Introduction

Robert Myers and Sonja Mejcher-Atassi

Sa'dallah Wannous (1941–97) was one of the most influential Arab playwrights and public intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century. The recognition of his substantial body of dramatic and critical work has extended well beyond Arab cultural, intellectual, and theatrical history into the fields of world literature and world theatre. Although during his lifetime, his plays were produced primarily in his native Syria and the Arab world, and other socialist countries such as East Germany and the Soviet Union, his work has more recently been produced in France, at the Comédie Française, and presented in performances and public readings in Germany, Belgium, Canada, and the United States. His works have been translated into Dutch, French, and German, as well as English, and Yale University Press recently released an anthology of translations of four of his major plays and a number of his major essays, entitled *Sentence to Hope: A Sa'dallah Wannous Reader*.[1] Other translations of his plays have recently appeared in English, including *The Rape*, about the first *Intifada*, in *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant*, published by Brill.[2] Today, among cultural historians and literary and theatre scholars, his name is frequently mentioned alongside those of other major twentieth-century playwrights and intellectuals such as Athol Fugard, Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht, Caryl Churchill, Vaclav Havel, and Wole Soyinka.

Wannous belongs to a generation of Syrian and Arab cultural practitioners profoundly affected by two traumatic and defining events that took place after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and decolonization from political control by Western powers. The first was the *Nakba* of 1948 – the creation of the State of Israel, which took place in tandem with the First Arab-Israeli War and provoked the forced departure of nearly 750,000 Palestinians – and the second the 1967 War, referred to in Arabic as the *Naksa* (setback) or *Hazima* (defeat). Both defeats led to intense self-criticism among Arab intellectuals and also to the rise of authoritarian regimes that were supported by the military across the Arab world. Despite the futile struggles for peace and political equity undertaken by his generation and the existential crisis that he personally endured,

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108973182.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wannous firmly believed in the transformative power of theatre. Shortly before he died of cancer in 1997, he became the first – and until today the only – playwright from the Arab world to give an address marking World Theatre Day. He concluded his message, entitled "Thirst for Dialogue," with the words "We are condemned to hope that this is not the end of history,"[3] a sentence that has been quoted repeatedly, especially after the Arab uprisings in 2011 and their violent aftermath.

At a moment when the hope of creating a new historical beginning in the wake of the end of the Cold War continues to elude both Arabs and the rest of the world, it seems vital to consider how Wannous' plays, essays, and autobiographical texts allow us to understand the recent and contemporary predicaments in the Arab world in particular, and of such historical dilemmas more generally. For those who care about the role of culture, especially as manifested in literature and theatre in various global traditions, as a key indicator and explicator of the dynamics of societies, it is imperative to examine the work of artist-intellectuals like Wannous as a means of measuring the extent to which theatre and literature still matter today. Moreover, examining the significance of the thought, work, and legacy of Wannous in the Arabic tradition and in world literature and theatre allows us to define those disciplines and modes of thought in new ways.

The Theatre of Sa'dallah Wannous: A Critical Study of the Syrian Playwright and Public Intellectual is the first book in English to provide a clear sense of the significance and complexity of Wannous' life and work. It is unique in bringing cross-disciplinary scholarship on Wannous together and aligning it with cultural practice and memory by including contributions from leading academics as well as renowned cultural practitioners from the Arab world and abroad. It is crafted to appeal simultaneously to an academic audience and a broader general public interested in cultural production, especially Arabic and world literature and theatre, and its intersection with society and politics. This volume should be of interest to literary and theatre studies scholars, cultural historians, theatre practitioners, and anyone who cares about contemporary theatre, Syria and the Arab world, and the role of cultural production – especially dramatic literature – in providing a portrait of and shaping a culture in the throes of profound transformation.

