

Coup de Théâtre

Ursula Lindsey
JUNE 27, 2019 ISSUE

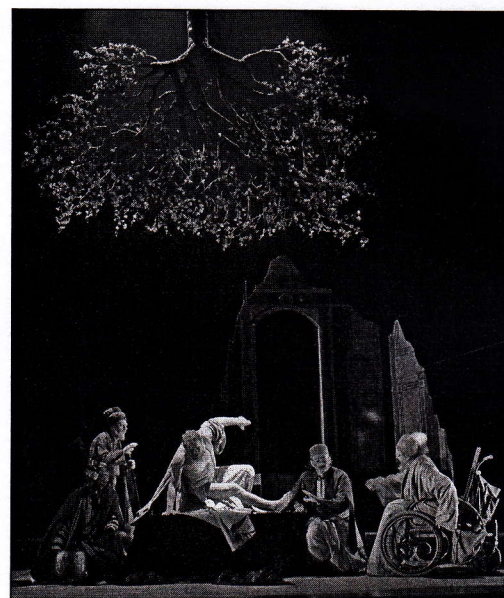
Sentence to Hope: A Sa'dallah Wannous Reader

translated from the Arabic and with an introduction by Robert Myers and Nada Saab
Yale University Press, 430 pp., \$38.00

In the spring of 1967, Sa'dallah Wannous, a young Syrian journalist and playwright, was studying theater at the Sorbonne in Paris. That June, after Israel's victory in the Six-Day War against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, it gained control of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Sinai; about 100,000 Syrians were driven from the Golan Heights, which Israel still holds today. It is hard to overstate the psychic and political shock of this turn of events in Arab countries. "The defeat of 1967 was the defining moment of our history as a people and our personal history," Wannous told his friend the filmmaker Omar Amiralay, who interviewed him at the end of his life for an elegiac documentary entitled *There Are Many Things Still to Say* (1997).

Like many Syrians, Wannous had been led by years of propaganda to expect the Arab armies to win handily. Even as Israeli forces were advancing across the Sinai peninsula, Egypt's Voice of the Arab radio station, listened to across the region, continued to boast of Israel's imminent rout. The postcolonial regimes in the region had staked their legitimacy on their ability to confront Israel and had used the struggle against "the Zionist entity" to justify repression at home. "In the name of Israel, the Arab regimes ruled us," Wannous told Amiralay. "In the name of protecting the nation.... But they only piled up the defeats."

In June 1967, in the face of a loss that shook all his convictions and hopes, Wannous asked himself: Why do we write? Twenty-one years later, in the essay "The Dream Falls Apart,"



Raphaël Gaillarde/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

The Comédie-Française performing Sa'dallah Wannous's Rituals of Signs and Transformations, Paris, May 2013

he remembered:

Asking myself that question made me feel as if I were swallowing a handful of razor blades. It was a harmful, excruciating question for which there was no answer. Words were defeated and language had collapsed. One might say that, in one sense, there had never been a defeat in which words played such a large role as they had in the June defeat.... I remember the speeches, radio broadcasts, declarations, announcements, slogans, boastful statements, and vituperations and then language falling apart as if it were composed solely of sand and foam.

Wannous's response was to write the play *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*, a furious and clever assault on official propaganda, censorship, and denial. Along with "The Dream Falls Apart," it is included in *Sentence to Hope: A Sa'dallah Wannous Reader*, which for the first time presents the work of this major playwright to an English-speaking audience. Four plays and a selection of essays, speeches, and interviews have been translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab, two academics who live and teach in Beirut. Their thoughtful selection builds a picture of a complex artist and thinker who used theater to grapple with the great political questions of his time: questions of the possibility of social justice, the effectiveness of revolutionary action, the power of words and art, and the possibility of personal freedom within repressive societies.

