Politicizing an Intimidated Audience: A Study of the Influences on Sa'dallah Wannous's Political Theatre

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Syrian political theatre has always faced state censorship, including random banning and unexplained releases of dissident plays. Political playwrights have implicitly critiqued state oppression and contested the state's forced deceptive mainstream narratives that glorify the autocratic regime's paranoia, chauvinism, and propaganda promoting themselves as defenders of pan-Arabism and the Palestinian cause. These playwrights have hoped, often vainly, to instill the concept of political awareness in their audiences and lay foundations for democratic citizenry and civil liberties. Among the issues to which Syrian political theatre has sought to put an end are the emergency law passed in 1963, sectarianism, surveillance, inquisition, imprisonment without trial, and torture of political dissidents. It should be noted that in the absence of an autonomous judiciary, the Syrian government hit with a fist of iron on politically leftist oppositional dramatists and encouraged the publication of conformist plays glorifying the regime. The tactics the regime has used to intimidate nonconformist playwrights and directors range from censorship, banning theatrical productions of their plays, dismissal from the Syrian Syndicate of Artists, surveillance, and even to restrictions on travelling abroad.

However, Syrian playwrights have used abstraction, symbolism, historiography, political parables, and folktales reflecting current upheavals in order to indirectly critique the military junta without attracting the attention of censors and gatekeepers. Playwrights have even imposed a sort of self-censorship on their plays before submitting them to the Director of Theatres and Music at the Ministry of Culture for approval to be published or staged in the country, as even dress rehearsals of all plays performed in the national theatre and elsewhere are watched by intelligence officials to ensure their compliance with censorship laws. Trevor Mostyn asserts that Syrian censors had been granted enormous powers by the 1963 State of Emergency

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2020 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/20/47.3/316

Law over "all means of communication, propaganda and publicity before issue" (159). Wannous complained that "every regime adopts a culture that buttresses its ideology […] and excludes art from playing any role in creating any change in the country's status quo" ("Journal Columns" 54-55). Nevertheless, the Syrian regime has occasionally and randomly allowed some political plays containing implied and oblique critique of the government to be performed throughout the country to show that it licenses anti-regime plays without any sort of censorship. Miriam Cooke refers to this uncensored political satire or unpredictable licensing of performances containing criticisms of second-ranking members of the Ba'th Socialist Party, with the exception of the regime elites and the President, as *tanfīs* or a "safety valve" meant for "releasing the pressure from state control" (65-80).

In such a rigid and undemocratic political climate, Wannous created his theatre of politicization. Wannous's canon of political plays mostly addresses the Arab-Israeli conflict, primarily the creation of the state of Israel in Palestine, the subsequent Palestinian exodus in 1948 into neighboring Arab countries, the 1967 setback that resulted in Israel's seizing of Arab territories in the West Bank of Jordan, the Golan Heights in Syria, and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, and the alleged victory in the 1973 October War. However, to deflect censorship, Wannous's political plays use parables drawn from the Arab cultural heritage of popular folk tales, historical, reflectionist and socialist realism, allegory, historiography, and political analogies. Edward Ziter observes that Wannous's "politicizing theatre" uses these historical analogies and folk tales to blame the perpetuation of Syria's police state on the silence of the populace (*Political Performance* 148).

The defeat of the Arab countries in the 1967 six-day war with Israel motivated Wannous to investigate the causes of this defeat and portray its traumatic effects on the masses. Fu'ād Dawāra points out that Wannous called the 1967 setback "a fatal blow that caused me an appalling psychological pain" (192). Wannous insisted that the outcome of the 1967 war incited him to propagate his concept of theatre of politicization, and that for theatre to be authentic, it must not turn its back on politics (*Manifestos* 106). In the Arab Festival for Theatre Arts, which he launched in 1969, he called for the establishment of a "theatre of politicization," which would act as a catalyst for political reform and inspire audiences to rise up against tyranny. In an interview with Mary Elias published on June 16, 1996, Wannous declared, "for the first time I feel free in my writing. In the past, I used to subject my work to self-censorship" (Swairjo). Wannous was commenting on his shift away from the kinds of plays he began writing in response to the 1967 War. He was now allowing himself to explore politics via characters' traumas, as opposed to the approach to politics that has dominated his earlier plays. This justifies the scope of the current study, which is limited to discussing the works from the second and third periods of Wannous's career as a dramaturge.

Conceptual Framework

In the manner of the theatre of the oppressed developed by the Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal (1931-2009), Wannous's political theatre specifically addresses the Syrian populace who suffer under a totalitarian regime. Frances Babbage points out that Boal's assertion that "all theatre is political" indicates that theatre "both reflects and affects the way society is structured and organized through its active engagement with the system of values buttressing it" (39-40). For Wannous, collaboration between audience and actors on stage empowers the former to perform actions that are socially and politically liberating. Rānia Jawād notes that Wannous has always considered theatre a catalyst for political reform, and he privileges audience interactivity during and even beyond theatrical performances. Thus, Wannous's political theatre seeks to transform spectators into "spect-actors," a term coined by Boal, rather than remain inactive recipients of the stage show. Though Wannous's oeuvre shows the influence of many European theatrical movements, primarily existentialism, surrealism, expressionism, socialist realism, theatre of the absurd, politicizing theatres, and the documentary theatre, he successfully locates such modes of dramaturgy in Arabic popular culture, history, and folklore (Al-'Anezī 4). 'Ali Al-Suleimān calls Wannous "an advocate of the Theatre of the Absurd" (23-24) but asserts that his plays also contain expressionist and symbolist elements. Taking a leftist approach on issues related to nationalism, martyrdom, sectarianism and military dictatorship, Wannous adapted these new theatrical forms, which had never been used before in the Syrian dramatic canon, to address social and political conditions in Syria and the Arab world. Riyād 'Ismat points out that Wannous's political theatre sought to galvanize the radical left and transform liberal playwrights into revolutionaries (93).