The volume is organized in four interrelated parts. Part I, "Situating Wannous," includes two chapters, one by Marvin Carlson, and the other by Robert Myers and Nada Saab. Carlson opens with a historical perspective of theatre in the Arab world, pointing to the significance of Marun al-Naqqash in Beirut and Ahmad al-Qabbani in Damascus and Cairo at the time of the Arab *Nahda*, the so-called Arab awakening,

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which had its beginnings in the nineteenth century. He then discusses Wannous' plays within the context of both Arabic and world drama. "Once almost unknown," Wannous is today widely considered "a major author, not just in the modern Arabic theatre, but for the theatre repertoire around the world," Carlson concludes. In their chapter on Wannous and Bertolt Brecht, Myers and Saab investigate the nature of the well-documented influence of the German playwright, theorist, and director on the Syrian playwright. In addition to examining theoretical and indirect links between the two, such as Wannous' interviews and friendships in France with Brechtian theatre artists and scholars such as Bernard Dort, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jean-Marie Serreau, and Peter Weiss, the chapter looks at Wannous' creation of innovative hybrid works that utilized Brechtian dramaturgical techniques alongside traditional Arabic performative modes. The chapter also analyzes manifestations of these reworkings of Brechtian dramaturgical models in performance in two very different stagings, one in former East Germany and the other in the former Soviet Union, of one of Wannous' most innovative plays, *The Adventure of the Head of Mamlouk Jabir*. It also discusses Wannous' participation in the Brecht Dialogue in 1968 in East Berlin, which commemorated the playwright's seventieth birthday, and the documents and theatrical programs from that event that were recently found in Wannous' personal library, which is now housed at the American University of Beirut.

Part II, "Reading Wannous," goes on to analyze the significance of several of Wannous' best-known and most produced plays (e.g. *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*, *The Rape*, *Historical Miniatures*, and *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*) and investigates the relationship of his plays to political and historical events, his theories of theatre (which, especially in his early career, were markedly influenced by those of Brecht), and his other writings, with special attention paid to his position as a committed Marxist and political dissident in authoritarian Syria. It begins with a chapter by Zeina G. Halabi about both the figurative silence of Wannous and the literal silence manifested in the period in which he ceased to write plays altogether. During this period, he continued, as Halabi points out, to write critical essays in addition to cofounding and directing the most important theatre school in Syria, the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. This literal silence – understood by Halabi as a meaningful event rather than an intellectual aporia – was triggered, as Wannous explained, by the Camp David Accords and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1978. Friederike Pannewick's chapter focuses on *The Rape*, Wannous' 1990 play in which he broke his literal silence after almost a decade of not writing

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plays. She reads Wannous' work in tandem with Fanon's analysis of violence in postcolonial societies in *The Wretched of the Earth* – which appears in Arabic translation among the books in Wannous' personal library – as a means of assessing Wannous' significance now, after the uprisings that began in 2011 in a number of Arab countries that led to violent state repression and war. Like Fanon, Wannous warned that authoritarianism and "blind nationalism" would severely undermine the development of a self-critical and realistic national consciousness as a basis for a democratic postcolonial future. Edward Ziter, in his chapter, examines Wannous' use and interrogation of history as means of carving out a space for critical reflection on pressing contemporary issues such as state violence. His reading of Wannous focuses on two of his late plays, *Historical Miniatures* and *The Drunken Days*. As Ziter points out, Wannous participated in Arab cultural and political debates in his capacities both as playwright and public intellectual. Ziter also includes an analysis of two significant productions of *Historical Miniatures*, one in Beirut in 2000, staged by the renowned Lebanese director Nidal Al Ashkar, and the other a daring site-specific production in the prison area of the actual thirteenth-century citadel in Damascus where the play is set, by Syrian director Naila al-Atrash, which was staged shortly after Wannous' death in 1997. Since the citadel had been used to house political prisoners during the early years of the regime of Hafez al-Assad, who died three years later, al-Atrash's production was inevitably interpreted as a pointed critique of the Syrian state's continuing use of violence and incarceration as means of suppressing dissent.