Wannous was born in the village of Husayn al-Baher in northwestern Syria in 1941. Life there was hard and semifeudal, and the villagers struggled to make ends meet. According to Ali Ali 'Ajil Naji Al-Anezi, whose doctoral thesis on Wannous is a valuable reference, his modest rural background made Wannous sensitive to social injustice.* From a young age, he was also struck by the plight and struggle of the Palestinian people, which had become a paramount political issue in most Arab countries after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

Wannous was able to pursue an education; in 1959 he traveled to Cairo to study journalism and began writing articles and short plays. Like most of the young intellectuals of his generation, which had witnessed the end of colonialism, he was a fervent nationalist, a Marxist, and an anti-Zionist who viewed Israel as an outpost of Western imperialism. He admired the socialist Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had nationalized the Suez Canal, introduced land reforms favoring peasants over rich landowners, and presided over a political union of Egypt and Syria from 1958 to 1961 (it collapsed after a military coup in Syria). Wannous was also an atheist from an early age.

An Evening's Entertainment was also partly inspired by the events of May 1968 in Paris, by experimental political theater projects such as the American Living Theater, and above all by the work of Bertolt Brecht. Wannous wanted to do more than witness history; he

wanted to find what he called “‘the word as action,’ a dense, unadorned word that simultaneously exposes reality and changes it.”

From the beginning, *An Evening's Entertainment* transgresses the usual boundaries between audience and performers and goads its spectators into participation. The opening stage directions are to start the play at least half an hour late, while actors disguised as audience members loudly express their indignation at the delay. Finally the theater's director appears onstage to deliver an apology that is actually a long complaint. This self-important, self-serving apparatchik is the play's great comic figure. He begins to explain why the play he commissioned, *The Whistling of Spirits*, will unfortunately not be performed, but he is interrupted by its playwright, 'Abdalghani. The two reenact how they conceived of the mediocre production that was meant to be put on that night. From the beginning, they did not see eye to eye:

'Abdalghani: (Hesitating) But don't forget that defeat diminishes the imagination.

Director: Defeat?

'Abdalghani: Yes, defeat. Does the word shock you? Or perhaps it has a strange ring to it?

Director: To hell with defeat. Who's talking about that?

'Abdalghani: So what do you mean?

Director: What I have in mind is something about heroism, not defeat.... Heroism, as you know, is a perpetual source of inspiration.

The melodramatic play the director envisaged—scenes of which are performed in the background—bears little relation to the actual experience of the Six-Day War, which was still fresh in the audience's memory. Its climax is meant to be a scene in which Syrian villagers preemptively kill their women to free themselves to resist the invading Israelis without fear of “disgrace.” But at the last moment, 'Abdalghani, disgusted at the play's fakery, has refused to have it staged.

Unable to put on a show about heroism, the director falls back on a celebration of “happiness and nostalgia” and calls on a band of musicians and dancers to perform traditional Syrian folklore. This plan, however, also collapses, as actors playing villagers wander onstage to discuss what actually happened when the war broke out and they fled their lands. The flustered director scolds and pleads with the audience to stay in its place, issues threats, and begins to grow paranoid (“This is a total conspiracy. I'm not ruling out the possibility that there's a foreign hand in this”). The band makes several awkward attempts to perform but gives up as more actors playing spectators push their way onstage

and argue over why the war was lost. The answer they arrive at is an indictment of their governments and of their own abdication of freedom of speech and thought in the name of the national interest—a national interest that “includes jails into which sunlight never enters.”

Toward the end of the play, as the conversation grows increasingly heated, the doors of the theater are sealed (and the audience purposely alerted to the fact); armed men appear, and a president-like figure harangues the crowd at length about the threat posed by conspirators, imperialists, and enemies of the people. All those who have dared speak are rounded up and arrested.

With a light, sure hand, Wannous uses all the dramatic strategies at his disposal to provoke the audience to question authority. His hope seems to have been that spectators would join in the discussion onstage (which ends with a literal call to arms), take over the theater, and be inspired to other forms of revolt. That no such thing happened left him terribly disappointed. The play ran for two nights in Damascus in 1968 and then was banned. The poet Adonis, who was living in exile in Beirut, lauded its technical brilliance and published it in the magazine *Mawaqif*, and it was staged in Beirut in 1970. Wannous wrote in “The Dream Falls Apart”:

I felt a renewed sense of bitterness the evening of every performance. After the play ended, people would applaud and then leave the theater as they always had after any other performance. They would whisper, laugh, or express amazement. But then what? Nothing. Nothing at all. The audience did not erupt in demonstration.