Wannous's political plays may have indirectly been influenced by the works of major anti-colonialist intellectuals, such as Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). However, Wannous's political theatre strives to liberate the masses not from an external colonizer, but rather from a local dictatorship. The radical pedagogical theory of Paulo Freire is based upon disclosing the heap of lies hidden behind the state's rhetoric of deceptive external reality. Freire contends that the oppressive status quo in a country produces a "culture of silence" that instills a destructive, silenced, and suppressed self-image in oppressed individuals. By the same token, Wannous considered government-funded theatres oppressive since they aim to propagate the regime's authoritarian ideology and instill in the audience this culture of silence and fear to maintain the privileged sectors' continued dominance over society. I should clarify here that Wannous was instrumental in creating the state-run High Institute for Theatre Arts where he taught, the state-run Damascus festival of theatre arts, and the state-funded journal *Theatre Life*, which he edited, and later became the director of the government-sponsored Experimental Theatre. However, in the aftermath of the 1967 setback and the historical visit of the late Egyptian President Anwar Sādāt to the Knesset prior to

signing a peace accord with Israel in 1979, Wannous realized that he had been duped by state rhetoric and media and was disappointed by the Arabs' political failings, and consequently changed his perception of the function of theatre.

An essential element of dramatizing the audience's interactivity with the onstage action in Wannous's participatory political theatre is historiography or historical dramaturgy, which includes parody, renegotiation, and the breaking and reconstruction of history by both actors and spectators. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière proposes a theory of political spectatorship that seeks to redeem spectators from ignorance and passivity and inspire them to take action on stage. He perceives the spectator as a mediator between politics and art. His concept of the paradox of the spectator lies in the assumption that "there is no theatre without a spectator and yet to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (2). Bertolt Brecht called for the "radical separation of the elements" (37) in a stage production, in which the rapport between actor, character, and spectator is freely unchained and the freedom of the audience is spontaneously unconstructed. Historical dramaturgy implies a restaging of historical narratives through the art of parody to satirize and ridicule a totalitarian military regime or to implicitly criticize current political affairs in a country. Georg Lukács points out that "the political writer seeks to narrate, that is, not merely to record events but to establish the causal connections between events" (qtd. in Patterson 16).

Like most Arab intellectuals, Wannous was strongly influenced by the personality cult of the late Egyptian president Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāsir and his political ideology that called for Arab unity, nationalism, Pan-Arabism, and anti-imperialism. It was during his presidency (1956-70) that Arab political theatre started to emerge, especially in the aftermath of the Arabs' disastrous defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel in June 1967. It should be noted that Arab theatre, in general, is inseparable from politics; as Augusto Boal declared, "Those who try to separate theater from politics try to lead us into error and this is a political attitude" (xxiii). Likewise, Wannous argues that the purpose of the theatre of politicization is to achieve political reform, change people's perceptions, develop their mentalities, and create a collective consciousness in an Arab historical context (Manifestos 26).

Like Erwin Piscator's political theatre, Wannous's theatre of politicization ignores the absoluteness of dramatic form in favor of creating a series of episodes. To establish a narrative theatre of politicization, Wannous borrowed some techniques from other literary genres such as oral folk tales. The narrative technique he adopted is the *Ḥakawātī*, the traditional storytelling style of *The Arabian Nights*, which was commonly used to narrate epics in a café in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Syria. This narrative technique allowed the actors to directly address the audience and engage them with political debate about the performance. The political issues discussed in Wannous's plays are universal, since they transcend the borders of Syria to address all who experience dictatorial oppression (Fahad 125).

Brecht's influence on Wannous's political theatre is obvious in many respects,

chiefly in the authors' use of alienation techniques to detach their audience from the events on stage to help them reflect upon their social and political realities. The Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* in Wannous's political plays is not only achieved through acting techniques such as minimal stage décor, fading in and fading out of lighting to indicate scene division and actors moving props on stage in front of the audience, but is also evident in the discontinuous, fragmented, episodic structure of the plays. Friederike Pannewick remarks that Wannous's early plays were influenced by Piscator's political theatre and Brecht's didactic theatre (97). In *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre* (1988), Wannous acknowledges Brecht's influence on his political plays, albeit adapted for a Syrian audience: "although I'm still enormously enthusiastic about Brecht's theatrical techniques, I think one should make some adaptations before presenting them to a Damascene audience" (114).

Agitprop theatre, short for "agitation and propaganda," is a politically radical left-wing dramaturgical movement that appeared in the late 1960s. Its proponents aspired to expose and defy the state's oppressive ideology by creating a counterculture. Both Piscator and Brecht were among the most active members of the movement, which has influenced playwrights around the world. Khālid Ramadān contends that Wannous's political theatre is influenced by the ideas of the American theatre practitioners Peter Schumann and Erwin Piscator in that his theatre is not only political, but also didactic and stimulating to the public (28). Moreover, Magdī Youssef argues that since the inauguration of the "Brecht International Dialogue," held in Berlin in 1968, the majority of countries that adopted Brecht's notions of political theatre are located in the Third World. Many of these countries had previously been colonized by Western powers and are currently struggling for liberation from authoritarian regimes (1). Wannous's politicizing theatre, which is based on pedagogical performance, seems to have been influenced by Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientização*, or consciousness-raising. Ken McCoy argues that Freire's concept of consciousness-raising is based on the assumption that learning, which is applicable to depoliticized theatre audiences, aims to help people "perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (10-16).

Another major influence on Wannous's political theatre is Wole Soyinka, Africa's best-known anticolonial dramatist, whose plays call for political activism and the decolonizing ethic toward residual tyrannies and all forms of state domination, hegemony, and subjugation of the masses. Nicholas Dirks argues that Soyinka's dramaturgy is contingent upon depicting social turmoil, political upheavals, and existential anarchy as contributing factors to social transformation and political change (10). In his political plays, Soyinka used myths of indigenous African nations to remind the Nigerian people of their marginalization, inspire them to defy authoritarianism, and produce an aspiration for political and social changes. Influenced by Soyinka's political theatre, Wannous uses historiography, epics, folktales, and legends from the Arab cultural tradition to parody and caricature current political upheavals and indirectly criticize the authoritarian regime in Syria.