Part III, "Staging Wannous," features chapters by Margaret Litvin and Sahar Assaf about recent productions of Wannous' plays. Litvin foregrounds transcultural translation as she examines, through a comparative approach, three different productions of Wannous' play *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* in English, French, and Arabic that were staged in Beirut, Chicago, Paris, and Cairo. The play, as Litvin convincingly asserts, carries a prophetic warning about the chaos that is released when rigid political, religious, and gender structures are undermined in a society deformed by a long experience of despotism. Assaf's chapter is written from a more practical perspective, drawing on her experience directing two significant contemporary productions of Wannous' plays in English in Beirut, *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* and *The Rape*. Part III also includes a conversation with one of the Arab world's most celebrated younger playwrights, Mohammad Al Attar, who studied at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus and at Goldsmiths, University of London, and today lives and works in Berlin. This interview offers valuable insights into the significance of Wannous' plays and their

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legacy for a younger generation of playwrights in and from the Arab world.

Part IV, "Remembering Wannous," offers a compelling and complex portrait of Wannous, beginning with Sonja Mejcher-Atassi's chapter about the contents of Wannous' personal library and the circumstances surrounding its donation to the American University of Beirut by his widow and daughter, Fayza and Dima Wannous, in the aftermath of the 2011 Syrian revolution and war. Her chapter provides an overview of the books in Wannous' life and the literary affinities that marked his theatrical and intellectual trajectory as documented in personal inscriptions in the books in the library. It also sheds light on the role his library played in Syria in opening up a space for critical thinking and creative literary production away from the scrutiny of the Syrian regime, which notoriously maintained a tight grip on cultural production as well as political thought. This section of the volume also provides insights into Wannous' life and work through personal testimonies by two friends, Farouk Mardam-Bey and Elias Khoury, both of whom are distinguished writers and intellectuals of world renown, and by his only child, Dima Wannous, herself one of the most acclaimed novelists and journalists of the younger generation in the Arab world. This section contains invaluable, and heretofore undisclosed, anecdotes about and insights into a multifaceted and contradictory figure who was simultaneously a committed artist and a public intellectual. Mardam-Bey, one of Syria's foremost intellectuals living in exile, who is also the most respected doyen of Arabic literature in French translation, focuses on the years Wannous spent as a student in Paris from 1966 to 1968, a formative period in his apprenticeship, during which he immersed himself in the rich and tumultuous cultural and political life of Paris. As Mardam-Bey makes clear, in addition to questioning the ambiguous relationship that existed between Europe and the Arab world, Wannous also interrogated the relationship among literature, theatre, and spectacle in the contemporary world, and was particularly intrigued by the association between political protest and theatre, both in conventional theatres and on the streets. Wannous' encounters and friendships with a host of writers and artists from France, the Arab world, and other postcolonial countries deeply affected his trajectory and writing. Paris was the place, for example, where he reflected on the 1967 War and wrote his celebrated play *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*. The chapter by Elias Khoury, who is one of the most important living Arabic novelists and a perennial candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, is adapted from an essay first published in the cultural supplement *Mulḥaq*, in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Nahār*, in 1997. The chapter, which has as its starting point

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a description of Wannous' funeral as a means of explicating his significance as a playwright and public intellectual, offers a particularly vivid portrait of Wannous. It includes descriptions of Khoury's first reading of *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June* in the cultural journal *al-Mawāqif* in Beirut in 1968, a meeting with Wannous in Paris at Mardam-Bey's house, and of being informed of Wannous' premature death in 1997 on May 15, which, in the Arab world, is *Nakba* Day, the "day of catastrophe," when the State of Israel was created. This collection of chapters ends on a personal note with a testimony from the perspective of Dima Wannous as a young girl as she recalls the final days she spent with her father more than twenty years ago in Damascus when he encouraged her to be whatever she wanted to be. Since she paints an elegant verbal portrait of a child raised by a literary parent in a world of books, it is not surprising to discover that she subsequently became a writer whose novels, originally written in Arabic, are now beginning to reach a much wider audience as they are published by a major publisher in the English-speaking world. Her most recent novel, *The Frightened Ones*, available in English translation by Harvill Secker (2020), was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2018. Sa'dallah Wannous' dedication of his complete works, which was published shortly before his death, to his daughter Dima is the clearest manifestation of his hope for the future of the Arab world, which he often professed. In the dedication, he writes of his generation's defeats, while at the same time looking toward her generation to find ways to break free of the impasses of their parents.[4] It is this hopeful vision that this volume attempts to embody as it introduces, from a wide range of perspectives, this playwright and public intellectual from Syria to readers across the globe.

