq's poor salary imposes on them, but she cannot tell him the truth because of his naivety and fragility, two qualities she loves. Fadwa is brutally honest with Farouq, as he had been with her: 'She's joined the real world because she knows that her husband is living outside his time. She knows that you're like a vase, and will be smashed once you enter the real world [...]. She visits us often, so that you can go on living in your fine world of rosy illusions!'¹³²

In the fifth and final scene Farouq and his wife sit in their kitchen; Farouq, deathly pale, holds a knife. His journey of discovery is over; he has now learned to 'distinguish truth from falsehood'. Najat is tormented by remorse and wishes to die. She tries to push the knife he holds into her body, but he resists. Everything she has done, she tells him, was done out of love for him and a desire to improve their living conditions. Farouq insists that it is he who must die, since he is out of time and place, while she has learned how to live in the real world. 'The veil has fallen from the face of the world',¹³³ he cries; 'it looks so ugly – split lips – O God, how ugly its face is!'¹³⁴ Najat convinces him that they should die together, and be carried to their last resting place in a bridal procession recalling their first happiness. They undress and make love, reiterating the words of the 'mad' employee, that death is better than living in the *ta'rees* of the state.

Conclusions

The premiere of *A Day of Our Time* took place at the Al-Qabani Playhouse in Damascus in 1996; ironically, the company was the National Theatre Troupe, which Wannous had attacked in the 1960s and 1970s. Wannous was by now a cultural celebrity, partly because his struggle against terminal disease had become widely known, and partly because he had been honoured as a significant literary figure by UNESCO. The title indicates that Wannous had temporarily moved away from the examination of history and its resonances in the present to an explicit concern with contemporary conditions, which are satirised with a barely suppressed fury. The play suggests that the 'obscene transformations' of the past two decades have created a culture in which all humane values are prostituted and polluted, and in which the only virtues are submission to the inexorable laws of the market and unquestioning obedience to the authority of the state, whose chief business is to ensure that nothing disrupts the smooth operation of those laws. To accede to these demands is wisdom and sanity; to resist them is madness or rebellion. In the metaphorical landscape the play depicts, those who willingly submit are considered well-adjusted, patriotic and devout citizens; those who resist are regarded as subversive rebels or dangerous fools. For those caught on the horns of this dilemma the only escape is death. It becomes clear to Farouq during his visit to Fadwa that the 'insane' employee became deranged when he discovered not only that his own wife and daughters had been visiting Fadwa

but also that all the other employees knew that their wives and daughters had been working in the brothel, and were not in the least disturbed. Only the lowly tea-man, we are led to presume, is exempt from this general corruption, since he is not one of the *infitah* group, nor the 'technical intellectuals' employed in the office. These employees, apart from turning a blind eye to the disgrace of their wives and daughters, also prostitute their own talents in the service of the state.

A Day of Our Time is profoundly pessimistic, despite Wannous's contention that the suicide of Farouq and Najat is an act of revolt against a cruel and oppressive reality, a rejection of 'ruin' and 'chaos' and a recapturing of the purity of their early love.¹³⁵ It surely cannot be compared with Su'ad's suicide, which asserts the strong individual's right to choose death rather than surrender to an ignominious fate. Wannous, however, argued for a positive reading of their suicide in terms that seem like a defence of his own reasons for attempting to kill himself. In an interview with *al-Hayat* newspaper in 1994 he insisted that '[...] this kind of death shouldn't be described as surrender or failure. [...] yes, since Farouq and his wife did nothing, but only killed themselves, there is a kind of surrender and failure. But why not call this death a protest against the death we suffer every hour of every day! [...] isn't our reality darker than the play? [...] No imagination, no matter how extraordinary, could match the obscenity and whoredom of reality'.¹³⁶ Here Wannous may be protesting too much; Farouq and Najat's suicide can at best be read as a romantic gesture, uniting in death two lovers who have recaptured their love and, in dying together, preserve its tender vulnerability. Nevertheless it is an act of despair, since Farouq is incapable of fighting against the *ta'rees* that encompasses him in all its ugliness; as he admits, he has no choice other than to leave a world in which he has no place.¹³⁷ He is incapable of revolt, unlike the 'mad' employee, or of subversion, unlike Mona, who draws the strength to resist, albeit clandestinely, from the writings of al-Kawakibi. In his interview with *al-Hayat* in 1994 Wannous spoke of Mona: '[...] the girl who reads al-Kawakibi represents this slim hope of reclaiming the Arab renaissance from grim oppression and its executioners'.¹³⁸ Here Wannous seems to be hoping against hope, and, significantly, placing his hope in the hands of a young woman. Nevertheless, none of the characters is shown as capable of challenging the existing state of affairs; the challenge is mounted by Wannous himself, who, as the Author, orchestrates the grim proceedings. In this play the authorial voice, having to some extent renounced its

prerogatives in *Historical Miniatures*, reasserts its supremacy. It is Wannous himself who constitutes the positive example, for his is the voice of articulate resistance.

The Author himself can be seen as the 'hero' of the play. There is no surrogate Wannous in *A Day of Our Time* because the satirical form permits him to be present in every line. It would surely be a misreading to imagine that Wannous is advocating suicide as the only available option in the *ta'rees* state. On the contrary; Wannous's other writings propose that one must learn from men like Taha Hussein – a heroic cultural figure without parallel in recent Arab history – and al-Kawakibi how to persist and survive in the 'cold, murky winter' of the 1990s. Persistence against all odds is not the same as hope, however, and there is nothing to be done but to grit one's teeth and, like Sisyphus, continue to roll one's stone up the mountain. What one can do is to warn those who, like Farouq, take refuge in their narrow specialisms that they are living in a fool's paradise, in a 'world of rosy illusions', as Fadwa puts it. Farouq is by no means unsympathetic: he is upright and honourable; he struggles to survive on a teacher's wretched salary; and it is his concern for his pupils' welfare that prompts him to undertake his journey of discovery. But he is naïve, and naivety is a luxury that no one can afford in the new world praised by almost everyone he encounters. Like Khaddour in *Poor Seller*, his naivety is his downfall; but times have changed, and now, the play suggests, the destroyer is not the brutal power of naked despotism but the seductions of the 'free' market, whose benevolent mask conceals violence and putrefaction.

Fadwa alone does not praise the new dispensation. She knows what lies behind the mask and acknowledges her degradation. She loves Najat – 'She is the dearest to my heart'¹³⁹ – because Najat is the only one among her girls whose motives are pure. Najat is humiliating herself out of love for her husband; like Shen Te in Brecht's *Good Person of Setzuan*, she realises that one cannot be virtuous and rich. It is perhaps this knowledge, not his wife's disgrace, that destroys Farouq's peace of mind and leads to his suicide. He also realises that he has not been a good teacher; it is not enough to be competent in one's own subject and impart technical knowledge. He has misunderstood the purpose of education, a purpose Mona grasps far better than he. As the headmaster acknowledges with pride, his school's function is above all to teach the importance of loyalty and obedience. Farouq has been complicit in this travesty; he has betrayed his charges and dishonoured his profession. This issue was, Wannous believed, of the greatest importance. He conducted an interview with the

Syrian literary scholar Anton Maqdisi in 1991, in which Maqdisi, a former teacher, excoriated the Syrian education system: 'Things are getting worse! [...] our schools are being used to inculcate propaganda and shallow slogans. Our teachers have become dead souls. From primary school teachers to university deans – they are all dead souls. Fear and hypocrisy have them in bondage; they have no courage or pride in their profession'.¹⁴⁰ Wannous was enraged by this state of affairs; for him education was the foundation of true progress and its deformation was a crime against the people.

A Day of Our Time moves with relentless pace from start to finish. It has none of the longueurs found in *Historical Miniatures*, a far more ambitious work in terms of dramatic structure. Its relative simplicity permits Wannous to focus the beam of his scorn on the vices of his time. Its most complex and powerfully drawn character is Fadwa, whose mirrors reflect the hideous glamour of the *ta'rees* that Syria had become, and who seems to represent the country that Wannous loved and detested in equal measure.

Miserable Dreams

(A long play in one act)

A Day of Our Time reduces the epic scale and public scope of *Historical Miniatures*; the action unfolds in a series of small functional spaces representing public institutions, school, mosque and government; it reaches its turning-point in a space which, though hidden and shameful, reveals the truth behind the public mask of those institutions: Fadwa's boudoir, and culminates in the purely domestic space of Farouq and Najat's kitchen, where the final act of their tragedy is played out. In his next play, *Ahlam Shakuiah (Miserable Dreams)*, completed the following year (1994), Wannous concentrates almost exclusively on the domestic interior. In this space he depicts the collapse of the nuclear family in the face of hostile social forces. It is the stony ground in which the seeds of love cannot germinate.

The play is set in 1963, the year the Ba'th party consolidated its power in Syria; this would have been known by a Syrian audience, but perhaps not to the Arab one. The choice of a precise year is deliberate and significant;¹⁴¹ according to Nadim Mua'ala, Wannous wrote, or began to write, a play on this subject in the 1960s, before

the outbreak of the 1967 war. Had he completed it, it would have been numbered among his early plays, but he abandoned it and only took it up again thirty years later, when – presumably – he extensively revised and developed it. Certainly it contains elements found in the early plays, most notably the intelligence agent and the pivotal dream scene.

The set consists of a small house and ‘indicates isolation and narrowness’.¹⁴² Two ground-floor rooms are divided by a stair leading to an upstairs room. The ground-floor rooms are occupied by two families, one of which is a childless couple; a young lodger lives upstairs. The articulation of this space is crucial to the development and significance of the action; any other arrangement would weaken the force and change the meaning of the drama. Such specificity is unusual in Wannous’s late work; usually stage directions concerning the set are minimal, a notable exception being the detailed description of Fadwa’s boudoir. Eight of the play’s nine scenes take place within this space, which is real and unreal at the same time, like the spaces experienced in a dream, which can be as meaningful as the dream-personages one encounters. The boundary between dream and reality is sometimes blurred in the play’s events, and certainly *Miserable Dreams* cannot be described as a naturalistic domestic drama. The focus of this dream-space is the upstairs room occupied by the lodger, about whom we know only that he may or may not be a student at the university. His character is deliberately undefined, since his dramatic function is to be a mirror reflecting the desires, fears and fantasies of the other characters.

The play opens in the right-hand room of the house. It is a cold night, and the middle-aged childless couple, Mary and Faris, are trying to sleep. From the first it is apparent that their relationship is not a happy one. Faris is imploring Mary to let him into her bed. He wheedles and cajoles, pretending to be a child; his language is reminiscent of Sha’ban’s cry in *Historical Miniatures*, but here the effect is grotesque. Mary answers him scornfully, and he remonstrates with her, reminding her that they are alone in the world; she has no one but him. Mary angrily denies this, saying that she has a son. Faris is taken aback, but Mary tells him that her son is upstairs, and that she will complain to him about Faris’s behaviour. Her husband is bewildered: ‘This stranger has taken over your mind. You’ve changed since he arrived. We don’t know where he comes from or what he does for a living [...]’.¹⁴³ Mary denies that her son is an illusion, but then, strangely, says that she miscarried him in the sixth month of her pregnancy, and that Faris spat on him as if the child were not his own. Even more

strangely, Faris allows himself to be drawn into his wife's fantasy; the tone here is very ambiguous.

Mary threatens to leave Faris and 'this poisonous life',¹⁴⁴ reminding him of 'the wedding gift' he gave her thirty years ago: the venereal disease that caused her to miscarry: 'I was innocent... I knew nothing of men... you polluted me... destroyed my purity... and left me diseased. I was ulcerating but I didn't know why... I didn't dare to ask. I've always been obedient, but my obedience has brought me nothing but infertility, sickness and affliction'.¹⁴⁵ This is the first time in thirty years of marriage that Mary has spoken of her suffering; what is more, she informs her husband that she has already told her 'son' of Faris's misdeeds. Faris is deeply perturbed and threatens to throw the young man out of the house, but Mary reminds him that the house is hers and that she will evict him unless he admits that her son has returned.

This scene sets the tone for the rest of the play, in which all our sympathies are engaged with the female characters, for we learn that the couple renting the room on the left are also locked in a loveless marriage in which the husband, Kathim, a drunkard and a bully, abuses Ghada, his wife. He is an agent for Syrian intelligence and cares more for his position than for Ghada or their three-year-old son, Thaeir. *Miserable Dreams* lays bare the wretched lives of the marginalised and oppressed and, though set in the early 1960s, takes a very different approach from that Wannous would have adopted in his middle period. We have already enumerated the key distinctions between the plays constituting the theatre of politicisation and the plays of the 1990s. It is especially noteworthy that this play not only includes important female characters, it makes them the focus of the drama. Through their sorrows and hardships the play reveals the disastrous effects on individuals of a socio-political structure characterised by ignorance and callous indifference. In such societies the family reproduces the dominant values inculcated by the ruling elite: the loyalty and obedience owed by the weak to the strong. Thus in marriage the dominant male is master of the house, while 'his' women submit. The unfortunate wives in *Miserable Dreams* have no one to turn to, since the play suggests that their own relatives endorse the systematic subjugation of women, believing that this is consistent with 'honour'.

The play can hardly be read as an attack on Islam: Mary is a Catholic, and when she is infected shame prevents her from seeking her mother's advice. She was given to Faris, despite her family's apprehensions, because she had reached twenty-five, had not received a proposal, and was likely to become an old maid, a

dishonourable and shameful fate. When Mary plucks up the courage to tell her husband, his reaction is typical of the ignorance and selfish attitudes of men conditioned by their culture to both desire and fear sex and to despise women as inferior creatures whose bodily functions inspire disgust: 'He said to me, while putting out his cigarette: women are so dirty; everyone knows how dirty they are'.¹⁴⁶ Mary has tried to recuperate her innocence and purity by denying her husband access to her body ever since her miscarriage; by doing so she has sought to compensate in some measure for her infertility. Her marriage is a marriage in name only; its emotional dynamics are complex: although Faris is considered the head of the household by outsiders, Mary combats his oppression of her by using the power she retains as owner of the house to mitigate his domination. She resents having to work long hours as a seamstress while he idles his days away and squanders her money gambling in cafés; yet, as the play's opening scene shows, he is dependent on her emotionally as well as financially, needily playing the role of their dead child. When the enigmatic young man, Bashir, takes the upstairs room and Mary seeks happiness and escape from her isolation by fantasising that he is her son, Faris's position is threatened, and his guilt, jealousy and insecurity erupt into resentful rage. The only course open to him, since he cannot regain Mary's love, is to find some means of ridding himself of the intruder. Wannous's choice of his name is ironic: Faris means 'knight', and would suit the heroic lover 'Izza dreams of in *The King's the King*; but a less romantic figure than this cowardly wastrel would be hard to imagine.

Equally repellent is Ghada's husband Kathim. Scene two depicts the wasteland of their abusive relationship. Kathim dominates his wife through violence, and though their marriage is not sexless the desire is all on his side; thus every act of intercourse is tantamount to rape. Ghada submits despite her disgust because to do so is her wifely duty, but, like Mary, she longs to escape, and Bashir's appearance releases fantasies which, like Mary's, have their roots in the past. The scene opens with Kathim, greedily devouring the meal Ghada has prepared. The little boy is asleep, and Kathim, already drunk, feels free to mistreat his wife. After striking her because the food is not to his liking, he initiates sex, telling Ghada 'You see how easy and pleasant life would be [if you obeyed me]'.¹⁴⁷ The next day Mary gives Faris money and he leaves the house. She and Ghada then talk about Bashir, how all three are united by their suffering – Bashir apparently weeps during the night – and of their feelings towards him. Mary has been able to unburden her sorrows to him, and Ghada

has fallen in love with him: 'I feel as if I'm living in a new world since I've met him'.¹⁴⁸ 'He treats me like a friend;' she says, 'telling me about his dreams and his reading. He can never have enough of reading, and he's never happier than when he's carrying a new book and getting engrossed in it'.¹⁴⁹ Although Ghada cannot imagine life without her husband, Mary imagines the two women living together with Bashir and without their menfolk. She believes that Bashir, whose name means 'bearer of glad tidings', has come not only to share her suffering but also to save Ghada. Although she longs for death and has asked Bashir to make arrangements for her funeral, she tells Ghada that she will prepare his bedroom for a wedding – his and Ghada's. It may be only a dream, but as Mary says, 'one must dream to be able to confront [oppression]'.¹⁵⁰

Kathim and Faris meet in a café, where they cannot be overheard by their wives. Kathim, an intelligence agent for the newly instituted Ba'th regime, wishes to recruit Faris into his circle of informers. Kathim resembles Hassan in *Poor Seller*, and believes that Faris would make an ideal spy because no one would suspect this poor, lazy and ineffectual man of working for the government. The play is to some extent an attack on Ba'thist methods of intelligence gathering, though the overtly political aspects of the play are not the most important elements, but serve to illustrate a dimension of Kathim and Ghada's marriage that links their relationship to wider political issues. As the events of the play occur twenty years in the past it is very unlikely that the state's censors would have been unduly concerned, and indeed *Miserable Dreams* was chosen to be presented by the National Theatre Troupe in 1996, as we have mentioned. However, had the early version of the play contained such an outspoken attack on the Ba'thist regime, its publication at that time might have attracted the attention of the authorities.