Wannous's political drama seems to have been most strongly influenced by Artaud, Brecht, and Boal. Although these three authors perceived the function of theatre differently both in theory and in dramaturgy, they all used the stage as a catalyst for political change involving both actors and spectators. Artaud's theatre of cruelty demolishes the stage and the auditorium traditionally monopolized by the actors and gives much space to spectators to be a part of the theatrical performance and directly communicate with actors: "we abolish the stage and the auditorium […] so direct communication will be re-established between spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator" (Artaud 96-97). Augusto Boal's dramaturgical ideology is contingent upon arousing political consciousness in the spectators, who are supposed to take part in the onstage action rather than remain passive recipients of the events of the show: "Theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action" (Boal 98). Similarly, Wannous thought of theatre as a generator of political awareness and the audience as an integral part of a stage performance: "audiences have to scream and stop a performance that is being staged to distort facts and anaesthetize them" (*Manifestos* 43).

Wannous's address to the world theatre community on International Theatre Day, organized by the International Institute of Theatre in collaboration with UNESCO on March 27, 1996, marks a turning point in his career as an internationally acclaimed dramatist and theatre practitioner. As Roger Allen states, "One Syrian writer, Sa'dallah 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" (209). At the Arab Festival for Theatrical Arts, held in Damascus in 1969, Wannous proposed his theory of the "theatre of politicization," the purpose of which he reveals in "Our Theatre": "I wish to create a political theatre that both instructs the audience and inflames them to revolt against oppression" (48). Global interest in Wannous is growing rapidly, and many of his plays have been performed in theatres in the United States and elsewhere. In 2010, *The King Is the King* was staged in Seoul, South Korea; and in 2011, *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* was performed at the American University in Cairo. *Rituals* was also performed at the American University of Beirut on December 6-8, 2013, and was staged in French by Comédie Française in Paris that same year. On March 3, 2014, the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center at CUNY hosted staged readings of excerpts from *Rituals* in celebration of its publication of *Four Plays from Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous*, co-edited by Marvin Carlson and myself. On March 8 and 9, 2014, the Chicago-based Arab theatre company Silk Road Rising presented staged readings of *Rituals* at Pierce Hall at the Historic Chicago Temple Building. In addition, *The Rape* was performed in English at the American University of Beirut on March 18, 2015.

Though Wannous was an advocate of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party, which disseminated the ideology of the President personality cult and pan-Arab nationalist rhetoric, he detested the Syrian regime's practices. This contradiction seems perplex-

ing, given that he served in the Ministry of Culture for many years and the Damascus Festival of Theatre Arts he founded was state-sponsored. The 1967 Six-Day War and the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 seem to have changed his perception of the regime, as he struggled against official theatre censorship to establish an interactive political theatre independent from state-sponsored conformist theatre. Wannous's Sorbonne mentor, French director Jean-Marie Serrault, advised him not to blindly follow ready-made European theatrical models; therefore, restricted by the lack of an indigenous Arabic theatrical tradition, Wannous used Arabic cultural heritage, history, and folklore as source material for his political drama. In *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre*, Wannous writes: "We reject imported ready-to-wear theatrical forms […] We strive to create a theatre that changes the people's mentalities and raises their consciousness of their common fate" (24). It should be noted that the Syrian regime was tolerant with anti-regime writers. In an interview on January 2014, the Syrian critic Nadim Mu'ala states that the Syrian regime has not been as despotic as many other regimes throughout the world; it has not imprisoned dissident writers, but it has only banned any nonconformist works; and when a writer exceeded the limits of censorship, "it 'has broken the writer's pen, not his neck or head" (qtd. in Al-'Anezī 83).

The political upheavals that influenced Wannous's drama include the Suez crisis of 1956, the Algerian War of 1954-62, the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948 and the ensuing Palestinian exodus into neighboring Arab countries, the refugee crisis, and the breakup of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria (1958-61) established by the late Egyptian President Jamāl 'Abdel Nāsser. The most traumatizing of these events for Wannous was the 1967 setback, followed by Egyptian President Anwar Sādāt's historical visit to the Knesset on November 20, 1977, and the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon and the siege of Beirut in 1982. Wannous's political plays identify dictatorship, oppression, persecution of political reformists, and lack of Arab unity as the main causes of the Arabs' defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Wannous's political theatre was also initiated by his interest in the ideology of Tāha Ḥusayn (1889-1973), the figurehead of the Egyptian renaissance, a blind professor of Arabic literature and critic who dedicated his literary career to serving Arab nationalism, social justice, and modernism in the Arab world. Wannous read Ḥusayn's political essays with interest and seems to have been mostly influenced by his bold views of politics and religion, which enraged religious dogmatists who accused him of heresy and apostasy. Abdulaziz Al-'Abdullah asserts that Ḥusayn's influence on Wannous's later plays is evident in Wannous's rejection of religious extremism and call for modernism in Syria (*Western Influences* 68).

Two major political movements in the Arab world further influenced Wannous's works. The first of these was the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party, which calls for the resurrection of Arab nationalism, pan-Arab unionism, secularism, socialism, and hostility toward Israel, and opposes imperialism, colonialism, and Western political

hegemony. The Syrian regime adopted the constitution of the Ba'th Party in 1963, imitating the Soviet Union model, which emphasizes socialist and communist ideology and the personality cult of the president as an autocratic military leader. Though Wannous was generally an advocate of the Ba'th Party's mainstream ideology, he disapproved of its oppression of fellow Syrian citizens. Wannous was also influenced by Nasserism, which originated in Egypt but spread quickly throughout the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s. Nasserism is a socialist Arab nationalist political movement based on the political views of President Jamāl 'Abdel Nāsser, the main revolutionary leader of the Egyptian Revolution in 1952. The tenets of the movement have an obvious resonance in Wannous's political plays, particularly those written in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, as 'Abduraḥmān Yāghī points out: "From the beginning of his career as a dramatist Wannous embraced an ingrained opposition against exploitation, despotism, abuse of authority, racial discrimination, hegemony, sectarianism, subjugation and poverty" (18).