Nonetheless he did not give up. He spent the next decade writing plays meant to raise the political consciousness of their audiences. He coined the term *masrah el-tasyis* (“politicizing theater,” rather than political theater) for the active process he hoped to inspire. At its core was dialogue—among the performers, between the audience and the stage, and among the spectators themselves. He wrote in the notes to his 1970 play *The Adventure of the Head of Mamlouk Jabir*, “We contrive means to present a mock dialogue in order to demonstrate to the audience that such a dialogue is possible.”

While Wannous derided the use of folklore as propaganda, he found inspiration in the Arabic literary heritage: *The Thousand and One Nights*, historical chronicles, epic poetry cycles. *The Adventure of the Head of Mamlouk Jabir* combines this heritage with his penchant for experimentation and for nested narratives. The play makes use of the figure of the traditional storyteller (*hakawaty*), as well as the neighborhood café in which men gather to chat and listen to tales. While Uncle Mu’nis tells his story to an audience in the café, actors play out the events he is recounting on the other side of the stage. The story is based on a historical anecdote from thirteenth-century Baghdad, in which a vizier sent secret messages to the invading Mongols on the shaved heads of slaves.

In the years before he wrote *Jabir*, Syria had undergone a dizzying number of coups. Wannous makes his play about the machinations of the powerful—the caliph, the vizier, and the Persian king—and the way they play out at the expense of the people. To underline how interchangeable the elite is, how its class interests are always the same, he has the same actors play the different rulers and their subordinates.

But Wannous also frustrates many of the audience's expectations. The *hakawaty* refuses to tell the *Epic of Zahir*, a tale of victory and glory, admonishing his listeners that "there's a sequence to history" and that it's not time yet for such tales. And Wannous refuses to give Jabir, the enterprising slave-soldier striving for freedom and wealth, a happy ending. Jabir is clever and charismatic but also overconfident and shortsighted. His opportunism and his unwillingness to face the danger looming over his city prevent him from being a true hero in Wannous's moral universe.

Yet Wannous's work is far from didactic: his mastery of storytelling and his gift for evoking character and emotion are much too strong for that. Jabir is a cocky charmer ("I want to be able to smell your perfume from a mile away as I'm returning to Baghdad," he tells his beloved, Zumurrud, before leaving on his mission), and the scene of his execution on the orders of the Persian king is distressing. It elicits indignant responses from the café customers, who comment throughout on the *hakawaty*'s story, drawing parallels to their own time—just as the audience is meant to see themselves in the play and do the same.

Wannous clearly intends his spectators to recognize uncomfortable parallels not only to their callous rulers, but also to their own shortsighted acquiescence to them. As a group of Baghdad residents line up to buy bread, anticipating bad times ahead, most refuse to discuss the political situation. Instead, they embrace cowardice masked as wisdom:

Group #2: That's why it's best if we hide our heads beneath our shoulders.

Group #1: We see nothing...we hear nothing.

Group #2: We wait for the outcome.

Group #1: And whoever marries our mother we call uncle.

At the end, Baghdad is sacked by a foreign army, and its dead residents address a warning against passivity to the customers and the audience. Uncle Mu'nis's listeners grumble at this unhappy ending. As the café closes and they disperse, they ask him if he will tell a less gloomy story the next day. He replies: "I don't know...maybe...it all depends on you."

After the play was banned in Syria, it was only performed abroad, where it served, ironically, to burnish the image of Hafez al-Assad, who had come to power in 1970; it

made his regime appear more open-minded and seemed to show how avant-garde Syrian culture was. Even though Wannous's works promoted revolution and implicitly criticized Syria's regimes, he lived in Syria and often worked in public institutions—he helped establish and taught at the High Institute for Theater Arts in Damascus, and founded and edited the publicly subsidized magazine *Theater Life*. The Assad regime seems to have viewed Wannous as more of an asset than a threat: a cultural star who did not belong to any political party and whose radical ideas could do little harm due to their limited audience.