Kathim's work is important in terms of character, plot and theme. He is a poorly educated man who has found a way of overcoming his disadvantages by making himself useful to the regime. He is an enemy of democracy, and when Ghada tells him she is going to the toilet, he replies 'Give the Speaker of Parliament my regards!'¹⁵¹ He considers himself a patriot, like Jadoun in *The Rape*, and is enraged when Ghada expresses her disappointment at the break-up of the UAR, which had taken place two years earlier. This is another instance of the topicality of the abandoned work. It is clear that Ghada is both more intelligent and better educated than her husband; we have learned this in a dialogue between the two concerning her

brother who emigrated to Europe several years before and no longer replies to her letters. Nevertheless she continues to write to him. The play suggests that she identifies Bashir with her long-lost brother, although the extent of this identification remains doubtful. Kathim orders her to ask her brother to return to Syria, as the revolution needs men like him. Ghada refuses and defies his threats of violence but is beaten despite, or perhaps because of, her protests.

The fragmentation of the Arab world is mirrored in the microcosm of the family. Ghada's veneration of the Egyptian leader may be connected with her grief at her separation from her brother, who has unaccountably abandoned her, and with the sense of loss felt by many Arabs over the failure of their leaders to build on the achievements of those who had thrown off the colonial yoke. Nasser still appeared to these disappointed men and woman to represent the future of their nation, and so the collapse of the UAR and the installation of a dictatorship in Syria plunged many of them into mourning. This bitter disappointment, however, did not stifle the hope that Arab unity would one day bring freedom and democracy to the people; this was one of the 'miserable dreams' that sustained thoughtful Arabs at this time, until they were rudely awakened by the June war of 1967.

In making Ghada a young woman Wannous also makes her his contemporary; and by identifying Kathim so closely with the Ba'thist regime he seems to be equating his domestic tyranny with the party's dictatorship over the people. This is made explicit in the dialogue between Kathim and Ghada: when Kathim orders his wife to denounce the Nasserists in her letter, she refuses, saying that she loves Nasser. Kathim explodes with rage: 'What did you say? Have you gone crazy? Are you looking for trouble? Why do you want to provoke me?'¹⁵² Kathim's response to opposition is to resort to violence; he is ruthless in seeking out and crushing any resistance, and his brutality and paranoia impress his superiors to the extent that they promise him a 'substantial promotion'.¹⁵³ His attitude to his wife reflects his attitudes at work, and his domination of her is sanctioned by the patriarchal mores of his backward society, which the 'socialist' Ba'thist regime is doing nothing to alleviate. He reminds Ghada that her role is to serve his every need without complaint: 'Here, I am god. In this house, I am your lord whom you worship'.¹⁵⁴

Faris is determined to get rid of Bashir, but he cannot do it alone; he needs a strong young man with good connections. Their dialogue is a succinct illustration of how the weak can manipulate the strong. Faris first wins Kathim's sympathy by

describing Mary's fantasy concerning Bashir, portraying himself as a loyal and concerned husband, and goes on to cast doubt on the lodger's political allegiances. To drive home his argument, he sows seeds of suspicion regarding Ghada's fidelity. It should be noted here that a Muslim, and especially an Arab Muslim, would regard an unchaperoned meeting between an unrelated man and woman as a scandal. Kathim does not fully trust Faris and realises that he is being used, but Faris has said enough to convince him that something must be done: 'I won't let anyone stain my reputation'.¹⁵⁵ They agree to meet at midnight.

The pivotal scene of the play, and by far the longest, is one in which Wannous abandons naturalism completely. It is impossible to give a definitive interpretation of the images in this scene, which is unique in Wannous's mature work and recalls the fantastical events of *The Locusts*. It is possible that a great deal of this scene survived unaltered from the abandoned version. It is the only scene in which Bashir appears, and the events are so bizarre and disturbing that they may be interpreted as the dreams of the four principal characters. We cannot even be completely certain that Bashir exists, since he never appears downstairs; that is, in the space given to the more naturalistic scenes. In this upstairs dream space, the realm of the imagination, Bashir is first visited by Mary, who calls him her son and asks about his travels. It is possible that Bashir in this guise represents the young Wannous, who has immersed himself in European culture and forgotten his roots and his obligations to his people. Mary speaks of the river, which Bashir fears; this is difficult to decipher. It could mean life itself, or fertility, or the flow of time and history; in *Historical Miniatures*, the River Barada represents the unceasing flow of time and history and is a symbol of hope for the future.¹⁵⁶ Mary is strangely transformed: she looks wild, and her back is blue with infection and disease – a possible reference to the condition of the Arab world.

Faris now appears, also strangely altered, and acknowledges Bashir as his son. He too is disfigured: a dark blue breast has grown on his left shoulder, which issues black and poisonous milk. Faris forces the disgusted Bashir to smell it, this may be a reference to the oil wealth of the Gulf states, since Faris is wearing a headdress of the type worn by Arabs in those states; to the venereal disease given by Faris to Mary; to the poisonous regimes of the Middle East in general; or even to the distorted ideas of masculinity and fatherhood prevalent among men like Faris – or to all four at once, and much else besides. Faris tells Bashir that it is his (Bashir's) sister's scent – another expression of sexual disgust. Bashir's 'sister' is Ghada, whom Faris wants

Bashir to murder using the dagger he gives him. His deformity, he says, will not disappear until he sees her blood dripping from the dagger. Here Bashir is clearly identified with Ghada's absent brother, even though Faris addresses him lovingly as his first-born son. Bashir must kill Ghada before he can be welcomed into the tribe, since 'she has brought shame to us before our relatives and our enemies'.¹⁵⁷

Ghada appears, also transformed: she is dressed as a peasant and invites Bashir to join her in the work of harvest. Although this presumably relates to her memories of the times she worked in the fields with her brother, their moonlight encounter is explicitly sexual, although intercourse does not take place. The change of scene, from Bashir's room to a moonlit field of grain, seems to promise an idyll, albeit a quasi-incestuous one. But Ghada somehow knows that Bashir has been ordered to kill her. Bashir cannot bring himself to obey his father's command, and when Ghada leaves for the river he finds himself sinking into the mud of the field. Ghada rescues and comfort him, and asks him to touch her breast, but he is afraid. The scene changes back to his room, and he begins to recite a love poem. Kathim and Faris now burst in; Faris appears to be his usual self. Kathim shoots Bashir in the chest, and the two men carry Bashir's body out, intending to throw it in the trash, while Bashir, still reciting, insists that he has not died.

Each element of this dream scene invites a number of possible interpretations, no one of which can be definitive, since each operates on a number of levels. The entire scene, and indeed the whole play, could be Bashir's dream: the nightmare of the intellectual marginalised and persecuted by the forces of reaction, and forced to witness the degradation of his country. Needless to say Wannous never attempted to elucidate the symbols and images used here, but their references to corruption, disease and death, as well as to love, life and fertility, are obvious. Nevertheless the effect of the departure of Bashir is plain enough; the men have removed the one thing that made the women's lives tolerable. As Ghada says in the next scene, 'They can't bear it that we have our own dreams, or that a gleam of joy appears in our lives'.¹⁵⁸ Mary and Ghada, like the people at the end of *The King's the King*, are forbidden even to dream, since even dreams may threaten the power of the state and the men who serve it. In the next scene Kathim tells Ghada, who has just woken up, that he has just thrown out the young lodger together with his bags. Ghada is shocked and admits that she loves Bashir and wants a divorce. Kathim's reaction is typical. He beats her, while making sure she understands her position:

KATHIM: Your fate is tied to my fate until you die. [...] You're my property, and I'm ready to shed blood to protect my property. [...] You are under my control and you'll stay that way until you're wrapped in your shroud.¹⁵⁹

Ghada does not resist her husband's beating. The next morning Mary gives Ghada the book Bashir has left under his pillow: 'I'm sure he left it for you'.¹⁶⁰ Faris told Kathim during their meeting that Ghada was visiting Bashir 'to exchange books and novels';¹⁶¹ and this seems to have been the mainstay of their relationship, since as an educated woman she would have longed for intellectual conversation, something her husband could not provide. Kathim's suspicions are aroused by this revelation, as he cannot imagine an innocent relationship occurring in such circumstances, and in any case reading can have all kinds of dangerous consequences.

Mary can no longer bear to live with Faris, but she dare not leave him without Bashir's support, and as she is a Catholic divorce is impossible and suicide is a mortal sin. Nevertheless something must be done, since 'we're suffocating and the house is like a prison now'.¹⁶² She shows Ghada a box whose contents she has been intending to use for more than twenty years. If Ghada is not to end up like her, she says, they must act at once. Quickly they prepare and arrange their husbands' favourite delicacies. In the play's penultimate scene the women's desperate plan is carried out, with tragic consequences. Kathim and Faris are sitting at Kathim's table, congratulating themselves on having evicted Bashir. Kathim proposes that he should rent the vacant room, and exhorts Faris to stand up to Mary's objections: 'Be a man, Faris!'¹⁶³ Ghada brings the supper; she has made Thair promise not to eat with the men. Ghada goes back into the kitchen, and Kathim presses a morsel of the poisoned food on the boy, brushing aside his objections: 'Why would she tell you not to? She's a foolish woman, and if you listen to her you won't grow up to be a man. You're a man, and you must eat with men'.¹⁶⁴ Thair collapses to the floor and begins to vomit. Ghada and Mary rush in, but the child is already dead.

GHADA (*wailing*): I poisoned my son. I poisoned my son.
(*Staring at Kathim with hatred*) Why didn't you eat?
Eat! You killed my son and you didn't eat... Look at me... I'll eat. Is there anything left for me but to eat?

*Stretches out her hand to the poisoned dish and tries to put a handful of the food in her mouth, but Kathim catches her wrist and throws the dish away.*¹⁶⁵

Kathim now understands the plot, but prevents Faris from going for the doctor, as it is too late to save the boy, and in any case there must be no scandal. Everyone must agree to say that the child died from natural causes; he will see to the formalities. This moment echoes the cover-up of Ishaq's murder in *The Rape*, and Kathim is surely meant to be seen as another example of the 'Arab Zionist' so bitterly criticised in that play.

In the short final scene Mary prays while Faris tries to understand why she hates him. He proudly tells her about the work Kathim has promised him. Mary answers scornfully: 'That's just the job for you – to earn your bread from spying and hurting people. Oh God... How dirty your soul is, Faris!'¹⁶⁶ But Faris is content: 'Whatever you say... All I care about is making you happy'.¹⁶⁷ The play ends with Mary's anguished recitation of the Lord's Prayer:

MARY (*stammering*): Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread... and don't put us to the test – don't put us to the test...¹⁶⁸

Conclusions

Miserable Dreams continues and intensifies the focus on the individual begun with *The Rape*. Like *A Day of Our Time* it attempts to strip away the mask concealing the reality of respectable lives. In *A Day of Our Time* the target was the institutions of Middle Eastern society; here it is the institution of marriage in the sociopolitical context of the Arab world in general and Ba'thist Syria in particular. But while the imagery in *A Day* concerns the pervasive corruption and decadence flourishing under the new dispensation of global capitalism, in *Miserable Dreams* the emphasis is on stillbirth, infection and poison. The play can be read on several levels, but it gives the impression of unity because the social, political, psychological and symbolic levels are woven into a coherent dramatic structure. The drama derives from the tensions and contradictions between the private and public spheres, and it is in these tensions and contradictions that the tragedy lies. The individuals in the play have a wider

significance than their own narrow lives; their actions and feelings have a broader resonance. Thus, for example, Ghada's inability to imagine life without Kathim seems to reflect the plight of those in the Arab world who have lived for so long under despotism that they cannot envisage any alternative. Hope is stillborn, like Mary's son, because of the poisonous atmosphere of ignorance and submission that pervades the regimes of the Middle East. Culture is either destroyed or expelled, depending on which reading one chooses – and why not both? – by the servants of those regimes. The Arab nation is betrayed by those who are willingly seduced by European culture; and so on. Moreover, it is surely the case that *Miserable Dreams* is the most feminist play Wannous had yet written. Its focus is on the two women characters and their tragic lives; as for the men, one achieves his goals through manipulation, the other through violence. Both are emotionally stunted. *Miserable Dreams* is in large part a criticism of the patriarchal societies of the Arab world, and the only escape lies either in death or in an engagement with literature, with the imagination. Mary longs for death as for a bridegroom: 'Death for me is happiness. I'm waiting for it, Ghada, [...] There, I'll find the happiness and joy I've missed in life'.¹⁶⁹ In his next play Wannous liberated the submissive wife in a manner unprecedented in his work and which astonished the writer himself.

Rituals of Signs and Transformations

(A long play in two acts)

From the beginning, *Tuqus al-Esharat wa al-Tahwulat (Rituals of Signs and Transformations)* had a special place among Wannous's plays of the 1990s. His widow commented: 'Wannous was fond of all his plays, but *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* was his favourite, perhaps because in it he came closest to understanding the motivations of the human spirit'.¹⁷⁰ Wannous left a record of the process of writing the play in a note to the Beirut production.

When I began to write *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* I had a story that needed to be developed. But from the moment I began to write the first scene I found that my usual way of writing dissolved. A spring of feelings suddenly welled up inside me. I was amazed, I trembled and my breathing quickened. No... I'm not talking here about

inspiration; I'm not one of those who expect or believe in such things. What had erupted inside me was the layers of my obsessions and stored-up feelings. The doors holding back these feelings began to wear away and loosen. It seems that the changes that had been occurring under the surface of my long depression matured and, without any forewarning, overflowed their banks. This is not to say that there was a 'coup d'état' against the play's stance or vision, but the stance and vision were emphasised and broadened.

After that moment, which overwhelmed me internally, my relation with the text was a mixture of mental and physical reactions. The characters began to shed their skins and advance towards their frightful and intoxicatedly truth-telling nakedness. I too was peeling off my skin and diving into my nakedness. In bewilderment and fear I was probing the hidden and repressed mysteries that had lain neglected in the darkness of my soul.

The characters' choices and transformations were not merely actions that I created and harmonised according to a specific scheme; they and I were connected in an electrical field. Although I never lost the ability to distance myself from my characters which the technique of writing demands, I was continually overpowered by a synthesis of distance and unity. This was because in this work I never ceased, not even for moment, to trace the mysteries of these characters and their search for freedom, or to examine deeply my own freedom and my own mysteries.¹⁷¹

Rituals marks a crisis and a culmination in Wannous's late work. In composing it Wannous felt for the first time the intoxication of writing without an internal censor.¹⁷² The authorial voice, implicitly or explicitly present in the earlier plays of his final phase, now distributes itself in every nuance of characterisation, dramaturgy and plotting. Wannous has no need to appear on stage, use characters as surrogates, or act as narrator; to a degree unprecedented in his earlier work he disappears into the dramatic structure and becomes the drama. This sense of ubiquity and absence has prompted the Lebanese actress and director Nidal al-Ashqur to compare Wannous's achievement in *Rituals* to that of Shakespeare, and remarks on the play's profound and disturbing questioning of received ideas and its bringing to light the hidden, the taboo and the repressed:¹⁷³ 'The play is a cruel social lesson. After the moment when the first mask falls, the rest fall in sequence. Wannous wanted to build a house but he demolished a city'.¹⁷⁴

As Wannous points out in the preface, the plot of *Rituals* is based on a memoir by the Syrian politician and writer Fakhri al-Baroudi (1889-1966), published in 1951.