Influences on Wannous's Political Plays Written in the Aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War: *The Evening Party for the Fifth of June* (1968)

In the aftermath of the 1967 setback, Wannous realized that experimenting with imported European forms of dramaturgy to implicitly criticize state oppression was insufficient. He aspired to directly challenge the Syrian regime's ideology and reconstruct a new political awareness against its misleading and damaging propaganda. The plays that he wrote in response to the defeat illustrate how oppression and oligarchy create a terrified citizenry and a defeated nation, and how the Syrian regime manipulates the nation's collective memory by falsifying history to perpetuate its rule. *Evening Party*, in particular, demonstrates that autocracy and persecution of political dissidents were the main causes of the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. The play, like all of Wannous's politically nonconformist plays, uses sardonic humour to cynically ridicule the regime's delusional heroism in wars with Israel, and to mock its shallow slogans of martyrdom, pan-Arabism, and Arab nationalism. In 1968, the play ran for two performances at Al-Ḥamra Playhouse in Damascus, after which the authorities banned it, and the Syrian Ministry of Culture withdrew the script from the market. Nevertheless, the play was reprinted in Lebanon in 1969 and was performed several times in Beirut in 1970. The Syrian censors uncomfortably lifted the ban on the play, which was performed at the Second Festival of Theatre Arts in Damascus in the same year. In "Refugees on the Syrian Stage," Edward Ziter points out that *Evening Party* was the only Syrian play that directly addresses the outcome of the Six-Day War. In disclosing the false Syrian identity camouflaged by the regime's

grand hegemonic narratives and its claim of being a defender of Arab nationalism, and identifying persecution of its citizens as the real cause of the Arab defeat, and giving a vital performative role to his audience, Wannous was likely influenced by Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*:

> The poetics of the oppressed aims to change the people—"spectators," passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon—into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action […] the spectator himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change. (Boal 97-98)

In *Evening Party*, the audience in the theatre is waiting to watch a play. However, the Director steps out to explain that there will be no performance because the playwright has withdrawn the script of the play; instead, he will entertain them with folkloric singing and dancing. The audience's protest is not only restricted to commenting on the onstage action, but also incorporates dialogue exchanges with the actors. These interruptions have even become an integral part of the play's scripts rather than remaining offstage disruptions. In the manner of Brecht's political theatre, such audience participation spreads the onstage action of the play beyond the theatrical space to address a wider spectrum of citizens. Ziter remarks that Wannous's play stresses the fact that, like the peasant refugees of the Golan Heights who were driven out of their hamlets, all Syrians have been alienated from a true understanding of their national identities by a regime that has colonized and terrorized its people's psyches ("Refugees" 127). He satirizes the Syrian regime's paranoia, chauvinistic slogans of Arab nationality, and self-promotion as a military power. For instance, the Director proudly says to the audience, "Don't you know that our soldiers are the bravest in the world? Just one of them is worth a hundred of any other country" (*Evening Party* 77).[1] The playwright 'Abdulghanī, who serves as Wannous's interlocutor, insists on withdrawing the script and complains, "I smelt the offensive odor of my words in the lines of the script and it reminded me of the vaginas of whores […] The other playwrights don't smell this bad odor as I do [...] I was like someone who throws trash in the faces of the audience" (*Evening Party* 60). In fact, Wannous disdains the regime's mainstream ideology, forcefully propagated by the Syrian National Theatre and the government-sponsored media: "Our government offered us a readymade awareness and we have remained a defeated nation all those years [...] So finally we must learn how to raise our own political awareness" (*Manifestos* 127-28).

According to Wannous, there are two types of theatre in most Arab countries. One is theatre for the bourgeois elites, which does not address political issues and is merely concerned with entertaining the public, and which, as state-sponsored drama, is often used to spread propaganda to depoliticized audiences. The other is political theatre, which seeks to raise citizens' political awareness. *Evening Party* illustrates that theatre must change from a sycophantic platform for promoting the ideologies of autocratic regimes, stupefying and misleading the public, into a liberal and reformist institution that not only entertains the audience but also politicizes

marginalized sectors of society such as peasants and proletarians. These two antithetical theatres are represented, respectively by the Director and the playwright who refuses to write pro-regime plays for the state-funded theatre. In the introduction to the play, Wannous asserts: "The Director of this play […] is also the Director of the theatre at the same time. He must be appointed by the government […] Therefore; his influence extends beyond the stage and the theatre building which he administers" (*Evening Party* 3). Moreover, Wannous launches a severe attack against pro-regime playwrights and directors:

> In the aftermath of the June 1967 six-day war with Israel, most of the directors of cultural institutions, particularly the government-sponsored ones, were, as usual, enthusiastically trying to prove the effectiveness and loyalty of their institutions to the authorities. (*Evening Party* 3)

In Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a real-life social or political dilemma is theatricalized, as both the oppressed and the oppressor contest for their respective opinions and interests; however, the oppressed, lacking political awareness, are unable to express their interests and thus fail to fulfill their needs. The Joker, or to use Boal's term, the Difficultator, then invites the "spect-actors"—Boal's coined hybrid term for spectator-actor—to mount the stage where spectators play the role of the oppressed and, through improvisation, try to defy the oppressor in the elated hope of changing the status quo: "Now the oppressed people are liberated themselves and, once more, are making the theatre their own" (Boal 95). In *Evening Party*, Wannous uses similar dramaturgy, relying on improvisation and audience interactivity, to question the state's deceptive political rhetoric. Like Boal's invisible theatre, which did not take place in a conventional theatrical space and in which the public were not aware that a play was being performed, Wannous's political plays were intended to be performed in cafés and other public places. In *Evening Party*, most of the actors are already seated among the spectators, but they are unaware that some will soon emerge from amongst them to mount the stage to improvise; as Badawī notes, "Wannous extends the stage to the entire audience by strategically placing some of the actors amidst the audience" (275). Once the protests against the delay of the performance have begun to spread throughout the auditorium, some of the spectators begin to complain loudly: "This delay is meant to show contempt for the audience" (*Evening Party* 5). The playwright 'Abdulghanī defiantly mounts the stage and refutes the Director's accusations, asserting that he himself was misled and innocently wrote several patriotic plays for the regime during and after the invasion of Egypt in 1956 and the setback in 1967. He admits that he later regretfully realized that such plays were meant to mislead his depoliticized fellow citizens and reinforce the regime's oppression of the public. However, having restored his political consciousness, he is determined to stop the play's performance hours before its premiere. Infuriated by the peasants' seizing of the stage, the Director reproaches them and asks them to go back to their seats among the audience: "No, you have no right to speak. The stage is

ours and the seats in the auditorium are yours. This is the simplest logic" (*Evening Party* 93). However, contrary to the Director's logic, Wannous wished to abolish the misconception of the "actor-teacher" and the "spectator-student."

The influence of Brechtian dramaturgy on Wannous is obvious in *Evening Party*, with techniques such as spectatorial involvement in the onstage action, breaking the fourth wall, the use of placards, a play within a play, direct address to the spectators, the cinematic technique of fading in and fading out of light as indication of scene division to replace the curtain, and changing the minimal stage décor in full view of the audience. Wannous even uses the Brechtian chorus of dull-eyed men, dressed in gray sackcloth with tails dragging on the floor, apparently representing defeat, to ridicule the Arabs' fake victory in the Six-Day War as publicized by the Syrian regime.

As a substitute for the cancelled play and a means of avoiding embarrassment in front of the government officials who have been invited to watch the play, the Director, like Boal's Joker or Master of Ceremonies, improvises a trivial patriotic pro-regime play, *The Murmur of Ghosts*, which portrays heroic Syrian soldiers dying under bombardment from Israeli fighter planes while defending their country. Wannous condemns such pro-regime plays, since their writers are no more than gossipmongers of the regime's misleading propaganda. The Syrian peasants who have taken the stage are refugees who were driven from their village in the occupied Golan Heights as a result of the 1967 war and now live in refugee camps. Because the peasants had no weapons of any sort except for sticks and daggers, their resistance to the Israeli occupation forces would have been useless. As one spectator remarks, "they had no experience of the tactics of war; what they know of wars is only to beat their enemies with their sticks and they still recall old memories of minor rural fights" (*Evening Party* 97). This critique of the futility of Arab resistance is reiterated by another spectator, who asks an actor vowing to take vengeance on the Israeli troops, "with what weapons do you want to make them taste the pangs of death?" (*Evening Party* 41). The peasants invade the stage to protest the deceptive propaganda promoted in the story of *The Murmur of Ghosts*, which glorifies the patriotism of the Syrian soldiers in the war without portraying the suffering of the refugees who have lost their homes. Al-'Abdullah contends that the play looks like a trial of authoritarian regimes, oppression, and dictatorial leaders worldwide where the playwright is the public prosecutor and the audience is both judge and jury and the stage is the court ("Politicization" 668).

In the introduction to *Evening Party*, Wannous writes: "There are no characters in this play in the conventional sense, and the Director and the playwright are no exception to this" (4). Ismā'īl Fahad asserts that in delineating his characters, Wannous seems to have been influenced by Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, Erwin Piscator's political theatre, and Peter Weiss's documentary theatre, in which characters are seen as types rather than individuals (115). The Director becomes perturbed and appalled by the peasants' usurpation of the stage. To save face from embarrassment in front of the government officials, who have so far been sitting in the front seats in silent

discontent, he calls for a group of folk entertainers to perform folkloric dancing and singing. The Director's manoeuvre fails, and a spectator among the audience shouts, "You and your folkloric troupe have no shame! [...] Take your troupe to a country that has no problems. Settle down there and entertain those people to relieve them of their drudgery. But this is a country of refugee camps" (*Evening Party* 83). In the midst of this mayhem, two humble refugee peasants from the Golan Heights, Abduraḥmān and Abū Faraj, unexpectedly step on the stage. The Director becomes furious and tries to send them back to their seats among the audience, but the spectators and the playwright protest and ask him to allow them to express their thoughts. The two peasants almost weep with joy when they are finally given their due attention in public and start narrating naïve stories about the village from which they were driven after the war. Then, more refugees storm the stage, an act that appalls the Director, who makes every effort to evacuate the stage of the usurpers, whom he calls "[a] gang of treacherous conspirators" (*Evening Party* 127). Immediately, a number of armed security policemen surround the theatre, guarding all its doors and preventing anyone from entering or leaving the auditorium. All spectators on stage, including the playwright, are arrested on charges of conspiracy, slandering the regime, sabotage, and espionage. The chief security officer turns to the detained playwright and reproaches him: "Now then, genius playwright! Couldn't you find any outlet for your gift except for organizing a conspiracy?" (*Evening Party* 132-33). In a ranting speech, the Director threatens the audience not to even think of slandering the "glorious regime" and instructs them to direct their assault on colonialism and its guardians, which are the nation's real enemies:

> Tonight's party […] has provided us with a proof that conspirators have important connections [...] You have seen them emerge from their dens into broad daylight. You have seen how they stuck their tongues out and spat venom like serpents with no fear and no restraint […] Colonialism and its guardians, the atheists, are the enemies of our nation and the enemies of God. They think that they can easily topple our great regime. (*Evening Party* 134)