Wannous was aware of this (“My very existence is propaganda,” he once told a journalist), but he continued to write plays throughout the 1970s even as his misgivings over the value and political impact of his work grew. His plays were often censored and never staged outside of traditional theaters or for working-class audiences, as he had hoped. His elite audience appreciated them but showed no inclination to be politicized into action.

Wannous's despondency was deepened by regional developments. In 1977 Egyptian president Anwar Sadat traveled to Jerusalem and spoke to the Israeli Knesset. Israel and Egypt signed the Camp David Accords a year later. As the translators write in their introduction, for Wannous and many of his fellow intellectuals, “Sadat's gesture represented not a realistic accommodation...but a complete capitulation to a colonial oppressor and US proxy.” On the day of Sadat's trip, Wannous swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills and was in a coma for several days. He survived, but wrote no plays for over a decade.

During this long silence, the political situation worsened. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, the same year the Assad regime put down an uprising in Hama by killing tens of thousands and razing portions of the city. Across the region, the revolutionary dreams of leftists like Wannous—who had expected their countries to achieve social justice, secular democracy, and an alternative to global capitalism—were defeated by increasingly repressive and corrupt regimes capable of holding onto power but not of making good on promises of development or independence. A wave of religious conservatism was bolstered by oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia, who saw it as a means to strengthen their regional influence and legitimacy. Leftist opposition was supplanted by the militancy of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, Hamas in the Occupied Territories, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.



Reuters

Sa'dallah Wannous, circa 1997

Wannous dedicated himself to teaching, reading, and reflection. He spent time studying the artists and thinkers of the Arab *Nahda* (Enlightenment), a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reformist movement. When he finally emerged from his silence in 1989, his views on the purpose and potential of theater had undergone a striking transformation. He would later say that he had been “purged of delusions.” He admitted that theater was an increasingly marginalized art form, with little chance of hastening a democratic, progressive future, and began to think that its purpose lay elsewhere. Already in an interview in 1986, he had said, “I am one of that group of writers who made a huge mistake by fundamentally linking the effectiveness of their theater to its political effectiveness.”

Shedding the burden of making “politically effective” theater turned out to be liberating. “For the first time I feel that writing is a form of freedom,” he told the interviewer Mary Ilyas:

I used to exercise a kind of self-censorship in my writing, an internal censorship that rested on the idea, or delusion, that what is secondary should be set aside for the sake of what I believed to be important causes. For the first time I feel writing is a pleasure.

Wannous’s sense of pleasure and freedom in his art was also sharpened by ill health. In 1990 he was diagnosed with cancer of the pharynx. Two years later it spread to his kidneys. This deadly prognosis sparked a creative outpouring: he wrote seven new plays before his death in 1997, including one that is considered among his masterpieces.

Rituals of Signs and Transformations begins, like so many of Wannous’s plays, with a power struggle. In nineteenth-century Damascus, the Grand Mufti (the top Islamic jurist) and the Naqib al-Ashraf (a representative of the city’s most venerable families) are at odds. An overzealous police chief, hoping to please the mufti, arrests the naqib while he is drinking and making merry in his garden with his mistress, and humiliates him by parading them together through the streets. Far from being pleased, the mufti views his rival’s public disgrace as a threat to the established order and to his own prestige: “Whoever acts towards the Naqib with such disrespect may do so with the Mufti at a moment’s notice.”

The mufti decides to save his rival; he asks the naqib’s wife, Mu’mina, to sneak into the prison and take the place of her husband’s lover, the prostitute Warda. This way it will appear that the chief of police made a terrible mistake. The mufti’s encounter with the well-read and confident Mu’mina is the first intimation that the play will head in unexpected directions. “Is the difference between a wife and a prostitute so slight?” she asks. When the mufti is surprised by her reluctance to participate in his scheme, she says, “I understand your astonishment, Sheikh. It never crossed your mind that I live, that I have desires and thoughts.” Mu’mina tries to explain that inhabiting the role of another feels

like “a terrible temptation, like walking at the edge of an abyss,” but the mufti is nonplussed:

Mufti: I must admit I don’t understand what you’re afraid of. I don’t see the horrible danger of spending an hour in prison.

Mu’mina: Have you ever looked inside yourself, Sheikh?