The particular incident in question is narrated in the story *The Solidarity of the People of Damascus*. The story concerns the political rivalry between the Mufti – the chief cleric of the city – and the chief of the nobility in Damascus in the later nineteenth century; however, as always, Wannous uses the original tale to point its contemporary relevance, and moreover treats it in such a way that the relevance to his own time overwhelms its significance as an examination of its original historical period, which is not true of, for example, *Historical Miniatures*. In the preface Wannous wrote that ‘the place is Damascus, and the time is the second half of the nineteenth century, but this is merely a formality’.¹⁷⁵

Nevertheless the choice of period is significant, according to al-Souleman, since the later nineteenth century was a time of transition in Arab societies, which witnessed ‘the emergence of the modern character’¹⁷⁶ created by the conflicting effects of the decline of traditional institutions such as tribe and family, and the emergence of the state and its new institutions. Since the traditional institutions were no longer able to protect the individual, the individual had to struggle against both the traditional norms and the new legislations of the state. Thus the period in which *Rituals* is set was characterised by the weakening of social and political institutions and by the decline of moral and ideological values.

It is certainly true that Wannous, not surprisingly for a dramatist, was drawn to periods of crisis or instability, in which conflicts and contradictions could be discerned which mirrored those of his own time. In *Rituals* Wannous concerns himself mostly with the affairs of men of influence, ‘hoping to raise questions and reveal problems which I believe exist currently and continually recur’.¹⁷⁷ However, unlike in *A Day of Our Time* or *The Rape*, the characters are not to be seen as merely representing their institutions:

The main characters in this work are individual beings experiencing conflicts of impulses, desires and choices. It would be a great misunderstanding if we did not read these characters through their individuality and the intensity of their inner realm, not as simplified symbols representing their institutions. The heroes of this play are not symbols and do not represent functional institutions; rather they are individuals with their own personal identity and sufferings.¹⁷⁸

The play is divided into two parts: 'Conspiracies' consists of eight scenes, 'Destinies' of seventeen. The actions of the characters in the first part determine their fates in the second. This might imply that the play focuses on character development, in contrast to Wannous's previous work, but the operative word here is 'transformations'. The characters do not 'develop' because they are not stable entities or harmonious selves. They are tragic subjects located at the focus of confrontation between the social and the individual, and the play traces 'the mysteries of these characters and their search for freedom'.¹⁷⁹

The events are set in motion by the actions of 'Izzat, the chief of police, who catches the chief of the nobility, 'Abdullah, disporting himself with his mistress Warda. The pair are dancing in 'Abdullah's private garden; 'Abdullah is drunk and has removed his clothes, which he has given to Warda to wear. 'Izzat arrests them and charges them with debauchery. He is not acting entirely on his own initiative, but to gain favour with the Mufti, who has been plotting the downfall of his political rival. 'Abdullah attempts to bluster and bully 'Izzat into releasing him, then tries to bribe him; Warda pleads for him, humbling herself before the chief of police, and begging 'Izzat to spare 'Abdullah and parade her in disgrace instead: 'I'm used to shame'.¹⁸⁰ To no avail; 'Izzat orders that the guilty couple be placed on a mule and exposed to public ridicule; they are then to be cast into prison.

Far from being pleased with 'Izzat's actions, however, the Mufti is angered by them. The news of 'Abdullah's arrest and humiliation is delivered to him while he is entertaining a group of notables and merchants, and he pretends to be outraged by the treatment meted out to 'Abdullah. Once alone, however, he reveals his mixed feelings. On the one hand, he is delighted that 'Abdullah has been disgraced; on the other, he fears that the incident will weaken the people's respect for authority generally and thus have repercussions upon his own position. These first two scenes set in motion the series of events that will transform the main characters into individuals very different from what they first appear to be.

The Mufti now seeks a solution to his problem: how is he to protect the prestige of the city's men of authority and at the same time eliminate the political threat posed by chief of the nobility? He also has another goal: to punish 'Izzat, who has gone beyond the limits of his duty and whose excess of zeal has endangered the Mufti's position. The Mufti resolves to save the situation by using Muamena, 'Abdullah's chaste and eminently respectable wife. He goes to see her and asks her to

help him rescue her husband. Briefly, the plan is this: Muamena is to secretly enter the prison where 'Abdullah and Warda are being held, and to take Warda's place, exchanging clothes with her. Warda, disguised as Muamena, will leave the prison, and 'Abdullah's good name will be restored. This ruse will also bring about the downfall of 'Izzat, who will be charged with wrongful arrest. He expects her to agree without demur, since the decision has already been taken by the city's notables, but Muamena agrees very unwillingly; she has no love for the cleric, not only because he is her husband's enemy but also because she considers men like him pedants with no understanding of life: 'You're a happy man, Mufti. One who thinks he knows himself is bound to be happy! I envy you your confidence and certainty'.¹⁸¹ She is a very well-read, and suggests that he read the *One Thousand and One Nights*, for such a book might soften his 'lifeless knowledge'.¹⁸² She realises that the Mufti's plan is to put her husband forever in his debt, to gain control over him and eventually to unseat him, but this is not the reason for her misgivings.

Muamena asks the Mufti why she should agree to help her husband, who is clearly guilty of infidelity and immoral behaviour, and expresses a further reservation that astonishes the cleric. The plan, she says, will expose her to dangerous temptation. She might be seduced by the substitution with Warda. It will be like walking on the edge of moral abyss. She is afraid that she will enjoy the game: 'My body will be shaken like a tree on a windy day'.¹⁸³ The Mufti insists that Muamena accept his plan, and she agrees, though setting as her condition that the Mufti shall divorce her from 'Abdullah.¹⁸⁴ At first all goes according to plan: Muamena is secretly substituted for Warda, and then the nobles of Damascus complain to the Governor about 'Izzat's false arrest and imprisonment of 'Abdullah and his virtuous wife. As a result of the plan 'Izzat is himself imprisoned, Muamena obtains her divorce, and 'Abdullah loses his position. Further developments issue from these events. 'Izzat goes insane in prison, contemplating his fate. 'Abdullah becomes a would-be Sufi mystic and wanders in rags about the city. Muamena asks Warda to teach her the arts of the whore; she changes her name from Muamena (believer) to Almasa (diamond) and becomes the most celebrated courtesan in Damascus. The Mufti issues a *fatwa* calling for the now notorious Almasa's death, then falls in love with her. She is killed by her own brother and the Mufti is removed from his position.

The most important of the secondary characters are 'Abbas and al-'Afsah, two of the Mufti's henchmen. Indeed they are important enough not to be considered

secondary. Al-‘Afsah, who has the reputation of being one of the strongest men in the city, becomes involved in a sexual relationship with ‘Abbas. While ‘Abbas uses sex as a means of dominating men, al-‘Afsah seeks emotional commitment and falls in love with ‘Abbas. When ‘Abbas rejects him he commits suicide.

It will be obvious by now that *Rituals* does not represent a total break with Wannous’s earlier work of the 1990s, but it certainly develops the themes found there in a way which can still astonish and disconcert. Arab audiences still find it shocking, and even critics have ignored certain aspects which remain taboo in the Middle East. The basic theme, as in *A Day of Our Time*, is the pervasive corruption and hypocrisy of the society the play is examining. As in the earlier plays, suicide, murder and sexual acts are presented on stage. The search for the self seems destined to end in madness or death.

Perhaps the two most significant characters are Almasa and al-‘Afsah. They are both marginal, as Wannous knew himself to be. Al Souleman rightly calls Almasa ‘the first true feminist character’¹⁸⁵ in Wannous’s drama, but fails to devote any space to Fadwa, her predecessor in *A Day of Our Time*. Had he done so he would have noted various similarities and differences. A key similarity is their relationship with their fathers; both patriarchs play a decisive role in their daughters’ lives. Like Mary’s father in *Miserable Dreams*, Fadwa’s father married her off to an unsuitable man, and this is the main factor that has led her into prostitution. Almasa’s father has more in common with Dulamah in *Historical Miniatures*: while outwardly respectable – he is a religious Shaykh – he raped many young servant girls when his daughter was young and, moreover, lusted after Muamena herself. After becoming Almasa, she confronts her father:

SHAYKH MUHAMMAD: You dare look me in the face?
Where did you learn this recklessness? [...]

ALMASA: Yes, O chaste man... I am possessed by the sexual desire that filled our house. [...] Who are you to tell me about morality when you were the one who ripened my body with the fire of his lust that never cooled? [...] Your eyes would hunt me everywhere – the toilet, the bedroom, my private place.

SHAYKH MUHAMMAD: Shut your mouth! May the Lord cut out your tongue. Satan has made you his home and his mouthpiece.

ALMASA: Was Satan the one who deflowered the maidservants before they had become women? [...]

Do you know that the most famous whore in Damascus was a maidservant in our house and you were her first teacher in the arts of pleasure and prostitution?¹⁸⁶

Almasa has not become a courtesan by accident. She has taken advantage of the Mufti's plan to reject her role as a respectable wife, not only to assert her freedom and liberate her body, but also because, although her father never touched her, her premature sexual education, in humiliating and disturbing circumstances, has prepared her for her transformation. Knowledge of her father's role, however, does not make her revolt illegitimate or valueless, but the play suggests that she is not simply rebelling for ideological reasons or heroically rejecting convention to explore her body, hitherto curbed and disciplined by patriarchy. Almasa does not choose the middle ground between respectability and prostitution, because she wishes to experience fully the opposite extreme of what she has been and in doing so gain a victory over her father's corruption and power and the general corruption of the city. Her challenge is blatant; the Mufti acknowledges the danger she poses to the 'good order' of Damascus: 'A woman with your strength and eloquence could destroy a kingdom of women'.¹⁸⁷

Almasa is aware that she is courting disaster. Her uncompromising insistence on flouting the conventions of her society makes an enemy not only of the Mufti, who is also tormented by his desire for her, but of her own family. Safwan, her brother, who has always been thought of as timid and squeamish, undertakes to purify the honour of his family and kill his sister. In his own eyes he is transformed from a coward into a hero, the dispeller of shame and upholder of the family honour, but for Almasa this kind of honour is bondage. Moreover, it is ineffectual; she defies her brother and his knife in words that recall those of Bashir in *Miserable Dreams*: 'O Safwan, I'm a story and stories can't be killed... I am obsession, yearning and desire [...] O my brother... You did nothing. My story will flourish now just like the gardens of al-Ghouta after a rainy winter... Almasa is growing and spreading. She is spreading with thoughts, obsessions and stories... stories... sto...'.¹⁸⁸ Incidentally al-Ghutah is the name of the region of fertile orchards and farms that surround Damascus. The farmers' main water supply is drawn from the River Barada, the waters that symbolised the relentless flow of history in *Historical Miniatures*.

Almasa is different from Fadwa in several important ways. Fadwa, despite her success, cannot be said to be a feminist character, since she in no way challenges the world of masculine power she finds herself in. Her victory over her husband has no wider resonance in the social realm. In pandering to desires of hypocritical and corrupt men she reinforces the social order. Her insight, born of bitter experience, is entirely negative; the world for her is a 'harsh and violent' place, and to deny this is to live in a 'world of rosy illusions'. The brothel itself, as the directions regarding Fadwa's boudoir suggest, is a synthesis of both worlds. Almasa, unlike Fadwa, is a cultured and very well-read woman, having devoured the libraries of both her father and her husband. She has no desire to submit to male authority, and seeks rather to subvert it; the Mufti is perturbed by her power and determination: 'You sin in a way no woman has ever done in this city',¹⁸⁹ he says, confused, but nevertheless decides to stop her from 'overturning the rules of our life'.¹⁹⁰ While Fadwa is a cynical and embittered survivor, Almasa is intent on liberation of the self from all that suppresses the body. '[...] fear, modesty, chastity, and feelings of impurity... from sermons, verses, threats [...]'¹⁹¹ She is able to live in the *ta'rees* state and to enjoy her freedom for however long she is given because she is able to accept that sooner or later she will pay the price society will extract for her disobedience. Had she been like Fadwa she could have lived to a ripe old age, but that would have meant death in life. She triumphs over her brother even as he kills her, for her stories, and what she has become, will remain to spread and grow like a garden in spring.

Almasa is a romantic figure, and cannot be said to be a tragic heroine, for she embraces her chosen destiny joyfully, and affirms life in the face of death. She is, in her own way, a visionary, and her death is a kind of secular martyrdom. The other transgressive character, al-'Afsah, is tragic, not because he kills himself but because his death is brought about by the callous indifference of his lover, 'Abbas. Al-'Afsah is an astonishing creation. For the first time in Arab drama the theme of homosexuality is treated with absolute seriousness and honesty. Furthermore al-'Afsah is a submissive, not a dominant, homosexual – in the Arab world, where homosexuality is a scandal, gay men tend to be either one or the other – and as such, if discovered, the butt of lewd jokes and physical attacks. His homosexuality is revealed, in an early scene, by the effeminate Simsim, one of 'Abbas's ex-lovers, who sits with them both and attempts to re-ignite 'Abbas's interest in him.

This theme, as al Souleman points out,¹⁹² has been ignored or avoided by all the play's reviewers. Wannous does not restrain himself in depicting the world of the homosexual, which the play situates in its sociopolitical context. The play presents that world with no regard for the sensibilities of its audience. Everything is revealed, including the naked male body, the sexual act, and the explicit and direct erotic language of the homosexual. The world of the homosexual in the Middle East, however, is not presented as one where hope can thrive, not only because of the intense disapproval of society, but because that world is divided between dominants like 'Abbas, who sees sex as a game of power he must win, and submissives like al-'Afsah. It is not a community supportive of long-term committed relationships. One of the play's ironies is that al-'Afsah, one of the strongest men in Damascus, is a submissive, and moreover one who is ennobled by love for an unworthy man. At first al-'Afsah is content to let the relationship proceed along lines dictated by 'Abbas. It is absolutely necessary to keep the affair secret; 'Abbas insists that they should continue to present one face to the world – that of strong men employed in the Mufti's retinue – and to enjoy each other in private, '[...] and be like everybody else, Abbas, just like everybody else'¹⁹³ adds al-'Afsah, consenting to the deception. Al-'Afsah grows tired of this hypocrisy, however, and wishes to reveal their love to the world. He shaves off his moustache and offers it as a gift to 'Abbas. This is al-'Afsah's transformation; he is willing to remove this precious sign of his masculine identity as a gesture of commitment to his lover. He will become a woman amongst men, inviting ridicule and even violent assault. 'Abbas, however, is unwilling to accept al-'Afsah's sacrifice, for it would signal his own disgrace; to openly declare his homosexuality would mean dismissal from his position.

The scene in which al-'Afsah gives 'Abbas his moustache is perhaps the most moving in the whole play, and one of the most touching Wannous ever wrote. Here the play dares to confront and openly challenge his audience's prejudices; al-'Afsah is presented as a noble and self-sacrificing character, who is prepared to risk everything for the sake of his love. The language is raw and real, and totally convincing, in contrast to Almasa's language, which is often highly poetic, and reveals her to be partly a symbolic figure, a goddess of nature and sexuality who is not polluted by her descent into the sordid world of the brothel. On this level she seems to embody the divine impulse of the libido, standing against the patriarchal condemnation and disgust with female sexuality as expressed by Faris in *Miserable Dreams*. She appears

to be beyond shame or guilt, and like Bashir she cannot be killed; her brother's knife is ultimately useless against the power of desire, which is unquenchable and renews itself eternally in stories of love. Yet she also seems to be beyond human love, since she has become immeasurably superior to the impure men who seek her favours.