While the outspoken spectators who have taken part in the turmoil are being led out of the theatre by police, one of them defiantly shouts amidst the uproar, "tonight we improvised, but tomorrow will you go beyond our improvisation?" (*Evening Party* 136). In staging such a post-performance turmoil, Wannous seems to be influenced by Antonin Artaud's radical left-oriented play *Paradise*, in whose final scene the actors lead spectators outside the theatre into the street, with the intention of inciting revolt in the real world. *Evening Party* constitutes a drastic change in Wannous's politicizing theatre, from his previous use of historical parables as implicit criticism to directly addressing the oppression of Syrian citizens. In an interview with Mary Elias, Wannous remarked, "I was the first Syrian playwright to be summoned for questioning by military intelligence for writing *Evening Party*. However, my conflict with the theatre censors revealed to me the confines of my dream and of the theatre's capabilities" (Elias 101-02).

The Adventure of the Mamluk Jāber's Head (1970)

In most of his political plays, Wannous uses historiography to parody the Syrian regime's suppression of civil liberties, as well as to escape the attention of government censors. In *Jāber's Head*, Wannous uses historiography and a didactic parable narrated by *al-ḥakawātī*, a storyteller of folktales, to relate the historical events of a political calamity that befell Baghdad in the thirteenth century. However, contrary to the real events, the external invaders are the Persians rather than the Mongols. Wannous uses the folktale *raconteur* to narrate the events of the upheaval and allows the café customers to comment on the onstage action and communicate with the actors. In the introduction to the play, Wannous notes: "The café is the entire theatre [...] Here the actors can develop a close intimacy with the audience" (*Jāber's Head* 44).[2] By performing the play in a café, Wannous imitates Boal's invisible theatre, which stages plays in a place other than a conventional theatrical space for spectators who are not perceived as a real audience: "during the spectacle, these people must not have the slightest idea that it is a 'spectacle,' for this would make them 'spectators'" (Boal 122).

Though the play retells a historical catastrophe, the parable is meant to be a harsh critique of Syria's autocratic regime. The play centers on the animosity and struggle for power between the Sunni Caliph of Baghdad and his Shi'ite Grand Vizier. The Vizier plans to overthrow the Caliph and seize power with the military assistance of Hulagu, the Mongol Commander. As a precautionary measure, the Caliph orders his military officers to close all the city gates and thoroughly search any suspicious person. Enraged by the Sunni Caliph's mistreatment of his Shi'ite countrymen, the Vizier sent secret letters, tattooed on the shaved heads of his slaves, to Hulagu, entreating him to besiege Baghdad. The city was destroyed and the Caliph and all his courtiers were slaughtered. Wannous's play starts with customers in the café asking the storyteller to tell them the heroic biography of Al-Ẓāhir Baybars; a story of Muslim victories and heroism. The storyteller denies the customers' request, asserting that the stories in his book are chronologically related and the turn of Al-Ẓāhir Baybars's heroic Islamic victories will come once the current age's stories of defeat and treason have been narrated.

The common people remain passive in the face of the conflict, and all that they care about in such times of political upheavals is, as a commoner declares, "to stock up with bread and stay in our houses" (*Jāber's Head* 165). Another man advises them, "Stay away from politics as much as you can" (*Jāber's Head* 174). However, some outspoken men warn them that "You fail to notice that they are fighting over our heads" (*Jāber's Head* 173). Despite such warnings, the commoners remain fearful and prefer not to interfere in such a brawl lest, as the commoners complain, "prisons will be packed [...] and men will be reported missing" (*Jāber's Head* 172). The mounting fear amongst the passive populace reaches its peak when they start repeating phrases such as "Whoever marries our mother, we call him our uncle" (*Jāber's Head* 174).

The Mamluk slave Jāber, a smart opportunist demagogue, has heard of the reward for anyone who manages to dispatch a letter to the King of Persia. Despite his best friend's advice to him, "If the fire breaks out, the common people of Baghdad will be the wood that fuels it" (*Jāber's Head* 155), and that of his mistress not to gamble with his fate, he resolves to undertake the expedition. Jāber proposes to the Vizier that his head be shaved and that the letter be tattooed on his scalp; once his hair has grown adequately to hide the tattooed message, he will deliver it to Persia. Surprised by his slave's cunning, the Vizier promises that if the plan succeeds, Jāber will be granted his freedom, awarded wealth beyond imagination, and offered his beloved Zomorod in legal marriage upon his arrival in Baghdad. Despite the rumour that "[i]t's harder to leave Baghdad than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle […] because the Caliph's soldiers rummage through every pocket and every tuck in one's clothes looking for messages" (*Jāber's Head* 180), Jāber manages to steal his way out of the city. As soon as Jāber arrives in the Persian camp, his head is shaved, the king reads the tattooed letter, the slaughterer is summoned, and Jāber is beheaded in compliance with the sender's final sentence: "To guarantee that this issue remains confidential between us, kill the bearer of the letter without delay" (*Jāber's Head* 242). Having cut off Jāber's head, the executioner gives it to the *ḥakawātī*. The play ends tragically with Zomorod holding the head of her beloved Jāber and desperately lamenting: "If heads are seen rolling over and death turns its face to you" (*Jāber's Head* 244); the actors complete her statement, addressing the café customers: "don't forget that you once said: 'Why should we care? Let the glasses break each other'" (*Jāber's Head* 245). In the manner of Artaud's and Brecht's political theatre, the actors sadly address the café customers: "You said: whoever marries our mother we call our uncle […] Nobody can prevent you from expressing your opinions. But if you look around you one day, you will find yourselves strangers in your own country" (*Jāber's Head* 244). Thus, *Jāber's Head* can be interpreted as Wannous's appeal to his depoliticized audience to free themselves from their customary passivity and fatalism, and to take part in politics. While hearing the story of the Mamluk slave Jāber, the café customers remark, "This is the age we live in now […] We taste its bitterness every moment" (*Jāber's Head* 146). As the customers intend to leave, one of them chastises the ḥakawātī, warning him that the customers will boycott his tragic tales unless he narrates the *Sīra* (biographical epic) of Baybars. The old *raconteur* tranquilly replies: "I don't know... Maybe! This all depends on you" (*Jāber's Head* 245). Here, Wannous hints that Islam's golden age of heroism and victories will be restored when the general public has courageously revolted against autocratic regimes. After many years of having banned the play without providing a reason, the Syrian censors finally allowed it to be performed in 1984.