From Aspiring Writer to Playwright and Intellectual of International Renown

Wannous was born in the village of Husayn al-Bahr near the coastal town of Tartous in Syria on March 27, 1941. Like other aspiring intellectuals of his generation, his renown within Syria, especially its capital, Damascus, came about only after a substantial apprenticeship that included a sojourn abroad. He studied journalism in Cairo, where he was influenced by the celebrated Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim, and theatre in Paris, where he befriended writers such as Jean Genet, Kateb Yacine, and Peter Weiss, stage directors such as Antoine Vitez, Jean-Louis Barrault, and Jean-Marie Serreau, and intellectuals such as the renowned Brecht scholar Bernard Dort. He began his writing career as a journalist, most notably for the literary journal *al-Ādāb*, published in Beirut, and for the Lebanese

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daily newspaper *al-Safir*, and also composed a number of short absurdist plays, written more for the page than the stage, which were clearly influenced by Beckett and Ionesco. Soon after, however, he disavowed the Theatre of the Absurd in favor of a highly politicized theatre influenced by Brecht, which he dubbed "theatre of politicization" and which he elaborated in a number of his critical writings. His 1968 play *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*, written in Paris, which is one of the most innovative and important works in modern Arabic literature, is an indictment of Arab leaders as incompetent liars who caused the disastrous defeat in the 1967 War.

In *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab offers a wide-ranging historical analysis of the contemporary intellectual malaise in the Arab world.[5] After surveying the principal figures of the *Nahda* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she discusses the deep implications for Arab intellectuals of the defeat in the 1967 War and the concomitant collapse of Arab nationalism as an ideology. She points to *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June* as perhaps the most complex and sophisticated explication of the meaning of the defeat and its immediate aftermath. Moreover, she identifies Wannous as one of the key intellectual figures in the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century who, through his theatre, journalistic writing, and critical essays attempted to define the sources of stagnation in Arab societies and to offer potential remedies for overcoming it.

The dilemmas Wannous addresses in his plays, as well as in his other writings, still confound the Arab world and other postcolonial societies. What is particularly intriguing about his analysis of Arab societies is the fact that, although he never minimizes the effect that social inequality, authoritarianism, and various defeats had on them, he rejects the reverence for tradition of many of his contemporaries and their cult of heritage (*turāth*), which Kassab describes as "the lure of an inexorably glorious Islam, untouched by the vicissitudes of concrete history."[6] For example, he flatly rejected the purist and ahistorical Islamist revanchism of Sayyid Qutb, the influential Egyptian thinker who founded the Muslim Brotherhood and whose writings later inspired Ayman al-Zawahiri, the intellectual architect of Al-Qaeda. Moreover, although Wannous supported a strict separation of religion and state, he was a fervent critic of the secular dictatorships that dominated the Arab world by establishing notorious police states. Instead Wannous recuperated heterodox Arab literary traditions such as the frame tale, Sufism, mystic poetry, and the *ḥakawātī*, or storyteller, and figures of the *Nahda* such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, the minister of education during the Ottoman rule of

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Muhammad Ali in early nineteenth-century Egypt, who supported a progressive Enlightenment agenda that entailed providing universal education, including for nonclerics and women.