Al-'Afsah, by contrast, is all too human, and in giving him such prominence Wannous throws down a bold challenge to conventional morality. The scene deserves to be quoted in full, but it may be possible to convey something of its pathos through a brief summary. Al-'Afsah enters to greet his lover; he walks and talks in an effeminate way, and he has shaved off his moustache, the sign of his masculinity. Abbas is shocked: 'God curse you; what have you done to yourself?'¹⁹⁴ Al-'Afsah explains that he has changed his appearance out of love. He has been afraid that 'Abbas is losing interest in him and may leave him. 'I wanted to be beautiful in your eyes. [...] I wondered, how can I satisfy my beloved? [...] An idea came into my mind... to give you the most precious thing I have, the thing that says "I am a man" to other people'.¹⁹⁵ He hands a silk handkerchief to Abbas; inside is his moustache. 'Now you can say to everyone in the city al-'Afsah's moustache is mine, and al-'Afsah is mine too – all mine! [...] I'm afraid you'll leave me. After you showed me my soul and gave me the joy I'd been looking for all my life – I won't be able to bear it if you abandon me! You don't know what you've done to me! You've changed me, you've turned me inside out!'¹⁹⁶ Abbas is amazed that al-Afsah is willing to risk public shame and humiliation – the contrast with Abdullah is telling – and is terrified that their secret will be revealed. Al-'Afsah's effeminacy disgusts him; he tells him that he would be ashamed to be seen with him, and calls him 'another Simsim'.¹⁹⁷ Al-'Afsah replies 'You're killing me, 'Abbas. I only did this for your sake. You know that what I've done will cost me dear. In our country it means death or worse!'¹⁹⁸ Weeping, he begs his lover to understand him: 'I won't be able to bear it if you leave me after you've changed everything I used to be. I'm as clear as water. [...] Didn't you tell me that you hate two-faced people? I've shown what's inside me, and I've nothing to hide. I wanted to make our love stronger and confess openly that I adore you. Our love has given me the courage to face people – and face myself too'.¹⁹⁹

'Abbas is mortified: 'You're crazy! You're talking like a silly tart who thinks she's fallen in love! [...] if you want the truth, love between men is impossible'.²⁰⁰ When al-'Afsah replies 'Yes, it's time you told me the truth... even if it costs me my life',²⁰¹ 'Abbas reveals his true feelings, which are those of a callous sexual predator:

'We fancied each other, that's all; as soon as I'd had you it was over for me. I enjoyed being on top of someone everyone thought was a hard man and seeing your body broken and humiliated'.²⁰² Abbas is revolted by al-'Afsah's 'womanish' appeals and refuses to accept that what he has done required courage. Al-'Afsah makes one last attempt to convince him: 'I've given up everything I have to be yours, to let everyone know I'm yours. Are you ashamed that I've sacrificed myself for you? If you understood love, you'd understand what I've done for you'.²⁰³ 'Abbas tells him that their affair is over, that the more al-'Afsah talks about love the more he disgusts him. Al-'Afsah realises that despite 'Abbas's condemnation of 'two-faced people' he belongs to the world of disguise and hypocrisy. 'Abbas is incapable of love; for him sex is nothing more than a game in which the only pleasure lies in dominating the other.

Rituals was considered so unacceptable in Syria that it has never been performed there, although in 2005 a German-Syrian troupe directed by Friederike Felbeck staged productions in Damascus and Germany. But even in 2005 the Syrian censors deemed al-'Afsah too shocking to be seen by the Damascus theatregoer, and his scenes were removed. Thus this play, 'the dearest to Wannous's heart' and dedicated by him to his daughter – 'a representative of the young generation to whom he was reaching out', Felbeck comments – still cannot be seen in its entirety in his native land. It is true that the printed edition is freely available, uncensored and unabridged, but stage performances are a different matter. 'Theatre has another kind of volatility',²⁰⁴ observes Felbeck.

While al-'Afsah's search for integrity leads to his suicide, 'Abdullah's leads him to undertake a quest, not for the assertion of the self but for the annihilation of the self in God. After being visited in a dream by his father's ghost he dresses in rags and becomes a Sufi mendicant. His asceticism and mystical yearnings are contrasted with the very physical yearnings of the Mufti, who abandons his religious scruples and becomes infatuated with Almasa, even going so far as to ask her to marry him, despite her having become 'a shame that stains her family'.²⁰⁵ Almasa amusedly rejects his offer, and to his questions 'Who are you, woman? What do you want? What are you looking for?' she replies 'I'm looking for something that someone with an untroubled soul like yours can't understand'.²⁰⁶ The Mufti and Almasa are the key heterosexual couple in the play, and their relationship mirrors that between Almasa and her father, Shaykh Muhammad. Both men are hypocrites who preach against vice during the day

and succumb to it at night, and Almasa attacks and undermines their dishonesty: bitterly in the case of her father, with irony in the case of the Mufti. There is a direct link between her father's crimes and her present situation: one of the maidservants he abused is none other than Warda, her husband's ex-mistress and now the madam of the brothel in which Almasa works.

The world of *Rituals* is one in which corruption is masked by hypocrisy and the self struggles to free itself from the prison of socially imposed meanings and behaviours. The play develops the notion of the disguise first articulated by 'Ubayd in *The King's the King*. As al Souleman notes, Almasa seems to be the only character to enter upon her transformation fully aware of what she must do to subvert that which constrains her.²⁰⁷ She agrees to the Mufti's plan knowing that the exchange of one disguise for another will initiate the eruption of a hitherto repressed self. Like all the characters who undergo transformation, she passes from one set of signs – her pre-transformation costume – through a ritual which involves the shedding of that costume and an experience of emotional if not physical nakedness and vulnerability signifying rebirth, after which she puts on the costume which will permit her to embark upon her new life. In the prison Muamena becomes Almasa by moving her body to the steps Warda has just taught her, in a dance that frees the body and signals farewell to the submissive wife she was only a few moments before. This transformation, though rapid, has been long prepared, like Abu 'Izza's transformation from buffoon to tyrant in *The King's the King*.

As in the earlier play, clothing in *Rituals* symbolises the wearer's social identity, but is also seen here as a barrier to the free expression of the body and its desires. Thus Warda prompts 'Abdullah to remove his clothes, 'this barrier of dignity and notability'²⁰⁸ and Almasa is even more explicit in helping the Mufti to take off the symbols of his authority: 'Throw off these burdens. Don't you want to be weightless and float?'²⁰⁹ Thus the transformation from self-deception to self-discovery, even if it leads to madness, death or social exclusion, is to be seen as necessary and positive. There can in any case be no going back; to attempt such a retreat would be to betray the self and life itself. Suffering is part of the process; and it is possible that in the play's redemptive scheme Wannous is recapitulating his own journey of discovery from the internal censorship of the theatre of politicisation to the joyful creative freedom of the 1990s, most fully realised in *Rituals* itself.

By the end of the play the world of the disguise, that is, the world in which we all live, has reasserted its dominance and claimed its victims. 'How strange life is!'²¹⁰ al-'Afsah says before hanging himself. 'If you lie and conceal you'll live with honour, but if you're truthful and reveal your secret they'll turn away and reject you [...] He loved me when I lied, and then despised and abandoned me when I became clear as crystal. [...] All the doors have closed. This world is unjust – only liars and counterfeiters can live in it'.²¹¹

'Izzat the police chief remains a minor character. We learn little of his time in prison, except that he has gone mad; like Fakhreddin in *The King's the King* he is driven insane by the effects of a substitution. He is rescued by 'Abdullah, who eventually is impelled by his conscience to inform the Governor of the Mufti's plot. 'Abdullah comforts 'Izzat, saying that spiritual darkness is worse than any physical jail. 'Abdullah seeks not to oppose the world of disguise but to transcend it into a mystical realm where duality ceases to exist. The self is an impediment in the search for oneness with God; ultimately it is an illusion that prevents the aspirant from attaining true knowledge of reality. The aspirations of the other characters are less exalted: they seek to throw off the bondage of an oppressive authority and to release the imprisoned self in order to relate more fully to others. For this to succeed, however, those others must also be in the process of freeing the self. The courageous individual who seeks to contest collective morality will be destroyed unless supported by a community large enough and educated enough to have an effect on society as whole. Nevertheless the play suggests that it is better to revolt and embrace one's tragic fate than to continue to live in a world of oppressive hypocrisy, and that in Almasa's case at least the effects of her revolt will be felt in the wider society long after her death.

Conclusions

In his works of the 1990s Wannous abandons revolutionary politics for a politics of revolt and a new emphasis on the individual character. This can be seen very clearly in *Rituals*. Each of the main characters – excluding 'Izzat but including al-'Afsah – is engaged by choice or accident of fate in a quest for the self that involves revolt of some kind against the established order. However, just as the notion of disguise is developed with some subtlety in *Rituals*, the self should not be seen as a

static, 'given' entity, but as a dynamic process of becoming that is essentially creative and which is given impetus by education. Since this 'self' is always engaged in contestation with those forces that would restrict it, its highest value is freedom. This is as true for 'Abdullah as it is for Almasa, although they follow different paths: he through the annihilation of the prison-self in the divine, she through the exaltation of the body and identification with nature. Wannous does not invite us to make a theological judgement and declare a preference; it is enough for him to attempt to convey 'the motivations of the human spirit', as his widow put it. Moreover, Wannous's excitement in writing *Rituals*, which he describes so vividly in his note to the Beirut production, surely came from his own sense of freedom, his sense of at last being able to write without having to obey the dictates of an internal censor.

This rejoicing in a new-found sense of freedom is probably the source of the play's vitality and richness, which overcome the grim nature of the characters' fates and provide a kind of consolation; and, in Almasa's case, death becomes a kind of triumph. Wannous seems to be affirming that freedom, culture and love cannot be subjugated for ever, whatever their fate in present circumstances. The playwright, as a marginal figure himself, identifies with and gives voice to the marginal and despised, far more honestly and self-revealingly than was ever the case in his theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. In revealing their 'nakedness and truth-telling intoxication' he revealed his own.

The Mirage Epic (A long play in one act)

Wannous completed two plays in 1995: *Malhamat al-Sarab (The Mirage Epic)*, and his final dramatic work, *Al-Aiam al-Makhmura (The Drunken Days)*. Neither of these develops the themes of *Rituals*, which has claims to be the high point of Wannous's late dramas, and it may be that he was more concerned with his autobiographical writings during the final stages of his illness. *The Mirage Epic*, though long, is a straightforward satire on globalised consumer capitalism. The plot brings together elements of the Faust/Mephistopheles story and the tale of Dracula. The play's central character is 'Aboud al-Ghawi, who has given himself to Mephistopheles, called 'servant' in the text. Al-Ghawi means 'deceiver' or 'one who

leads astray'. He appears 'old and [...] frail'²¹² at the beginning of the play, and intends to return from 'the West'²¹³ to his native countryside village to marry a young girl who might serve to revitalise him; his 'exhausted veins need fresh and youthful blood'.²¹⁴ He is one of the living dead, and has employed this strategy several times in the past, whenever his vitality deteriorated. Mephistopheles, al-Ghawi's 'servant', admires his master's character, which is 'without mercy or compassion'.²¹⁵ 'The more I live with you the more attached to you I become', he tells al-Ghawi, and praises him for being different from all the 'disappointing masters' he has had 'since Faust'.²¹⁶

The action of the play takes place in al-Ghawi's native village, which his wealth utterly transforms. He builds a gigantic leisure centre and shopping mall which combines every aspect of contemporary capitalist consumer culture: it contains, among other things, casinos, fashion houses, car showrooms and fast food restaurants. The villagers are mesmerised by this flood of goods and services, and do not object when al-Ghawi buys their land, transforming them from productive peasants into avid consumers and opportunistic bourgeois. As one of the peasants who approves of al-Ghawi's innovations says to his brother: 'What profit will you get from the land? You're working all year, but a tiny stall can bring in twice as much as a peasant can get working his land'.²¹⁷ Everything is 'modernised' – night club singers replace folk music and Mephistopheles employs al-Ghawi's former wives as manageresses of sex shops. Debt forces people to sell all they have, even their own children; a father gives his young daughter to al-Ghawi at the end of the play in order to clear his debts – surely an echo of the selling of Rihana to Dulamah in *Historical Miniatures*. Moreover, al-Ghawi's scheme transforms the peasants into anxious, harassed individuals who have lost their deep – one might almost say spiritual – connection to the land: 'in return for money', one says, 'we lost our happiness and stability'.²¹⁸

The only character not bewitched by this diabolical scheme is Zarka, an old blind woman who has the gift of augury. She is based on Zarka al-Yamama, a semi-legendary figure of early Arabic lore who was endowed with such piercing eyesight that she could discern an object thirty miles away.²¹⁹ She warns the people that 'one day they will know that what they are thrusting one another aside to possess will bring only death and ruin'.²²⁰ It is hard not to see her as a mouthpiece for Wannous's ideas; even though she is not given much to say her utterances are always powerful and the play's structure would collapse without her. The exchanges between al-Ghawi and

Mephistopheles are enjoyable, but her death scene is certainly the most compelling in the play.

At the end of the play al-Ghawi and his servant leave the village, al-Ghawi having 'regained his youthfulness and refreshed his blood'.²²¹ His agents will rule the village on his behalf. Zarka is killed by the villagers, prophesying that those who follow the path laid out by al-Ghawi 'will only inherit a mirage'.²²² The villagers kill her because they think she is a jinxed seer who is able through prophecies to bring about catastrophic events. Thus they become enraged when she foretells the departure of al-Ghawi and Mephistopheles, believing that she will make their 'benefactors' abandon them. The play does not in any way portray the peasants' way of life as a rural idyll, but suggests that they are enriching themselves in a way that will extinguish their culture. Zarka prophesies that the Arabs will be destroyed by the invasion of the global market, which thrives on dissatisfaction and envy: 'I see a terrible storm rising and advancing. The people are like a lonely child under the open sky – No one is protecting him and he has no shelter. The storm is terrible, roaring and advancing'.²²³

The Mirage Epic is a polemic against what Wannous saw as the destructive development of the *infitah* policy, which had begun in Egypt in the mid-1970s and which was twenty years later, a significant feature of all Middle Eastern societies, perhaps reaching its apogee in Dubai. The play's characters are of no great interest in themselves and are certainly not the site of an assertion of individuality against oppressive social forces. We are in any case a long way from naturalism here, and Wannous's voice is clearly discernible throughout, although he speaks most clearly through Zarka. As she lies dying, she says 'Tell everyone that Zarka has said that, had you not hastened her death, she would have been able to witness a sunrise after this long night [...]'.²²⁴ Thus a measure of hope is provided by the play, but it is hard to take this seriously, since her final phrase, a 'long night', is echoed by other characters as the play comes to a gloomy conclusion.

The play reiterates certain themes already articulated in earlier plays. The peasants argue about those who are enriching themselves by taking advantage of the opportunities provided by al-Ghawi: some think they are to be condemned as opportunists, others call them 'smart and successful';²²⁵ this recalls the arguments about Jabir in *Jabir's Head*. Similarly, al-Ghawi, like Fadwa in *A Day of Our Time*, builds a huge mosque in the village and is praised by the local cleric. Al-Ghawi's

motive, however, is more sinister. He hopes that within a few years 'the mosque will increase fanaticism and darkness, [...] and so the devil will have his share of the mosque just like God'.²²⁶ This is an extraordinarily courageous and prescient statement; a belief in free markets and a fundamentalist, literalist view of religion are by no means incompatible, and Wannous seems to be prophesying that their alliance will unleash diabolically destructive forces.

The Mirage Epic is not a complex play. It gives the impression of having been written quickly: Wannous seems to have needed to express his disgust at the encroachments of consumerism, which he saw as offering mere parodies of freedom. The language used is extreme: like Tamerlane, this modern invasion will bring 'death and ruin' in its wake. Wannous is also concerned with the loss of cultural identity in the mad rush to purchase an empty substitute which is dictated by the vagaries of imported fashion. In his essay 'An Interview with Anton Maqdisi', published in the winter 1991 issue of *Issues and Testimonies*, Wannous had written 'The men of the Arab renaissance such as al-Tahtawi (1801-1877) understood that their societies should be modernised politically, socially and intellectually. [...] For the past two decades our modernism has been all about wasting money on consumer goods. The situation is deteriorating and our subordination to Western capitalism is total'.²²⁷ Later in the same article he wrote 'Electronics, fashion and shop windows are not real modernisation, but only the peel'.²²⁸ And as late as 1996 he inveighed against the 'new masters of the world',²²⁹ the owners of computer companies and 'kings of the stock exchange'.²³⁰ These were, he said, people without morals who gave no thought to the fate of the world. It is clear that he never ceased to believe that capitalism is the enemy of mankind.