The Rape (1989)

The Rape stands atop Wannous's political dramatic canon, since it is the first play in which he directly addresses the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The play, translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab and directed by Sahar Assaf, was performed at Irwin Theater at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, on March 18, 2015. Its main plot appears to be a rough transadaptation of *La Doble Historia del Doctor Valmy* (*The Double Life of Doctor Valmy*, 1968) by Antonio Vallejo, the most prominent dramatist of the Spanish civil war. In Vallejo's play, secret agent Daniel Barnes castrates a political dissident in an interrogation cell, an atrocious act that consequently causes his impotence. Frustrated by his inability to fulfill her intense sexual desire, his wife eventually kills him. The psychiatrist Dr. Valmy, who has been treating Barnes for some time before he is killed, censures the Spanish fascist regime for allowing police brutality during inquisitions. Wannous's *The Rape* is set in the occupied territories in which Palestinian revolutionaries are tortured by Israeli police investigators.

In the introduction to the play, Wannous makes it clear that he wishes to dramatize the trauma of both colonizer and colonized by depicting the conflict in a fairly balanced and impartial manner, from the perspectives of both Palestinians and Israelis: "I dream of an extraordinary performance of this play that will give as much credit to the Israeli story as to the Palestinian one" (*The Rape* 64).[3] Wannous further elaborates that he "envision[s] two high-quality performance styles, one that dramatizes the distinctively Israeli story and the other the distinctively Palestinian. Both performance styles should be serious and rigorous" (qtd. in Myers and Saab 205). Wannous also warns members of the audience not to be biased in their perception and judgement of the Arab-Israeli conflict: "The spectators are not to blame since formidable institutions and systems mold their reactions and tastes in this direction" (qtd. in Myers and Saab 205). Robert Myers and Nada Saab assert that in writing *The Rape*, Wannous wanted members of the audience to serve as a "moral tribunal" in which they act as "a sort of historical jury who view a dramatization of the past and must actively engage in an interrogation of its meaning and political implications" (10).

The Palestinian story unfolds with Al-Fāri'ah, an old Palestinian woman who still lives in her land, thus challenging the Israeli occupation forces, as she bitterly indoctrinates her infant nephew in a cradle beside her. She speaks highly of her father, a revolutionary resistance fighter who died fighting Israeli soldiers and settlers to liberate Palestine. The scene is contrasted with an Israeli woman, Sara, teaching her grandson the story of David and Goliath from the Jewish tradition: she tells the infant that Goliath, the brutal ancestor of all Palestinians, was a pagan giant Philistine warrior who was defeated by the young David, a pious believer in God and the future king of Israel. The moderate Israeli psychiatrist Abraham Menuhin condemns torture of Palestinian revolutionaries in Israeli detention cells and boldly calls for co-existence between the two peoples. The central event in the story surfaces

when the security chief officer Meir gives an order to his soldiers to rape Dalāl, the wife of Palestinian revolutionary Ismā'īl, in front of him while he is being questioned in the Shin Beth interrogation center. Meir ruthlessly declares that "Palestinians' dignity is related to the honor of their wives" (*The Rape* 80). Ishāq, an extremist and a racist security officer serving under Meir's command, brutally takes part in the rape of Dalāl, and constantly asserts that "the only good Arab is a dead one" (*The Rape* 144). As a result of his participation in the rape, he is traumatized and is afflicted with feelings of anguish, inner torment and anxiety, and reluctantly consults the psychiatrist Dr. Menuhin, to whom he confesses his crime:

> I was turned on when I saw my colleague Jadoun raping the Palestinian woman, and then suddenly I went soft and was content with watching. After a while I became furious, got out of my mind—and I unconsciously cut the woman's vagina and breast with a razor. I ran sweating all over. (*The Rape* 112)

Dr. Menuhin informs Ishāq that, unfortunately, he cannot be helped unless he confesses to his crime in public: "There is no righteousness in what you're doing. There's no justice in occupying another people's land" (*The Rape* 114). Ishāq's torture of innocent and defenceless Palestinians has rendered him sexually impotent and spiritually sterile; his anguish is made worse by his army buddy Jadoun's unexpected rape of his wife Rāḥīl. Having confessed to having participated in the rape of Dalāl, he becomes possessed by her husband Ismā'īl, who was tortured to death in the interrogation centre. Ishāq complains to the psychiatrist, "He's lurking inside me, punishing me and curbing my virility" (*The Rape* 145). Rahīl lays all the blame for her rape on her husband, thus increasing his anguish: "Your noble chum, Jadoun, raped me […] He raped me the way you and your army buddies rape Arab women in your glorious work" (*The Rape* 147). Desperate, Rahīl tells Ishāq that she cannot bear to live with him anymore and that she will leave him to live with her aunt in the United States. She cries out: "If I stay, I will go insane. This life is disgusting, a nightmare [...] I can't stand living in this house, seeing you, your mother, and my body […] I must flee this country or I'll die like a dog" (*The Rape* 147). Filled with wrath, Ishāq tries to take vengeance on Jadoun, but Meir surprises him and shoots him. Meir cunningly reports the killing as an accident, claiming that Ishāq unintentionally shot himself while he was carelessly cleaning his pistol. However, both Rahīl and Menuhin report the murder to the authorities and expose both Meir and Jadoun as, respectively, a murderer and a rapist.