Mufti: I thank God there is nothing inside me I fear or that I’m ashamed of announcing to the outside world. He put piety in my inner and outer existence and tamed my soul, which then commanded evil to be transformed into obedience and contentment.

Mu’mina: You’re a happy man, Sheikh. One who believes he knows himself must be happy. I envy your trust and certitude.

Mu’mina finally agrees, on condition that the Mufti promise her a divorce from her husband. She has already decided to give in to the temptation of being someone else. By the second half of the play, she has become Damascus’s most famous courtesan, renaming herself Almasa (“The Diamond”). Her ex-husband has renounced the world and become a Sufi ascetic, wandering the streets in torn garments and encouraging people to abuse him. And the mufti has lost all his obtuse certainty and fallen wildly in love with Almasa, a woman who proclaims that she wants to liberate her body and to “exist beyond the limits of fear and violation.” “I dream of reaching my inner self and becoming as clear as glass, having the eye see my inner being,” she says. “You make me dizzy, Almasa,” says the mufti. “A woman with your determination and power can corrupt a sultanate of women. You’re undoing our lives, our system, our future. No, I can’t allow it.”

As Wannous became concerned with personal emancipation, gender emerged as a theme in his work. In his earlier plays there are no important female characters, and women most often serve as measures of the male characters’ manhood. But in his plays from the 1990s, women are protagonists. *Wretched Dreams*, the other of his late plays included in *Sentence to Hope*, tells the story of two neighbors, Ghada and Mary, who are trapped in very different but equally miserable marriages and try unsuccessfully to get rid of their husbands. Men in the late plays are desperately needy yet unable to love; they are also deadly. Almasa is killed by her brother, who yells hysterically, “I killed her. With this dagger I killed her. I’m a man. I’m a man. Look, father. I’m the man among us. I’m the man among us. I’m the real man.” Yet Almasa has told him, “I’m a tale, Safwan, and a tale can’t be killed. I’m an insinuation, a desire, a temptation. Those are things daggers can’t kill.”

Others are less able to claim victory in death. Before he hangs himself, the strongman al-‘Afsa reflects sadly: “This world, how strange it is. If you suppress and conceal, you live well, you’re revered. If you’re true to yourself, if you reveal who you are, you become an outcast, you’re shunned.” Al-‘Afsa is not only homosexual but has chosen to come out, shaving off his mustache and giving it to his lover, who instead of appreciating his courage rejects him.

Rituals focuses on how fragile identities are, and how untrue. In this play, the journey to self-knowledge demands self-exposure, self-abasement, and even self-annihilation. Every character who liberates him- or herself does so at the cost of sanity, social status, or life. Yet they all experience a sort of rapture, even as they knowingly court disaster. Wannous dedicated *Rituals* to his daughter, Dima Wannous, who was fifteen at the time he died, and who today is a writer herself.

Wannous had once declared that the only valid goal was “theater for the people, for the working class,” but by the end of his career he would say that “I do not imagine a specific audience.” His early plays featured representatives of class interests, but in the introduction to *Rituals* he emphasized that “the characters of this play are not symbols and do not represent functional institutions but are rather individuals with personal, unique forms of suffering.”

Later in life he became convinced that the path to a more just order was much more complicated than arousing the people to oppose and replace the ruling class. “We have constantly changed authority, which was in every case an artificial coup d’état,” he told Ilyas. “The one difficult thing we have not yet tried is to change society.” He had envisioned artists as the vanguard of political change, but he ended up embracing a purpose for the intellectual that was “less brilliant and more humble”—as a critic, a freethinker, a witness after all.

The shift in Wannous’s views was both an accommodation to dismal political realities and a triumph of artistic perseverance and imagination. The one belief he never shed was that theater was the best venue for civic dialogue, “the exemplary place where humans can ponder their historical and existential conditions,” as he said in the 1996 UNESCO World Theater Address that gives this collection its name. “We are sentenced to hope,” he said—a formulation that finely evokes the despair and determination that run through his work.

* *An Analytical Study of the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous, with Particular Emphasis on the Plays Written After the 1967 War*, University of Sheffield, 2006; available at theses.whiterose.ac.uk/3080/1/434995.pdf. ↩