In *The Mirage Epic* Wannous seems to return to the certainties of the 1960s and 1970s, and to state categorically what freedom is not – having explored its potentialities in *Rituals*. In *The Drunken Days* he seems to retreat from this position and, while dramatising the struggle between traditional mores and the new ways of the coloniser, questions the nature of truth.

The Drunken Days

(A long play in a twenty-six short acts)

In *The Drunken Days* truth is presented as problematic; no one individual's recollection or interpretation can be taken as definitive. The play dramatises the search for truth conducted by the various members of a family living in Lebanon in the 1930s – the 'drunken days' of the title. The story of the family's secret is presented by a multiplicity of voices, as in *Historical Miniatures* and *Rituals*, and as in the latter the authorial voice is diminished. The play consists of twenty-six parts, comprising an interwoven accumulation of connected events and narratives delivered by several narrators.²³¹ Thus truth is presented as incapable of being objectively established or agreed by consensus. In the closing scene the *aragoz* (a kind of clown), who comments ironically on the events at various points in the play, demystifying the action, calls the truth 'a needle lost in a dunghill'.²³² Truth does not exist, there are only 'stories and news about the truth'.²³³

The search for some sort of truth begins with the memories of a character known only as *al-Hafid* (the grandson). He remembers that when he was about six years old his mother Laila brought home a silent and enigmatic old woman, who he learns is his grandmother, Sanaa. Sanaa's sudden appearance intrigues the grandson and makes him aware that his family is guarding a secret, which he later comes to think of as 'a wound that everyone tries to hide'.²³⁴ He also realises that he will never establish his identity and his name until he discovers the wound and opens it. He therefore begins to question his mother, who is at first very reluctant to answer him, and then persuades the other members of his family to give their own accounts, which may confirm or contradict the accounts narrated by others. The grandson recognises that these stories will contain 'illusions and lies'²³⁵ but that he has no option other than to follow the path he has chosen.

Laila's recollection of her mother's story centres on the internal conflict whose symptoms Laila has noticed. When in her late thirties Sanaa, the mother of four children and the wife of a respected businessman, fell in love with Habib, a Lebanese Christian.²³⁶ It should be noted that under Shari'a law, while a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman the reverse is not permitted. Sanaa therefore is not only shaming her family, she is also breaking a powerful religious taboo. Wannous is

concerned to make her transgression more extreme than an abandonment of husband and family. Sanaa is a Syrian; her father had given her in marriage to her elderly husband when she was only fifteen in order to protect his commercial interests; this is hardly a new theme in Wannous's drama. Her marriage is unhappy and recalls that of Ghada and Kathim in *Miserable Dreams*. Abdelqader, her husband, threatens to beat her if she fails to comply with his sexual demands and give him his conjugal rights.²³⁷ The situation is complicated by Sanaa's devotion to her Muslim faith; thus she seems to some extent to be a composite of Mary and Ghada in the earlier play.

The play dramatises her internal struggle by splitting her into two characters: Sanaa and the 'follower woman', with whom she conducts a series of dialogues. These dialogues mostly take place in the second half of the play, and the woman, who, significantly, wears a scarlet dress, constantly pleads the cause of love in an attempt to overcome Sanaa's conviction that her love for Habib has been a terrible mistake. This device is used more successfully than in the early play *Gush of Blood*, since here the two aspects are in continual dialogue. The woman, who seems to personify Sanaa's passion, is apparently an atheist, who disturbs Sanaa's prayers with the question 'Are you praying to God to torture you and make your life miserable?'²³⁸ Only death, she says, can release the living from the 'madness' and the 'dream' of love.²³⁹ The irresistible power of love and its ability to heal or destroy is another important theme of *The Drunken Days*.

Sanaa's story is set during the French occupation of Syria and Lebanon. Lebanon in particular was the centre of French culture in the Middle East, and under the administration of the High Commissioner the country was, according to the grandson, 'quivering with desire and debauchery. The High Commissioner [...] seized their minds, so that they gave up their traditions and values and, following their ruler, dedicated themselves to the pursuit of enjoyment and pleasure.'²⁴⁰

The theme of the conflict between traditional values and those of a foreign, imported culture is clearly linked to the central concern of *The Mirage Epic*. Moreover, the importance of clothing as a signifier of social meanings, which was emphasised in *Rituals*, is dramatised here in the third part of the play. Sanaa's children attempt to persuade their father to abandon his traditional costume and adopt European dress. They argue that Beirut is now a modern city and that he must relinquish his backward Ottoman dress and put on a suit, tie and hat; this change is politically trivial and culturally important; as in *Rituals*, costume is presented as a

disguise that signifies adherence to, or rejection of, certain social norms. The father reluctantly agrees, but insists on keeping his traditional headgear, his *tarbush*, which symbolises his 'culture and heritage'.²⁴¹ This episode is one of those commented on by the *aragoz*, in a scene entitled 'The competition between the *tarbush* and the hat'. The *aragoz* scenes offer a lively and satirical view of certain aspects of the action, but they are extraneous to the events and serve mainly to link the private world of the family to the public sphere, as al-Souleman points out.²⁴² The *aragoz* scenes also serve to accentuate the ironic, mocking tone of the play as a whole, and their inclusion marks a return on Wannous's part to a concern with staging and performance in which the role of the *hakawati* is distributed among a number of narrators. Al Souleman notes that the *aragoz* show is used as a play within a play, but Wannous's dramaturgy here is different from that of the theatre of politicisation. Rather than presenting a lesson through a dialogue between the stage and the audience, the dialogue takes place between the different elements within the dramatic space and is realised on multiple, overlapping levels.²⁴³ The *aragoz* could be removed from the play without damaging the essentials, but if performed skilfully could enhance the audience's enjoyment and emphasise the social meaning of the private passions dramatised in the main part of the text. The clown's dialogue, while not making light of the characters' sufferings, removes them from the grimness of some of the other 1990s plays and helps make a space in which the power of love may be dramatised.

While several characters willingly embrace the new ways brought by the French, others are injured by them. Sanaa's children are divided in their attitudes: her son Sarhan gives up his studies at the American University of Beirut to become a drug dealer, and later owns gambling clubs and brothels; he can be seen as a naturalistic counterpart of al-Ghawi in *The Mirage Epic*. His sister Salma works for him and is a regular frequenter of the High Commissioner's parties; for her, French culture is admirable in every respect, and she sees no value in her own. These two delight in the corruption of the 'drunken days'. Given Wannous's inveterate anti-Americanism, Sarhan's choice of university is not surprising and signals his willingness to reject his own culture in favour of that of the coloniser. In contrast, 'Adnan is presented as a principled character with a kind heart, which is somewhat surprising, because he is a policeman, and one would expect Wannous to make him unsympathetic, since his duty is to serve the colonial regime. But although in his loyalty to the ruling regime he resembles Azdar in *Historical Miniatures*, he is more convincingly drawn. Sanaa's

fourth child is her daughter Laila, whose love for 'Adnan's friend and colleague Shamil is an important dimension of the play. As an adolescent Laila witnessed her mother's desertion and became mute. Her power of speech is gradually restored by the love she shares with Shamil; thus her experience is the positive counterpart to Rihana's in *Historical Miniatures*. Shamil later becomes a member of the resistance and dies fighting the French, while 'Adnan commits suicide after failing to kill Sanaa as punishment for her transgression.

As for Sanaa herself, she is continually tormented by guilt, and ends her days muttering prayers. She is divided into a character who doubts, and a character who affirms the value of love and the rightness of her actions. Her love for Habib and her consequent abandonment of her husband and family bring social ostracism upon her, not to mention the threat of her sons' revenge. In the Middle East her own family would have been expected to punish her behaviour. In the event, however, her husband decides to let her go, Sarhan laughs at the very idea of an honour killing, and 'Adnan is unable to kill his mother when he confronts her. Thus in the plays of the 1990s we find three males who are charged with purifying the family honour by killing the woman who has shamed her relatives: Bashir, who refuses; 'Adnan, who fails; and Safwan, Almasa's brother, who succeeds but ultimately fails, since her stories survive and flourish. 'Adnan commits suicide because, unlike the rest of the family, he cannot live with his 'feeling of ugliness and shame'.²⁴⁴ He is the polar opposite of his brother Sarhan, who prides himself on his lack of illusions and relishes his immersion in 'the mud of this world'.²⁴⁵ In this respect they are perhaps echoes of Farouq and Fadwa in *A Day of Our Time*.

The play hints at complications in 'Adnan's relationship with Sanaa, but Wannous does not make anything explicit, in line with the *aragoz's* contention that the truth is elusive. For example, before killing himself 'Adnan confides to Sonia, one of Sarhan's whores, 'Mothers are strange creatures. They quench your thirst for love when you're a child, then leave you thirsty when you grow up. If they abandon you, you feel lost [...].²⁴⁶ Sanaa's relationship with Habib eventually becomes stifling: isolation and social pressure make their love overheat until it suffocates them. Habib insists on knowing all Sanaa's secrets, as if he wishes to incorporate her into his own being. Their relationship is contrasted with that of Laila and Shamil, which is based on mutual understanding, cooperation and sacrifice. Despite her experiences Sanaa is sure that love will heal her daughter's muteness, and encourages her in a letter, which

Shamil reads to Laila: 'Don't be afraid to love; it's a blessing and a gift that beautifies mankind and makes life a continual joy and an inexhaustible hope'.²⁴⁷ The play suggests that transgressions inevitably lead to suffering and even death, either for the transgressor or for those close to them; that the conflict between passion and social duty is not easily resolved; and that the truth cannot be established through consensus or the unreliable memories of witnesses, including the person whose story is being constructed. All that can emerge is 'stories and news about the truth'. Nevertheless, the *aragoz* tells the grandson, 'Only stories can ease our sufferings and heal our wounds. When people learned how to translate their afflictions into stories that would last for ever, they discovered a magical cure for their wounds and pain'.²⁴⁸

Love and the search for truth are two key themes of *The Drunken Days*, and these are interwoven with an enquiry into the true nature of modernisation. In this respect the play is a companion piece to *The Mirage Epic*, and may have been written concurrently; but the satire is far less savage and the characters are far from being mere puppets. Certain aspects of the play, however, seem to confirm Mua'ala's contention that, like *The Mirage Epic*, it was written hastily; and certainly Wannous was – as he acknowledged – writing 'frenziedly' for the theatre. For example, the confrontation between 'Adnan and Sanaa covers only two pages and seems dramatically unsatisfactory; and the *aragoz* interludes, though an interesting experiment, add little to our understanding and seem to be largely a formal exercise in technique. If *The Mirage Epic* and *The Drunken Days* represent a probably inevitable diminution of intensity in Wannous's dramatic writing after the high point of *Rituals*, it was perhaps because in 1995 Wannous was becoming preoccupied with what was for him new venture: the construction of an autobiographical text.

Finally, it should not be thought that Wannous is becoming a social conservative after the radical upheavals of *Rituals*; he is not bemoaning the passing of Ottoman customs but questioning the wisdom of adopting another culture and all its trappings without considering what might be valuable and vital in one's own. It was because this question was so important to him, and to a great many educated Arabs, that he continued to emphasise the contribution of the great figures of the Arab renaissance, particularly Taha Hussein. His admiration for Hussein had been expressed in an essay, 'Reclaiming Taha Hussein', included in the winter 1990 issue of *Issues and Testimonies*. The essay was in part a critique of Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, and discussed Hussein's emphasis on culture and knowledge as the

twin pillars of civilisation, and his insistence that 'independence and freedom are the tools of perfection and development'.²⁴⁹

About Memory and Death

(A collection of writings, including an autobiographical work)

The Drunken Days suggests that there can be no reliable way of constructing an unassailable version of past events, since social reality is made up of a number of conflicting interpretations. In 1996 Wannous published a collection of writings under the title *About Memory and Death*, which include an important autobiographical work, *Rihla fi Majahil Mawt 'Abir (A Journey through the Obscurities of a Passing Death)*, and a short dream-play, *Bilad Adiaq min al-Hub (Countries Narrower Than Love)*, which was probably written before *A Journey* but is undated. Much of the play's imagery is obscure, but the 'story' concerns two lovers: a writer, Nabil (meaning 'noble'), and Eva, a young girl. The play dramatises their search for a place where they can make love, a search which is always thwarted. The atmosphere is disturbed, almost nightmarish; an owl, bird of ill-omen, hoots at intervals throughout, and the lovers are helped in their search by a dwarf. Nabil speaks of his rejection of faith: 'I washed my hands of religion when I was fourteen years old'.²⁵⁰ Love is presented as a transgressive force challenging the conventional morality of the unimaginative; the lovers are persecuted as if they were criminals.

The dwarf tells the couple the story of two lovers who lived before the time of the Prophet. Isaf and Naila, who were also searching for a private place in which to make love. Finding none, they resort to entering the sacred space of the Ka'ba, but while embracing they are discovered by God, who curses them and turns them to stone. This story is not Wannous's invention, but few Muslims have heard of it, and according to Nadim Mua'ala those who have consider it an obscene blasphemy, since the Ka'ba, though originally sacred to the polytheists of Mecca, was pronounced holy by the Prophet Muhammad. The dwarf tells Eve and Nabil that the pre-Islamic Arabs revered Isaf and Naila as deities of love: modern lovers do not know how to glorify love or how to stand amazed before its idols. The lovers resume their search; Eva carries a book, while Nabil now holds a stone sculpture of Isaf and Naila embracing. The connection between the two pairs is reinforced by their initials. Eventually Nabil

and Eva arrive at a convent boarding school where Eva seemingly becomes a nun and Nabil looks forward to death. Eva remains in the convent after Nabil's death, endlessly painting portraits of him and then tearing them up, as if endlessly frustrated by the impossibility of finding an adequate means of representing a cherished memory.

This short work, probably written to be read rather than performed, defies clear interpretation, but suggests that love is a disruptive power that crosses frontiers and annihilates borders, and which exists in continual opposition to the oppressive social forces that value order and convention above beauty and freedom. Here those forces are identified with religious, rather than political oppression, and Nabil/Wannous expresses his defiance of all organised religion, not just orthodox Islam.

Although the focus of this study is on Wannous's dramatic work, the prose sections of *About Memory and Death* cannot be neglected, since the anthology embodies Wannous's attempts to go beyond the limitations of dramatic representation and use the techniques of prose writing to reveal himself without inhibition. In doing so he affirms that the self is not a fixed entity whose experiences can be categorised as real or fictitious. As the critic and curator Barbara Steiner and the artist Jun Yang point out, self-depiction is subject to change, as ideas of the self 'range from an imaginary coherent and autonomous self to one that is composed of many fragments'.²⁵¹ In the latter, the concept of the unified, narrative life story is replaced by a process in which 'the subject searches for identity, or rather for what is merely the possibility of an identity'.²⁵² Wannous does not attempt to create a coherent self but presents a mosaic of reflections which constitute a fragmentary image. These fragments and stories become a means of fashioning an identity which, in the words of Steiner and Yang, is seen as 'contingent and forever incomplete'.²⁵³ Thus, in writing such a text, Wannous is writing his own identity, writing himself.

In writing himself, Wannous paradoxically affirms his identification with not just his own people but with humanity in general. His suffering body and even his disordered thoughts represent human experience stripped of its pretensions, and he takes advantage of his desperate situation to confront his fate with uncompromising honesty. This honesty led him to examine his own feelings without constraint. When the friend who had driven him to the consultation at which his 'death sentence' had been pronounced exhorted him to be brave, Wannous wrote 'The word 'brave'

seemed funny to me! What use is it to someone whose departure has been confirmed? And why should I be brave? Don't I have the right to collapse, wail and weep endlessly? I shed two tears; then I found I had no more to shed. Isn't the inability to cry part of my inner emptiness that was preparing my death and pronouncing it?'²⁵⁴ This passage comes from a memoir, *Prophetic Memory*, written in France in 1992. In the same memoir, Wannous does not refrain even from criticising his own family: 'My father, my cousin and my sister were proud of the attention paid to my illness by the government and the press. My father even saw in my illness a source of prestige and superiority'.²⁵⁵ This disloyalty would have been shocking enough to Arab readers, but Wannous went further: 'In 1940, having awoken from a dismal dream, my father lifted my mother's skirts and lay on top of her. After less than a year I was born'.²⁵⁶ Such disrespect, one might say such callous disregard for his parents' feelings, was a sign that Wannous was now prepared to be brutally frank in revealing his thoughts and emotions.