Wannous established his reputation as a playwright and a public intellectual in Syria and the rest of the Arab world by tirelessly working in various capacities, such as director of the experimental al-Qabbani Theatre in Damascus, editor-in-chief of *al-Ḥayāt al-masraḥiyya* (Theatre life), and founding member of Syria's Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, where he taught throughout the 1980s. Although he was an Arab nationalist until the 1970s and an avowed Marxist until at least the 1980s and was appalled by the uncritical importation of consumerism into the Arab world, he was nonetheless clearly able to distinguish between the negative aspects of Western-style capitalism and positive values that were supported, at least in theory, by Western societies, such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, universal education, and separation of religion and state. In the last decade of his life – after a long phase of depression and artistic silence caused in part by his frustration with the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict – Wannous wrote a number of extraordinary and complex plays that drew on the styles of Shakespeare, Chekhov, and others, as well as Eastern folk and literary forms, to dramatize and diagnose the ills plaguing contemporary Arab societies and governments.

As Ziter makes clear in his study *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising*,[7] Wannous is the most significant playwright and intellectual figure in what was an extraordinarily rich theatrical and cultural landscape in Syria in the second half of the twentieth century. Ziter concurs with Kassab that Wannous' 1968 play *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June* was not only a formal triumph – an innovative hybrid of Eastern theatrical forms, Western "happenings," and metatheatrical modes present in both traditions – it was also a brilliant, acerbic assault on the underpinnings of Arab nationalism and the Orwellian doublethink of the Ba'th regime in Syria.[8] In a number of works written in the 1970s, Wannous adapted Brecht's allegorical style, employing Eastern elements and narrative material, most successfully in *The Adventure of the Head of Mamlouk Jabir*. The play, which takes place in a contemporary coffee house and is acted out as it is told to patrons by a *ḥakawātī*, dramatizes the thirteenth-century siege of Baghdad through the story of a slave who devises an ingenious scheme to take a message to the enemy's leader by shaving his head, allowing his master to write a message on it and letting his hair regrow to hide it so he can deliver it.

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The Rape, a play that represents a transition in Wannous' dramaturgy from a carefully constructed *engagé* theatre into a more complex examination of character, is an adaptation of the Spanish playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo's *The Double Life of Doctor Valmy* and marks Wannous' return to playwriting in 1989 after a ten-year-long interruption and a suicide attempt. In this play, Wannous, who was ardently pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist, created sympathetic Israeli characters who question and reject Zionism. The play also contains a severely conflicted and compromised but sympathetic Palestinian character, the son of a heroic freedom fighter, who, to his sister's profound chagrin, decides to work for an Israeli construction company so that he can earn money to rejoin his wife and family abroad.

In his analysis of *The Rape*, Ziter, who has contributed an incisive study for this volume of one of Wannous' last, finest, least studied, and most challenging plays, *Historical Miniatures*, asserts that the play "poses important questions about the possibility of Arab-Israeli co-existence"[9] and reveals how crudely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been internalized by those who have experienced it. As he points out, *The Rape* "demonstrates that violence cannot be compartmentalized: a state that employs violence against occupied peoples will inevitably see that violence permeate into all reaches of society."[10] In addition, Ziter, who devotes an entire chapter of his book on political theatre in Syria to Wannous, emphasizes how the playwright's highly literary dramatic language consistently interrogates history and tradition, particularly in the plays he wrote after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer in the early 1990s: *Historical Miniatures*, *Wretched Dreams*, *The Drunken Days*, and *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*.

In 1984 in the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Roger Allen published a groundbreaking study of the texts of the plays written by Wannous from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. Few readers outside the Arab world or Eastern bloc, except for scholars specializing in Arabic or Syrian literature, were aware of his work at that time. Allen's essay is referred to frequently in this volume. It examines the tensions between Wannous' aspirations as a playwright and theorist, points to various impediments he encountered in staging his plays in an increasingly authoritarian country, and analyzes the actual audience for the plays. As Wannous writes in *Manifestos for A New Arab Theatre*, first published in the cultural journal *al-Ma'rifa* in 1970, "the central and proper way to discuss theatre – its actualization and how to solve its problems – is to start with the audience."[11] He was then ostensibly creating work for a dispossessed, working-class audience, although he later admitted that his audience came largely from the educated elite. Allen also edited an anthology entitled *Modern Arabic Drama*,