In the final scene, the playwright Sa'dallah Wannous unexpectedly appears within the play's events as he is summoned at the request of Menuhin. Both Menuhin and his interlocutor agree that coexistence between Arabs and Jews is possible as long as both sides have liberal people like them, and both censure Israelis and Palestinians alike for the bloodshed and violence. Menuhin asserts to his interlocutor that it is hard to be a Jew and anti-Zionist in the state of Israel. The character Wannous further admits to Menuhin that it is also difficult, if not forbidden, to present a sympathetic

Jewish character like him to Arab audiences, and that "I myself need to be brave enough to present you" (*The Rape* 145-46). Moreover, both the character and the playwright agree that extremism on both sides is their mutual enemy. Nonetheless, Judith Miller remarks that "Wannous failed to create a sympathetic Jew who believes in Israel's right to exist" (317).

The play ends with Menuhin being strapped into a straitjacket and being led to a mental asylum by Israeli security police. Edward Ziter states that Wannous's *The Rape* foresees Palestinian armed resistance to the Israeli occupation as a nascent reality and a call for widespread Arab resistance to reclaim Palestine (*Political Performance* 104). The play also depicts the plight of Palestinian refugees living in camps in diaspora as marginalized people without identity; refugees who cannot express their communal will to reclaim their country and for whom the host countries rarely speak on their behalf. It further condemns Palestinian lackeys who collaborate with the Israeli occupation forces to imprison resistance fighters, detention of political activists without a fair trial, and rape of Palestinian women in detention cells, and oppression of defenceless people.

Historical Miniatures (1994)

Historical Miniatures illustrates how historians can be biased in writing down history to fulfill their interests and those of noble personages. According to Edward Ziter, *Historical Miniatures* demonstrates that history is merely a process of selection and production, like any sort of fiction by state chroniclers, to suit the objectives of those who write it (*Political Performance* 171). The play portrays the renowned Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406) as a devious and corrupt compiler of chronicles, and history as merely a heap of lies made reliable by established historians. It depicts the siege of Damascus and the carnage that followed during Tamerlane's conquest of Syria in 1401. The Mamluk Sultan led an Egyptian army to Syria to fight the Mongol army; however, after having engaged in several futile battles with the invading army, the Sultan's forces retreated to Cairo to prevent a rival from toppling the reign of the Sultan while fighting on a distant front. In the absence of any resistance, the Mongol army set the city on fire after the loose troops brutally massacred male civilians and raped women. Ibn Khaldūn, the Sultan's historiographer, opts to stay in the city to record a curious historical event and vindicate his theory of the inevitable growth and decline of civilizations and empires. During Tamerlane's siege of Damascus, Ibn Khaldūn develops an alliance with the callous conqueror and draws maps of the region for him. He even convinces the populace that resistance to this conquest is useless, since the Arab dynasty in Syria is doomed to crumble and the conqueror's founding of a new dynasty in the country is inevitable. Driven by self-interest, the opportunistic Ibn Khaldūn sides with the merchants of Damascus in rejecting the declaration of *jihād*, or "holy war against disbelievers," asserting that "*Jihād* is

impossible […] Anyone who talks about *jihād* these days is either senile or a trickster" (*Historical Miniatures* 416).[4]

In *Historical Miniatures*, Wannous indirectly depicts the Syrian regime's political reaction to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon, as the main characters of the play censure the Sultan's failure to defend the country and protect his subjects. One woman's dream of iron birds roaring in the skies of Beirut, hurling "fiery horrible balls that echo and annihilate" (Ziter, *Political Performance* 175), is an indirect reference to the Israeli invasion of Beirut while people from other Arab nations watched without concern, and an arraignment of the Arab armies and the lack of solidarity among Arabs in times of upheaval. Wannous points out that there is no certainty in any historical incident, only different accounts.

Conclusion

The superiority of theatre to other arts lies in its immediacy, idiosyncrasy, and ability to construct a testimonial collective memory. This unique attribute of the performative arts gives the playwright a better chance to politicize his/her audience. Baz Kershaw states that political theatre can be best assessed by what he calls "performance efficacy; the potential that theatre may have to make the immediate effects of performance influence on the general historical evolution of wider social and political realities" (1). Aware of this fact, both dictatorial regimes and revolutionary oppositional playwrights throughout the world have used theatre to achieve their aims. The former use theatre to impose their totalitarian rhetoric, promote surveillance, ensure obedience, and maintain the status quo; the latter use the same medium to generate political awareness, social cohesion, dissension, and resistance to such totalitarian dictatorships. Wannous's oeuvre covers three periods in his career as a dramatist. His early plays show the influence of Western theatre movements and were mainly concerned with tackling social issues; his middle plays developed his concept of the "theatre of politicization," based on Marxism; and his late plays show more freedom in tackling social and psychological issues. This article traces Wannous's development as an artist and his strategies of audience politicization. This gradual development of audience politicization has clearly guided the selection of the plays under discussion. In *Manifestos*, Wannous admits that his theatre of politicization failed to challenge the regime's representation of Syrian politics and politicize his audiences because it had been "hindered by many obstacles [...] and consequently could not flourish" (111). Unfortunately, Wannous's political plays have never had the hoped-for political effect on Syrians and, on the contrary, have been strategically used by the Syrian regime to foster its deceptive reputation in the West as a devotee of liberalism in dealing with political dissents.

Notes

1. Quotations from Wannous's *The Evening Party for the Fifth of June* taken from *Four Plays from Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous*, edited and translated by Marvin Carlson and Safi Mahfouz.

2. Quotations from Wannous's *The Adventure of the Mamluk Jāber's Head* taken from *Four Plays from Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous*, edited and translated by Marvin Carlson and Safi Mahfouz.

3. Quotations from *The Rape* taken from Wannous, *The Complete Works, Vol. 2*. My translation.

4. Quotations from *Historical Miniatures* taken from Wannous, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 2. My translation.

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