Wannous's struggle against death was immeasurably strengthened by his sense of mission as a writer. By the mid-1990s writing was the only thing left to him, and through writing he was able to challenge the inevitable extinction of his consciousness by creating a legacy of stories, like those bequeathed by Almasa in *Rituals*. Nevertheless he had no illusions about the finality of death; as a lifelong and militant atheist he could not take refuge in belief in an afterlife. *About Memory and Death* is not a comforting book, but it is a book of revelations in which Wannous attempts to remove his own masks and disguises and to present himself as nakedly as he can. He reveals his wounds and gives up his secrets while acknowledging the irony that even this nakedness is a construction, a fiction that imposes order on the chaotic flow of experience, and that memory inevitably falsifies the past, which is constantly reinterpreted in the light of the present.

Nevertheless the project is an honourable one, and it is the duty of an honourable man to live with contradiction and illusion and not to lie to himself or to others. Truth may be 'a needle lost in a dunghill', but one must continue the task. Like Sisyphus one must be indefatigable; another model, both ridiculous and heroic, might be Don Quixote. In 1990 Wannous had refused to identify himself with the Spanish knight,²⁵⁷ but by 1996 he accepted the comparison: '[...] when I dream that theatre will be able to create dialogue, however weak, I may be like Don Quixote in his

enthusiasm and illusions; but we are fated to present our testimonies and hope that what now exists will not last for ever'.²⁵⁸

In *A Journey through the Obscurities of a Passing Death* Wannous confronts his dying self and attempts to find forms that might express the inexpressible.²⁵⁹ The narrative of his hospital experience is interrupted by three episodes, the last of which retells the story of Job, or Ayyub as he is called in the Qur'an. God accepts Satan's challenge to test Ayyub's faith by inflicting upon him all manner of intolerable sufferings, including sore boils that afflict his whole body. Wannous comments on the story by asserting his atheism and scornfully mocking the 'arrogant wager' conducted in the heavens.²⁶⁰ 'If we look hard at our world and the affairs of men we will find that inequality, injustice and unfairness are signs of the non-existence of God rather than his existence. Making use of God to face this corrupt world is useless. We must face ourselves and the world alone. Or...we must train our souls through satire to face this corruption and injustice'.²⁶¹ To proclaim oneself an atheist and thus challenge the growing power of Islamic fundamentalism would have taken courage, had Wannous not already passed beyond courage of that kind. He was contemplating death's door, which had swung open to admit him, and he identifies with Ayyub's sufferings but not his faith: 'Only hypocrites and villains can be happy in this life. God's hand beats only the righteous and tests them by the harshest agonies'.²⁶² Wannous denies himself the consolation Ayyub found in his faith, which gave meaning to his suffering, and he comes to doubt even the affirmation of mankind to be found in Greek tragedy: 'Whenever my wounds erupt and my frailty increases, I wonder whether life is really glorious and man is that miracle Sophocles spoke of. Ayyub shamed God into silence, but who can I shame? I have only this desolate certainty: from darkness I came and to darkness I shall return'.²⁶³

Conclusions

The final phase of Wannous's career as a playwright comprises a series of bold dramatic experiments in which he attempts to come to terms with the 'obscene transformations' that had taken place in his society and the wider world during the 1980s and 1990s. *The Rape* was written after a long silence in which he had begun to reexamine all his former assumptions, and marks a transition between the theatre of politicisation and his late work. The nature of Arab societies in the Middle East had

changed and was still changing; the *infitah*, among other factors, had ushered in dramatic and – Wannous believed – unwelcome and destructive developments, socially, politically and culturally. In particular, the theatre was marginalised as a forum for enlightened debate; ranged against it were the rapid growth of the mass media and popular entertainment on the one hand, and the forces of reaction on the other, especially those of the anti-modernist religious traditionalists who sought to impose their puritanical version of political Islam on the region. These new circumstances forced Wannous to reassess the position and role of the theatre and his own role as a dramatist. It was impossible to rekindle the ashes of an overtly political theatre whose function was to galvanise the audience into revolutionary activity. Moreover, Wannous had become disillusioned with the project of modernisation as he and some others of his generation had conceived it, since the Marxist ideology he had espoused had neglected the individual, considering any interest in the self to be a bourgeois indulgence and a distraction from the urgent matter in hand, which was to politicise the mass of the population.

In the 1960s and 1970s Wannous had written according to the dictates of an internal censor. His late work bears witness to a process whereby he strove to free himself from that controlling force, or at least to diminish its power, a process that culminated in the writing of *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* and the autobiographical prose of *A Journey through the Obscurities of a Passing Death*. This transformation did not happen at once; the earlier works of this phase are distinguished by a strong authorial voice, although a new interest in the lives of individuals is apparent, and the old emphasis on the relationship between stage and auditorium disappears. Wannous still thought of himself as a Marxist, and lost no opportunity to praise and promote the work of earlier writers who he considered had fought for secularism, democratic freedoms and the enlightenment of the Arab nation. In fact Wannous never gave up those ideals, but his late work dramatises them with a subtlety, complexity and imaginative power that far outstrips the didacticism of his earlier works – the exception being, perhaps, *The Mirage Epic*. Generally Wannous's plays of the 1990s no longer present unassailable truth but dramatises the key questions raised by this period of transition, in which we are still living and of which no discernible end is in sight.

The loss of a single viewpoint dominated by the idea of class struggle and the crude opposition of ruler and ruled opened for Wannous a vista of opportunity which

enabled him to deepen and expand his vision. Increasingly he sought to call into question every received idea and to challenge every prejudice that militated against the individual's dangerous freedom to think and act. His task as a secular intellectual was to accept loneliness and marginalisation and to continue to write in a world dominated by illiteracy and governed by tyrants, as Taha Hussein had put it sixty years before.²⁶⁴ The task of the theatre had also changed. As al Souleman points out, it had to develop and express a new sensibility which might create an alternative culture of resistance.²⁶⁵ The question of modernity, first articulated by 'Abduh and others and profoundly investigated by Hussein and his contemporaries, had to be reexamined from a new perspective. This entailed, not a decisive break with the ideals of the past, but an enrichment and expansion of those ideals to include the suppressed and marginalised forces hitherto neglected and ignored by the political discourse of the left. Perhaps 'perspective' is the wrong word here, since it implies a single viewpoint, whereas Wannous's theatre of the 1990s sought to embrace and dramatise a vision of diversity, multiplicity and contradiction.

Wannous's drama was influenced by Hussein's advocacy of radical doubt, but Wannous was also driven by the 'desolate certainty' of his approaching death, which led him to question the nature of truth, exalt love and freedom, and insist on the value of human relationships and dialogue. He struggled to find hope and meaning in a world that seemed increasingly devoid of both, and sought to discover and develop forms and language that would embody and express that struggle in all its dynamic complexity.

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- ¹ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ² Hassan Salama, 'Saadallah Wannous.... Why the 15 May?' In Syrian Ministry of Culture (Set) (1997), *The First Echoes of the Departure* (Syria: Ministry of Culture Press, 1997), p. 288.
- ³ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 438-443
- ⁴ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 103, 143-144.
- ⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 447.
- ⁶ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 100.
- ⁷ Salah Al Din Abu Diab, *The Presence and Absence of Saadallah Wannous* (Kuwait: Sua'ad Alsabah Publishing House, 1997), p. 71.
- ⁸ Hassan Salama, 'Saadallah Wannous.... Why the 15 May?' In Syrian Ministry of Culture (Set) (1997), *The First Echoes of the Departure* (Syria: Ministry of Culture Press, 1997), p. 288.
- ⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1986), p. 128.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ¹⁶ Taha Hussein (1889-1973) was a prominent Egyptian writer and educational reformer. Left blind by a childhood illness, he overcame this disability and studied at Cairo and the Sorbonne, later becoming Professor of Literature at Cairo University and emerging as one of the most prolific and controversial figures in the Arab world. His monumental autobiographical work *al-Ayyam (The Days)* is considered a milestone in modern Arab Literature. *Mustaqbal al-thaqafa (The Future of Culture in Egypt)* is his most systematic work of social commentary, in which he argues that Egypt was historically an integral part of the Mediterranean culture that gave birth to Western civilisation, and that therefore modern Egyptians should see themselves as part of Europe. Hussein was committed to the secularisation of national life in Egypt, and since his death he has become the object of attacks by conservative religious thinkers. He still towers over the Arab cultural scene. See *Encyclopaedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Rich Martin, Vol. 1, (Indianapolis: Ind. Macmillan USA, 2003), p. 325; *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 2, ed. John Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 148.
- ¹⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 492.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 493.
- ¹⁹ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ²⁰ For a discussion of intertextuality in Wannous's late work, see Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), pp. 86-97.
- ²¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 453.
- ²² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 64.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

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- ³³ Ibid., p. 112.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 113.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 114.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 110.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 133.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 134.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 145.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 147.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 151.
- ⁴² Ibid., pp. 145-146.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 167.
- ⁴⁴ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ⁴⁵ Abdulaziz al-Abdulla, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allāh Wannūs*, Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1993), p. 245.
- ⁴⁶ Mary Elias, 'Marks and Transformations in Saadallah Wannous's Journey', *Al-Tareeq* (February 1996), p. 99.
- ⁴⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 166.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 64.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 65.
- ⁵⁰ See Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Volume three (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 694.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 692.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 659.
- ⁵³ Judith Miller, *God Has Ninety-Nine Names* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 317. In Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 40.
- ⁵⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 169.
- ⁵⁵ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 694.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 455.
- ⁵⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1988), p. 113.
- ⁶⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 465.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 465.
- ⁶² Ibid., p. 465.
- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 453.
- ⁶⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 169.
- ⁶⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 528.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 450.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 487.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 488.
- ⁶⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Thirst for Dialogue* (World Theatre Day address), translated by International Theatre Institute (ITI), (UNESCO), <http://iti-worldwide.org>, accessed on 11 May 2003.
- ⁷⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 581.
- ⁷¹ See Ibid., p. 638.
- ⁷² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 376.
- ⁷³ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 665.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 668.

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- ⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 668.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 668.
- ⁷⁷ For an analysis of Wannous's use of this form see Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), pp. 82-86.
- ⁷⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 565.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 668-669
- ⁸⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 390.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., p. 338.
- ⁸² Ibid., p. 339.
- ⁸³ Ibid., p. 356.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 357.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 425-426.
- ⁸⁶ See Silkroad Foundation, Tamerlane (1336 - 1405) - The Last Great Nomad Power, (<http://www.silk-road.com/art1/timur.shtml>), accessed on 20 December 2005.
- ⁸⁷ Richard C. Martin, *Encyclopaedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (USA: Gal Group – Thomson Learning inc, 2003), p. 222.
- ⁸⁸ See Ibid., p, 336.
- ⁸⁹ Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 87.
- ⁹⁰ Richard C. Martin, *Encyclopaedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (USA: Gal Group – Thomson Learning inc, 2003), p. 336.
- ⁹¹ H.A.R. Gibb, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 828.
- ⁹² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 115.
- ⁹³ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 680.
- ⁹⁴ H.A.R. Gibb, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leaden: Brill, 1960), p. 826.
- ⁹⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 416.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., p, 392.
- ⁹⁷ See H.A.R. Gibb, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 828.
- ⁹⁸ See Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 354.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 428.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 352.
- ¹⁰¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Volume two (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 458-460. .
- ¹⁰² Ibid., pp, 456-466.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 360.
- ¹⁰⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 684.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 684.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 684.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 678.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 681-689.
- ¹⁰⁹ See Ibid., p. 558.
- ¹¹⁰ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 101.
- ¹¹¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 326.
- ¹¹² See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 91.
- ¹¹³ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 448.

- ¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 194.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 196.
- ¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 197.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 201.
- ¹¹⁸ 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1854-1902) was the key figure in the rise of pan-Arab nationalism. Born in Aleppo, he was forced to flee to Egypt by Ottoman intrigues. His two books, *Umm al-Qura (The Mother of the Villages)*, one of the names of Mecca, and *Taba'i al-Istibdad (The Attributes of Tyranny)* attacked Ottoman tyranny and called for an Arab revival. Among the many weaknesses of Islamic world he enumerated were fatalism, intolerance, lack of freedom of speech, inequality and injustice, hostility towards the sciences, and neglect of woman's education. He was by no means a secularist, but his advocacy of the temporal and spiritual dimensions of society represented a break with classical Islamic thought. *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 2, ed. John Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) , pp. 405-406; Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 78.
- ¹¹⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 205.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 210.
- ¹²¹ For examples of the absurdities occupying the attention of the clergy in Saudi Arabia, and their neglect of vital issues, see Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 22.
- ¹²² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 217.
- ¹²³ Ibid., p. 217.
- ¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 220.
- ¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 219.
- ¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 222-223.
- ¹²⁷ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 422-423.
- ¹²⁸ See Wannous's essay 'National Culture and Awareness' in Issues and Testimonies, Autumn 1999. in *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 570.
- ¹²⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 225-226.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 237.
- ¹³¹ Ibid., p. 237.
- ¹³² Ibid., p. 238.
- ¹³³ Ibid., p. 246.
- ¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 246.
- ¹³⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 690-691.
- ¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 690-691.
- ¹³⁷ See Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 246.
- ¹³⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 691.
- ¹³⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 238.
- ¹⁴⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 526.
- ¹⁴¹ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ¹⁴² Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 253.
- ¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 256.
- ¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 257.
- ¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 258-259.
- ¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 299.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 267.
- ¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 272.

- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 272.
- ¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 276.
- ¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 261.
- ¹⁵² Ibid., p. 264.
- ¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 295.
- ¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 265.
- ¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 282.
- ¹⁵⁶ See Ibid., 669.
- ¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 285.
- ¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 296-297.
- ¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 294.
- ¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 297.
- ¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 282.
- ¹⁶² Ibid., p. 297.
- ¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 306.
- ¹⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 310-311.
- ¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 311.
- ¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 315.
- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 315.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 315-316.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 275.
- ¹⁷⁰ Unpublished interview with Faiza al-Shawish, 19 March 2005.
- ¹⁷¹ Wannous record of the process of writing *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* in a note to the Beirut production. See Ahmid Sakhsokh, *The Songs of Wannous's departure: A Study of Wannous's Theatre* (Cairo: Egyptian and Lebanese Publishing House, 1998), pp. 136-137.
- ¹⁷² See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 214.
- ¹⁷³ See Ibid., pp. 17-18.
- ¹⁷⁴ Ahmid Sakhsokh, *The Songs of Wannous's departure: A Study of Wannous's Theatre* (Cairo: Egyptian and Lebanese Publishing House, 1998), p. 136.
- ¹⁷⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 469.
- ¹⁷⁶ Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 131.
- ¹⁷⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 469.
- ¹⁷⁸ See Ibid., p. 469.
- ¹⁷⁹ Wannous record of the process of writing *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* in a note to the Beirut production. See Ahmid Sakhsokh, *The Songs of Wannous's departure: A Study of Wannous's Theatre* (Cairo: Egyptian and Lebanese Publishing House, 1998), p. 137.
- ¹⁸⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 478.
- ¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 498.
- ¹⁸² Ibid., p. 496.
- ¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 497.
- ¹⁸⁴ Normally a woman must have her husband's consent for a divorce although she can sometimes ask a *Qadi* (religious judge) to dissolve the marriage. See Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 107.
- ¹⁸⁵ Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 118.
- ¹⁸⁶ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Volume two (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 549-550.
- ¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 555.
- ¹⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 596-597.
- ¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 555.
- ¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 555.
- ¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 554.