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published in 1995, with Salma Khadra Jayyusi that contained a translation of Wannous' play *The King's the King*, and he translated and wrote a short introductory essay for *Soirée* [*An Evening's Entertainment*] *for the Fifth of June* for *The Mercurian: Theater in Translation* in 2016. Other recent studies in addition to Kassab's, published in 2010, and Ziter's, published in 2014, include Pannewick's, who has contributed a chapter for this volume on colonialism, trauma, and psychiatry in the works of Fanon and Wannous, and who has written extensively on Wannous in German over the past decade. In the past twenty years there have also been several significant doctoral dissertations completed on Wannous, and an increasing number of scholarly articles published in Arabic, English, French, German, and Italian, which are included in the works cited at the end of this book.

Interest in Wannous' drama, especially recently, has no longer been confined to academic circles. Wannous' 1994 *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab, was produced in 2013 in Beirut, and directed by Sahar Assaf. The production, which was praised by local and international critics, was reviewed in a long essay about the play and the theatre of Wannous in the "Ideas" section of *The Boston Globe*. In the same year, the English-language version received a staged reading at Silk Road Rising in Chicago and at CUNY's (City University of New York) Martin Segal Theatre, where it was the subject of an essay by the renowned Lebanese journalist Rami Khouri in *The Daily Star*. A year earlier, in 2013, the play, which includes themes of prostitution, clerical corruption, and overt homosexuality, was produced in French at the Comédie-Française, directed by Sulayman Al Bassam from Kuwait. It is the only Arabic-language play ever to be included in the Comédie's repertory. *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* was also produced in Arabic in 2012 at the American University in Cairo, where its theme of personal and sexual liberation was explicitly linked to the zeitgeist of the Arab Spring. Two studies about the play appeared in *Theatre Research International*, published by Cambridge University Press, in a special issue devoted to "Theatre and the Arab Spring," in 2014, which was edited by Marvin Carlson. At the American University of Beirut (AUB), Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Robert Myers organized two conferences on Wannous, in 2015 and 2017. The first was timed to accompany the staging of Wannous' *The Rape* in Beirut, which was produced by AUB and directed by Sahar Assaf. The second was an event with scholars, practitioners, and Wannous' spouse and daughter to celebrate their donation of Wannous' personal library to AUB, where it is preserved and made available for research.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108973182.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1. *Sentence to Hope: A Sa'dallah Wannous Reader*, eds. and trans. Robert Myers and Nada Saab (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), was reviewed by Ursula Lindsay for *The New York Review of Books*, June 27, 2019.
2. Robert Myers and Nada Saab (eds.), *Modern and Contemporary Political Theatre from the Levant: A Critical Anthology* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).
3. Sa'dallah Wannous, *al-Aʿmāl al-kāmila* vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2004), pp. 39–44; English translation in *Sentence to Hope*, pp.14–15; International Theatre Institute, *Saadalla Wannous 1996* (Paris: UNESCO, 1996), www.world-theatre-day.org/pdfs/WTD_Wannous_1996.pdf (last accessed August 10, 2020). Wannous' expression lends its title to Eyad Houssami's *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).
4. Sa'dallah Wannous, *al-Aʿmāl al-kāmila* vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2004), pp. 5–6.
5. Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
6. Ibid., 63.
7. Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).
8. As a means of providing readers with easy reference to the plots of Wannous' plays that are discussed in this study, summaries of the plays are provided at the end of this volume.
9. Ziter, *Political Performance*, 142.
10. Ibid., 142–3.
11. Sa'dallah Wannous, *Manifestos for a New Arab Theater*, trans. and introduced by Asaad Alsaleh, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, special issue on "Transnational Drama: Theater and Performance," 39 (2019), 206.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108973182.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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