- ¹⁹² See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 123.
- ¹⁹³ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 492.
- ¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 540.
- ¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 540.
- ¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 540-541.
- ¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 541.
- ¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 541.
- ¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 542.
- ²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 542.
- ²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 542.
- ²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 542.
- ²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 543.
- ²⁰⁴ Ann-Katrin Gässlein Saadallah Wannous' "Metamorphoses" Staging Taboo Issues on a Damascus Stage (http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-310/_nr-173/i.html), accessed on 11 November 2005.
- ²⁰⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 548.
- ²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 553.
- ²⁰⁷ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 118.
- ²⁰⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 474.
- ²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 589.
- ²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 561.
- ²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 561.
- ²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 603.
- ²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 621.
- ²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 604.
- ²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 605.
- ²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 605.
- ²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 657.
- ²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 721.
- ²¹⁹ See H.A.R. Gibb, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. XI (Leiden: Brill, 1960), pp. 460-461.
- ²²⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 733.
- ²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 740.
- ²²² *Ibid.*, pp. 748-749.
- ²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 745.
- ²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 749.
- ²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 735.
- ²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 654.
- ²²⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 521.
- ²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 530.
- ²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 631.
- ²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 632.
- ²³¹ This 'intersecting of times and voices' is related by al Souleman to recent developments in the Arabic novel. See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 155.
- ²³² Saadallah Wannous, *The Drunken Days* (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1997), p. 125.
- ²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- ²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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- ²³⁶ It should be noted that under Shari'a law, while a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman the reverse is not permitted. Sanaa therefore is not only shaming her family, she is also breaking a powerful religious taboo. Wannous is concerned to make her transgression more extreme than an abandonment of husband and family. See Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 18.
- ²³⁷ Saadallah Wannous, *The Drunken Days* (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1997), p. 25.
- ²³⁸ Ibid., p. 9.
- ²³⁹ See Ibid., pp. 10-12.
- ²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 27.
- ²⁴¹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Drunken Days* (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1997), p. 19.
- ²⁴² Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa 'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 165.
- ²⁴³ See Ibid., p. 163.
- ²⁴⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *The Drunken Days* (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1997), p. 102.
- ²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 119.
- ²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 115.
- ²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 99.
- ²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 126.
- ²⁴⁹ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 480-481.
- ²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 41.
- ²⁵¹ Barbara Steiner and Jun Yang, *Autobiography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 11.
- ²⁵² Ibid., p. 13.
- ²⁵³ Ibid., p. 16.
- ²⁵⁴ Saadallah Wannous, *About Memory and Death*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1997), p. 81.
- ²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 86.
- ²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 118.
- ²⁵⁷ See Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 561.
- ²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 633.
- ²⁵⁹ For the structure of the text see Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa 'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), pp. 195-196.
- ²⁶⁰ Saadallah Wannous, *About Memory and Death*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1997), p. 123.
- ²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 125.
- ²⁶² Ibid., p. 124.
- ²⁶³ Ibid., p. 175.
- ²⁶⁴ See Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), pp. 480-481.
- ²⁶⁵ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa 'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 144.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

Wannous devoted his life to the drama, unlike most other significant twentieth-century Arab playwrights: Tawfiq al-Hakim, for example, was also an eminent novelist.¹ His work is characterised by constant experimentation: his early plays are marked by an attempt to dramatise the problems besetting the Arab world, and Syria in particular, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the UAR and the failure of Nasserism; the theatre of politicisation sought to arouse the audience to political action by redefining the relationship between stage and auditorium; and the late plays display an unprecedented freedom of expression and bring the individual to centre stage.

The early plays, though influenced to some extent by European models, were not informed by an understanding of the philosophies underpinning those models or of their relationship to their sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Wannous was mainly concerned with the dramaturgical possibilities they afforded, and adopted an eclectic approach to dramatic representation; he was never committed to such movements as Existentialism or the Theatre of the Absurd, as is evidenced by the ease with which he rejected their influence after the trauma of the Six-Day War of 1967. Most of his early work is essentially political in nature and dramatises the conflict between the individual and political authority, although reference to actual despotic regimes is made obliquely and indirectly, through hints and allusions.

In these works oppressed or marginalised individuals such as Khaddour in *Poor Seller* and the beggar in *Corpse on the Pavement* are shown as existing at the mercy of forces they cannot control, but it is not suggested that their situation is caused by an ineluctable fate or an unalterable 'human nature'; on the contrary, their oppression is shown to have a political cause. Nevertheless Wannous later repudiated his early plays as mere imitations of European models which were written for a cultured elite and which failed to address the most pressing issues confronting Arab

societies. This judgement seems too harsh; the plays do not avoid political issues, and they emphasise the responsibility of the oppressed to take control of their own lives and act to rid themselves of their masters. This is done through the use of negative examples, as in the case of the chorus of statues in *Poor Seller*, or by presenting a determined individual, notably the boy in *Unknown Messenger* and Ali in *Gush of Blood*. It is true, however, that these plays fail to fulfil the demands Wannous later made concerning his overtly political theatre. They were not written with performance in mind, being mainly influenced by the example of Hakim; indeed, they are examples of dramatic literature rather than of literary drama. This does not mean that they could not be staged, but they are not concerned with relationship between actors and audience, a relationship Wannous later considered crucial when formulating his conception of the theatre of politicisation. Furthermore, the early plays contain no class analysis such as Wannous was later to regard as being of major importance, and resistance to oppression and injustice, when it occurs, is made by individuals, not through collective action. For all these reasons, and probably also because Wannous considered these works to be juvenilia lacking aesthetic merit, he rarely spoke of them except to disparage them. The bleak humour, pessimism and air of nightmarish gloom to be found in many of them seem to reflect Wannous's mood of anxiety and disorientation during this period.

The catastrophe of June 1967 awoke Wannous to the need for a new kind of drama, but he was unable to respond to the challenge of the defeat until he had returned to Paris. The French capital provided the stimulation he needed to begin work on what was to become *Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, the first of his avowedly political plays and the work which initiated his theatre of politicisation. In particular, the events of May 1968 were to prove hugely influential on his thinking, since they appeared to show that a country could be brought to the brink of revolution by popular uprising, and that all political and cultural institutions could be challenged. It was during this period of ferment that Wannous felt moved to join a political group for the first and only time in his life. *Evening Party* marked a radical departure from his earlier concerns. In seeking to diagnose and dramatise the causes of the defeat, *Evening Party* – and its successors – directly attack the despotic regimes he saw as responsible for the weakness and disunity of the Arab world. Dramaturgically, the play reflects Wannous's newly kindled interest in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht and is dependent for its effect on the construction of a strong and direct relationship between

stage and auditorium. This relationship, Wannous hoped, would create an interaction between actors and audience that would incite the latter to take direct political action against the region's regimes, eventually securing the return of Palestine to its exiled citizens. The play is a literal call to arms, and stresses the importance of collective action and, by implication, the unimportance of the individual in social transformation. *Evening Party* was also a cultural call to arms against the region's government-sponsored theatres and their stupefying propaganda.

Although Wannous was profoundly disappointed by the critical and public reaction to *Evening Party*, he was not sufficiently discouraged to abandon his project of contributing, through drama, to the collective project of modernisation and enlightenment. He recognised that the theatre had become a forum and focus of public debate on the key issues of the time, and a dominant and defining feature of modernist culture.² He believed that theatre could change the world, and developed his concept of a theatre of politicisation that would express the complexities of the interaction between traditional culture and the modern culture of the West in order to make the audience aware of its potentials and responsibilities. To this end the new theatre combined Brechtian elements – and the Brechtian dream of a politically effective theatre – with elements drawn from the Arab heritage.

In drawing on his national heritage Wannous intended to use stories and characters from the past to shed light on contemporary issues and to reach out to his audience in a way *Evening Party* had failed to do. He saw the characters in *Jabir's Head* and *Al-Qabani* as contemporary, and mustered his powers to ensure that the audience would understand and act on the 'message' of the drama. The audiences, however, remained unresponsive, and Wannous was forced to accept that the theatre of politicisation had failed in its key aim; it had had no discernible impact on the wider world of Arab politics. Wannous's success in the GDR was a bittersweet reward, for he was acutely aware that his work was being used by the Syrian regime for its own purposes. He had escaped the censors only to become an unwilling tool of a government he despised.

The King's the King, written after a gap of five years, was an attempt to rectify the errors Wannous believed were being committed by his fellow dramatists, who had treated political issues with insufficient seriousness since the 'victory' of 1973. Abandoning the complexity that had characterised his experiments synthesising Brechtian techniques and Arab traditions, Wannous produced a lesson in politics,

strongly didactic and closely following what he conceived to be the Brechtian method, that he hoped would articulate in the clearest possible way the choice facing his fellow Arabs – in a phrase, ‘Socialism or barbarism’.

Again, Wannous was disappointed with the reaction to the play, blaming the director of the Damascus production, though as usual he had remained aloof from taking any responsibility for the staging. Given the power of the dramatic scenes and the relative weakness of the ‘teaching’ interludes it is not surprising that the play was misinterpreted as depicting the new king’s usurpation of the throne, and nothing more. The contradictions in the play’s argument may have contributed to the misunderstandings, but those very misunderstandings can be seen as a testament to Wannous’s power as a dramatist. The play’s ambiguities, as well as the somewhat dry interludes and the underdeveloped characterisation of Zahid and ‘Ubayd, undermine a straightforward reading. By the end of the play the monstrous Fakhreddin has become a pathetic, even a tragic, figure; he had not understood that, as king, he had been an abstraction, an image whose identity was constituted by the trappings of his role and the symbols of his power. Now this identity – the mirror in which he saw himself, and was seen by others, as a coherent individual – lies shattered in a thousand pieces. Similarly, Jabir is admired by nearly all the café customers, and although Wannous takes steps to prevent the real audience identifying with him, a substantial proportion of the audience might take his side despite the playwright’s intentions, especially if the actor plays him as an engaging, resourceful and energetic risk-taker.

While *The King’s the King* does not strictly belong to the theatre of politicisation, since the relationship between stage and auditorium is not important in the dramaturgy, it deserves to be categorised as belonging to that group by virtue of its didacticism, radical political stance and ideological certainty. It is a pivotal work in that it seems to reiterate and develop many of the themes of his earlier work, including those found in some of the early plays, and because, in its concern with the masquerade and the ubiquity of the disguise, it looks forward to Wannous’s late work.

After surviving the trauma of his suicide attempt in late 1977 Wannous fell silent for a decade, during which he attempted to come to terms with the failure of his hopes and the shattering of his illusions. He also sought to understand the transformations that were profoundly changing Arab societies; the inexorable expansion of the mass media and their exploitation by repressive governments, together with the increasing influence of traditional forces hostile to modernism, had a

great impact on the Arab world and contributed to the decline of the theatre and the marginalisation of the secular intellectual. The place of the theatre now became a problematic social and cultural issue. Avant-garde theatrical activity appeared to be no longer possible, and certainly could no longer be effective, in the face of the new cultural and political realities. Moreover, the increasing dominance of global capitalism and globalised entertainment rendered the strategies of dramatists who wished to create a theatre that might promote enlightened modernisation not merely ineffective but irrelevant.

In this climate Wannous turned again to the Arab-Israeli conflict, pleading in *The Rape* for tolerance and dialogue, and daring to create a sympathetic Israeli in the character of Dr Munohin. But even he was not willing to enter into dialogue with an Israeli, no matter how liberal, who believed in Israel's right to exist; nevertheless the play scandalised Arab opinion. Although *The Rape* ends on a note of hope, the plays of the 1990s are almost entirely devoid of optimism. Conscious of his approaching death, Wannous sought to struggle against the cancer that was ravaging his body by writing frenziedly for the theatre. While in the late 1960s and 1970s he and others had been certain in their conviction that class struggle was the essential driver of social development, in the 1990s he developed a theatre that sought to dramatise the questions thrown up by the impact of the radical social, political and cultural changes that had been taking place in the Arab world. Ironically, it was the marginalisation and decline of the theatre that helped to free him from the ideological constraints and internal censorship that had limited his imagination during the late 1960s and 1970s. He now felt himself free to express the individual, the hidden and the taboo with a greater boldness than ever before, most notably in *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*.³ This boldness was a result of his awareness of his approaching death, which provoked an uncompromising honesty and liberated his writing, permitting him to truly enjoy the process for the first time.

Despite their common features, which can be attributed to Wannous's disillusionment with the cultural and political legacy of the collective project of modernisation that had preoccupied him in his middle period, the late plays do not form a coherent group any more than the early plays did. They constitute a series of dramatic experiments, some of which partly look back to his earlier concerns. *Historical Miniatures*, despite its employment of a multiplicity of voices and a polyphonic dramaturgy, has much in common with *Jabir's Head* in its examination of

the relevance of a historical catastrophe to current or recent events; *The Mirage Epic* is a didactic satire that seems to recall the certainties of the 1970s; *Miserable Dreams* is a reworking of a play abandoned some thirty years earlier; and in *The Drunken Days*, Wannous again becomes preoccupied with the question of the audience and its relation to the stage.⁴ Moreover in *Miserable Dreams* and *The Drunken Days* Wannous seems to be presenting his own versions of the family melodramas popular in Syria before the crisis of 1967. Thus Wannous's late theatre, while marked by the refusal of a single viewpoint dominated by the idea of class struggle and the dichotomy of ruler and ruled, does not represent a decisive break with the past as much as an expansion to include and recognise more fully those marginalised and suppressed forces ignored by his work of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Thus it cannot be said that Wannous was writing in accordance with any kind of preconceived programme such as had informed the plays of the middle period. But he was intensely concerned with social, cultural and political issues, with the role of the secular intellectual and the place of the theatre in a profoundly changed Arab world. He was still a Marxist, but one who rejected the left's marginalisation of the individual. He remained committed to the theatre's role as an agent of enlightenment, but believed that it should also delight and inspire through the beauty of its language. Moreover, he was aware of the fragility of such concepts as the self and the truth, and attempted in *Rituals* and in *The Drunken Days* to examine and dramatise these problematic issues. In his autobiographical writings, especially *A Journey*, he presents a shifting, fragmented flux of stories, thoughts, memories and dreams that together delineate the precarious yet obstinate survival of the individual known as Saadallah Wannous, whose identity is created rather than assumed.

In these late works the single authorial voice that dominated his earlier plays is weakened in favour of the presentation of many voices, each with its own viewpoint, and disappears altogether in *Rituals*, which remains the most daring and the most enigmatic of Wannous's plays. It contains no authorial surrogate such as can be found in most of Wannous's other works, unless we accept that Almasa, before being murdered by her brother, speaks for Wannous when she affirms that her stories will be immortal. Indeed, this seems to be the only immortality that Wannous can affirm, since in *The Drunken Days* the power of memory to recall or reveal the truth is called into question; there are only 'stories about the truth'.

What are the 'truths' we can affirm about Wannous as a man and a dramatist? On the evidence provided by his plays and other writings, by his friends and his widow, and by critics and commentators, the picture emerges of an unbending, deeply serious individual who was governed by a strong moral purpose, which was to create a theatre capable of enhancing the sociopolitical and human conditions of the Arab peoples. As the theatre declined, Wannous sought and found means of expressing the conditions of his fellow Arabs, and his work also reached out to resonate with the concerns of those in the wider world who struggle with questions of identity and the need to adapt to the demands of life at the beginning of the new century. Although the contradictions are particularly sharp in the Islamic world, between secularists and traditionalists and even within Islam, between the conservative orthodoxy and the more liberal *Sufi* tradition embodied respectively by the Mufti and 'Abdullah in *Rituals*, the problems that preoccupied Wannous have also preoccupied people outside the Arab world. For this reason his work has the potential to reach a wider audience.

As Badawi has written, 'More than any other literary form perhaps, even more than the novel and the short story, drama affords incontrovertible evidence that Arab writers have been the political conscience of the Arab nation'.⁵ Wannous took his role as guardian of the Arab world's political conscience very seriously indeed, and this sometimes led him to reject possibilities that might have proved fruitful. According to Nadim Mua'ala, Wannous was approached in the 1970s by Duraid Laham, a famous comic actor and comedian. Laham, described by the American journalist Judith Miller as 'Syria's Woody Allen',⁶ asked Wannous to write plays in which Laham would star, for a substantial fee. Wannous refused this attractive offer, although Laham's previous work had obliquely satirised the region's regimes, because he considered that any compromise would be a betrayal of his conception of the theatre.⁷ It is noticeable that Wannous's drama contains scathing satire, irony and even farce, but radiates little warmth. In this respect Wannous is very different from Fo, who has used humour as a deadly weapon, and from Brecht, who emphasised the importance of 'fun' (*Spass*).

Wannous was perhaps temperamentally unsuited to be a writer of comedy, but his high-minded rejection of Laham's proposal is also revealing on several counts. First, it reflects Wannous's view of drama as a literary form; he remained throughout his life committed to literary drama in a way that Hakim would have recognised and

endorsed. Second, although comedy was very popular in the Arab world and a Wannousian comedy might have reached a far wider audience than any of his 'politicising' plays had, Wannous seems to have regarded comedy as beneath his notice and never discussed its nature or potentialities. It should be remembered that Arab drama had not achieved a secure place in Arab literature as poetry and fiction had, and Wannous presumably did not want to endanger the status of his art by lowering it to the level of the box-office. Third, he was not a good colleague; he found collaboration difficult, and was slow to praise and quick to blame those who produced and directed his works. Even his collaboration with Omar Amiralay on *Daily Life* had ended in disagreement and a rift in their friendship that lasted many years.

A well-informed source who wishes to remain anonymous has revealed that Wannous's uncompromising stance extended as far as the Presidential palace. When Wannous had become a celebrity after being honoured by UNESCO, Hafiz al-Assad invited him to a private audience. Wannous apparently told Assad that he should forthwith grant the Syrian people their freedom, because they were in dire need of democracy. Speaking truth to power in this way is certainly admirable, but it should be contrasted with Wannous's attitude towards the Soviet Union, whose demise he deeply regretted. As late as 1991 he criticised the Soviet government's adoption of perestroika and its rapprochement with the United States; Gorbachev, he argued, was a shallow leader who had danced to the American tune. One implication of this argument is that democracy is a dangerous system, since without proper guidance the people will choose to become consumers rather than free citizens; this theme is given its fullest expression in *The Mirage Epic*. Wannous did not believe that the masses should aspire to the same standard of living as their American brothers and sisters. He detested all manifestations of the global economy, which he considered was corrupting the societies of developing countries and ruining their economies. This is an understandable position for a Marxist to adopt, but Wannous went further, contrasting the social systems of the Soviet Union and the United States: '[...] one contains all human hopes for equality and justice, the other supports all those things that prevent humanity from reaching its goals'.⁸

Such a judgment must call into question Wannous's grasp of political realities, and suggests that Wannous remained a romantic. As an Arab, he had good reason to distrust the United States; as a Marxist, he had good reason to abhor capitalism; but as an intellectual he surely could not have justified this view of the Soviet system.

Despite espousing Hussein's 'hyperbolic doubt' when it came to the study of Arab history, Wannous seems to have been content to 'live in a world of rosy illusions', like Farouq in *A Day of Our Time*, in relation to the realities of Soviet oppression. His language is that of a fanatic, and suggests that this was an issue so sensitive that he was willing to abandon reason and adopt a position based on an emotional attachment to the first 'workers' state'.

Such a position might be called religious, and certainly the passion with which Wannous pursued his personal *jihad* against what he regarded as the forces of darkness recalls the action of zealots throughout the ages. Jabir 'Usfur has called the theatre 'the cross of Wannous, his paradise and hell',⁹ and sees in the image of al-Sharaiji, the crucified intellectual in *Historical Miniatures*, an allegorical representation of Wannous's own fate as an artist excluded and marginalised in his own society by the ruling regime, political Islam, the power of global capital and the new technocratic class. 'Usfur's judgment seems correct; Wannous does seem to have regarded himself as a martyr who carried the torch of enlightenment bequeathed to him by the great secular intellectuals of preceding generations. Thus a dichotomy appears in Wannous's thought between personal, individual truth, which some of the late plays suggest cannot be known, and sociopolitical truth, which can be known absolutely and which must be fought for.

In presenting himself as a martyr Wannous steps outside the limits of rational discussion, although it is for his rationalism that he is martyred, and enters the realm of myth and symbolism, a realm that he had been concerned with in his early plays. Myths and symbolism rarely occur in the theatre of politicisation but reappear in *The King's the King*, where the myth of a golden age of primitive communism is presented by 'Ubayd as historical fact, and the symbolic rite of killing and eating the king is central to the play's didactic message. In the late plays myths and symbols abound, and among the most interesting are the characters of Almasa in *Rituals* and Zarka in *The Mirage Epic*. Both the nature goddess-courtesan and the legendary prophetess are martyred, and both can be read as Wannous's surrogates, especially at the point of death.

While women are relatively unimportant in the plays of Wannous's early and middle periods, they are central to his late work. It would perhaps not be going too far to argue that Wannous became a feminist in his later years, and there are certainly no shortage of interesting, sympathetic and even powerful female characters in these

plays. They sometimes seem to symbolise the country or the Arab nation, just as in the early plays Palestine is personified as an abused woman in *Gush of Blood* and Khidra clearly represents the city in *Unknown Messenger*. For example, Mary and Ghada in *Miserable Dreams* can be seen as representing the oppressed and exploited country; Fadwa in *A Day* is a more ambiguous figure, being both powerful and vulnerable, corrupted and corrupting; Su'ad in *Historical Miniatures* seems to embody the spirit of heroic resistance and defiance even in death.

Moreover, it is evident from these late works that Wannous saw the strength of women as crucial to the development of the Arab world. The region would prosper if and when strong, educated women played their full part in society, overcoming the obstacles men placed in their path. In *Rituals*, Almasa is more aware than any other character of the nature of her transformation and of its likely outcome. Ghada receives a book from Bashir; Mona reads al-Kawakibi. The great importance Wannous seems to attach to women's education must be understood in the light of the Syrian situation: literacy rates remain low, and the position of women is markedly inferior to that of men, in contrast to the situation in Egypt, where educated professional women have considered themselves feminists for generations.¹⁰ By the 1990s, moreover, feminists throughout the Islamic world were under attack from religious fundamentalists; for example, the outspoken Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin was condemned by a *fatwa* for her advocacy of sexual freedom and her attacks on male dominance. 'I am convinced', she wrote, 'that the only way the fundamentalist forces can be stopped is if all of us who are secular and humanist join and fight their malignant influence. I, for one, will not be silenced'.¹¹ Wannous appreciated the difficulties women would have in fulfilling their potential and realising their dreams. Before he died he composed a short letter to his daughter Dima, 'to her generation and the generations to come', in which he spoke of his regret that he was not bequeathing her a better future. It is significant that he does not repudiate his ideals:

[...] our defeat doesn't mean that the ideas we adopted and defended were wrong. No... freedom, democracy, rationalism, Arab unity, social justice were not wrong notions, but our generation didn't know how to realise them. Forgiveness and condemnation are not important, but what deepens the grief in my soul is that we are bequeathing you an unfinished work and forcing you too soon to begin

working in a land and a history that offer nothing but frustrations and difficulties.¹²

Those frustrations and difficulties might be partly engendered by fundamentalists, but it is hard to argue that Islam itself could be held responsible. Islam is essentially a tolerant religion, and the concept of *hisba* can be interpreted to embrace ideas that approximate to socialism and democracy. There is also a *hadith* (saying of the Prophet) to the effect that 'the best fighting (*Jihad*) in the path of God is [to speak] a righteous word to an unjust ruler'¹³ – a *hadith* Wannous himself put into practice during his audience with Assad. Moreover, an Iraqi cleric and columnist recently pointed out that the marginalisation of the intellectual and cultural elite was not the result of machinations by the clergy. According to Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Yousif the elite became marginalised because they removed themselves from the concerns of the people, whereas 'religious scholars live among the people and are close to their sufferings and issues'.¹⁴ This may be a case of special pleading, but there is grain of truth in it. Wannous himself seems to have adopted an arrogant and condescending stance towards the people, whom he feared were incapable of making wise decisions in their own interests, and were being deluded, misled and corrupted by the siren voices of global capitalists and their marketeers, and by the systematic programmes of misinformation disseminated by the region's regimes. On the evidence of Wannous's plays and other writings it seems that he did not regard the people as being ready for democracy, although in principle he could not deny their right to it.

Wannous's sense of his own importance and his intense awareness of his responsibilities as a leading secular intellectual seem to have led directly to his suicide attempt. It is astonishing that a meeting designed to end hostilities should have prompted him to try to take his own life, an act which would have left his wife a widow and his daughter fatherless. His attempt was a pivotal event in his life and shows how deeply he identified with the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In his case the political became deeply personal, as can be judged by the guilt-laden text of *I Am the Cortège and I Am the Condoled*. In his late plays suicide becomes a constant theme, as if Wannous is examining the act from various angles, seeking to analyse and justify it. It is significant that the only truly heroic suicide is that of the resistance heroine Su'ad in *Historical Miniatures*. All the others are committed by noble,

sensitive characters who find it impossible to live in a harsh, bitter and corrupt world. It is tempting to suggest that Wannous himself is identifying with these victims of an unendurable reality.

Yet Wannous did not attempt suicide again, although he did, in a sense, become mute, like Rihanna in *Historical Miniatures* and Laila in *The Drunken Days*. After being diagnosed with cancer, he used writing as a weapon against the disease; as he said in his UNESCO address,

I have been asked, somewhat cynically, why I so stubbornly persist to write plays at a time when the theatre is receding, even fast disappearing, from our life. [...] For me to abandon writing for the theatre as I stand at the outer limits of my life would be tantamount to an act of betrayal that would only hasten my departure. I would further say, if I had to proffer a reply, that I am determined to go on writing for the theatre to the very end and would add, at the risk of repeating myself, that the theatre must stay alive because without it the world would grow lonelier, uglier and poorer.¹⁵

Wannous did not commit suicide because, unlike his self-destructive characters, he had a reason to go on living. This passage calls to mind the myth of Sisyphus, that hero of the absurd to whom he often compared himself in his last years. Wannous's rejection of suicide and his determination to continue writing in the face of an apparently hopeless destiny – his own and the theatre's – also recalls Camus' meditation on the meaning of suicide in a godless world. Wannous never discussed *The Myth of Sisyphus*, nor did he ever mention Existentialism in his last phase except for a brief, enigmatic remark in *A Journey*,¹⁶ but it may be that Camus' understanding of his hero may help us grasp Wannous's meaning. Camus writes that phenomenology 'confirms absurd thought in its initial assertion that there is no truth, but merely truths'.¹⁷ The absurd '[...] is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints'.¹⁸ He says of Sisyphus that his 'lucidity, that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory'.¹⁹ Sisyphus is stronger than his rock; his fate belongs to him. Through his assent he conquers: 'The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. [...] This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. [...] The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy'.²⁰

To find certain correspondences between Wannous and Camus is not to argue that in his late plays Wannous returns to Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd. However, the late plays emphasise the issue of freedom and responsibility as much as, if not more than, the early plays. Almasa in *Rituals* is perhaps the character who most lucidly asserts her freedom to choose her destiny and to take responsibility for the consequences; she consciously removes one disguise and takes on another. Wannous seems to be suggesting that the disguise is eternal in the human world and that below one mask lies another. In a world of fragmented and shifting identities, where the truth of a person's life can never be fully grasped, the freedom to choose is essential to our humanity. Wannous, however, seems in his last works to have seen this choice in political and moral terms as a creative act, and to have regarded the 'choice' offered by consumer capitalism as a meaningless, trivial and ultimately destructive parody of freedom.

In his late work, and especially in *Rituals*, Wannous suggests that the price of an authentic freedom is worth paying, even if it leads to death, since such a choice is not only an assertion of individual freedom but can have repercussions beyond the individual and affect the wider society. Here, it seems, Wannous is identifying with the struggles and sufferings of the individual and rejecting the class-based definition of identity dramatised in the works of his middle period. Yet this is too simple a picture; an unresolved tension seems to exist between individual and collective action in *Al-Qabani*, since the pioneer of Arab drama is presented as an admirable figure, a fighter against intolerance and obscurantism, despite not being engaged in a collective struggle, unlike the revolutionary youths depicted in other scenes in the play. This difficulty can perhaps be resolved if we see Wannous as proposing that the individual, in the Arab world especially, is not separable from the collective and that apparently private actions have social and political meanings.

Wannous himself is an example of an artist who even at his most personal was always deeply concerned with the conditions of his people and with the task of the theatre. He believed that the role of the secular intellectual carried great responsibility, which he bore stoically and even joyfully during his last years. It is ironic that he was denied a secular funeral and was buried by his family with full Muslim ceremony.²¹ Judging by the insults Wannous inflicted on his parents in *About Memory and Death*, he identified more with the eminent fathers of the Arab enlightenment, such as Taha Hussein, among whose heirs he placed himself. At the end he bequeathed to his

daughter ‘an unfinished work’ which she and the generations to come might achieve, even ‘in a land and history that offer nothing but frustrations and difficulties’. As he said in his UNESCO address, ‘We are doomed to hope, and what is happening today cannot be the end of history’.

Suggestions for Further Research

As al Souleman has pointed out, ‘theatre studies as an academic field has never been established in Arabic scholarship’, and so surprisingly little work has been done on Wannous’s drama in the Arab world. There is even less in English, and so much remains to be done. For example, Wannous’s early work has been neglected, partly because of the playwright’s own view of it; it merits serious critical study that will shed light on its place in the literature of its time in the Arab world and beyond. Similarly, Wannous’s theatre of politicisation could be analysed in its sociopolitical and cultural contexts in greater detail than has so far been attempted. *Daily Life in a Syrian Village*, the film produced by the collaboration between Wannous and Omar Amiralay, could be discussed in the context of the development of documentary film in the Arab world. Wannous’s entire career could be considered with reference to the important issue of censorship in Islamic countries. It is also important to gather evidence on Wannous’s life and work from his contemporaries – friends, family and colleagues – who are now becoming elderly. Studies could also be conducted comparing Wannous’s work to that of his fellow Syrian dramatists Walid Ikhlas (1935 -) and Farhan Bulbul (1937 -); there is also the Lebanese ‘Isam Mahfouz (1939 – 2006). All three have received scant attention even by Arab scholars, and all deserve detailed study. As for myself, after translating this thesis into Arabic I intend to undertake a comparative study of Wannous and the Egyptian dramatist Alfred Faraj (1929 – 2005), who is slightly better known than Wannous in the West. Finally, it would be an act of great cultural and political significance to present Wannous to a Western audience through performance of his plays; *Rituals* seems the most suitable candidate. It is vital in these troubled times to promote understanding between the West and the Arab-Islamic world, and a play such as *Rituals* would surely be a revelation to those who associate the Arab world with religious fundamentalism, social conservatism and political extremism.

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- ¹ See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 2.
- ² See Ibid., p. 16.
- ³ See Ibid., pp. 17-18.
- ⁴ See Ibid., p. 147.
- ⁵ M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 288.
- ⁶ Judith Miller, *God Has Ninety-Nine Names* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 316, in Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 39.
- ⁷ Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.
- ⁸ Saadallah Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Damascus: Alahali for Press, Publishing and Distributing, 1996), p. 652.
- ⁹ Jabir 'Usfur, cited in Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dall°ah Wann°us and the Question of Theatre*, Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 2005), p. 183.
- ¹⁰ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 344-345.
- ¹¹ Taslima Nasrin, *Shame* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), preface, p. 14, in Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 50.
- ¹² Salah Addin Abu Diab, *The Presence and Absence of Saadallah Wannous* (Kuwait: Sua'ad Alsabab Publishing House, 1997), p. 149.
- ¹³ Musnad Ahmid, *Sahih Al-Jami' Al-Saghir*, vol. 3\19 (Beirut: Al-Sadir Publishing House, 1985), No. 1111 (1\361)
- ¹⁴ Haidar, *Khalil Margins about Terrorism* (<http://www.elaph.com/News Papers/2005/4/59054.htm>), accessed on 12 April 2005
- ¹⁵ Saadallah Wannous, *The Thirst for Dialogue* (World Theatre Day address), translated by International Theatre Institute (ITI), (UNESCO), <http://iti-worldwide.org>, accessed on 11 May 2003.
- ¹⁶ 'I have to talk about Existentialism and the freedom and beauty other countries are enjoying', in Saadallah Wannous, *About Memory and Death*, Vol. II (Damascus: Alahali Publishing House, 1997), p. 149.
- ¹⁷ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 41.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 48.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 117.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 119.
- ²¹ Mua'ala recalls that the *al-Hayat* newspaper's headline was 'A Secular Playwright Is Buried in Accordance with Islamic Law'. Unpublished interview with the Syrian critic Dr. Nadim Mua'ala, 20 January 2004.

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