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Approaching Sa‘dallāh Wannūs’s Drama: The Manifestos for a New Arab Theater

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Sa‘dallāh Wannūs: The New Playwright

Sa‘dallāh Wannūs, also commonly transliterated as Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997), is an influential Syrian playwright who made significant contributions to Arab theater between the 1960s and the 1990s. His plays are well-known in the Arab world; many of them are still performed in various Arab countries, including Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait. Some of them, however, are banned because of their strong critique of political and cultural norms. Several of his plays have been translated into English, French, and other European languages. These are some examples of his plays that were translated into English: *Four Plays from Syria: Sa‘dallah Wannous*, translated by Marvin Carlson et al;¹ *Soirée for the 5th of June*, translated by Roger Allen; *The Glass Café*, translated by Fateh Azzam and Alan Brownjohn; *The King’s Elephant*, translated by Ghassan Maleh and Christopher Tingley; *The Elephant, O Lord of the Ages*, translated by Peter Clark; “A Translation of *Sahra ma‘a Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī* by Sa‘dallāh Wannūs,” by Shawkat Toorawa; and *The King is the King*, by Ghassan Maleh and Thomas G. Ezzy. In 2012, a book in Arabic and English was edited by Eyad Houssami entitled *Doomed by Hope*, honoring the legacy of Sa‘dallāh Wannūs and tracing his “repertoire in the Arab Middle East and beyond” (2). Thanks to this repertoire his plays have been, and still are, performed in the Arab World and Europe, not to mention that they have become on the reading lists of several departments at world universities.

Wannūs can be seen as the founding father of “the theater of politicization,” where such essential issues as oppression, tyranny, lack of dialogue, and the impotence of both Arab rulers and citizens are raised. This theater engages and empowers spectators to partic-

ipate in uncovering their political reality and have a dialogue about how to change it. He not only aims at challenging the tyrannical political conditions of society, but also the tendencies to accept such conditions. Such tendencies, as Salma Khadra Jayyusi notes, are “deeply ingrained within contemporary Arab society, attitudes Wannūs has regularly attempted to combat in his work” (xi). As can be gleaned from his “Manifestos for a New Arab Theater,” which is translated at the end of this article and hereafter referred to as “Manifestos,” Wannūs has a mission to renew theater based on knowing the audience and the masses at large. He dedicates his theater and writings to communicating with the audience and transforming their role from passive to active participants. These new methodologies are highly emphasized in his “Manifestos” as well as his plays.²

Wannūs was born in 1941 to a poor family in a Syrian village called Ḥuṣain al-Baḥr, which is also the birthplace of the Syrian novelist Ḥaidar Ḥaidar (1936-). In a village that overlooks the Mediterranean, Wannūs completed primary education before moving to the port city of Ṭarṭūs to attend his secondary school, which he completed in 1959. He was awarded a scholarship (for being the top Syrian student in secondary school) to study journalism at Cairo University. While still a university student, he wrote his first play, *al-Ḥayā Abadan* (Life Forever; 1961), but he never published it. When he returned to Syria in 1963, he started working for the Ministry of Culture and wrote *Mīdūzā tuḥaddiq fī al-ḥayā* (Medusa Staring at Life), and also began writing short stories and critical essays. In 1965, he joined the leading government newspaper, *al-Ba‘th*, as its cultural editor. During this time, he resided in Damascus, where he started to explore its cultural and social fabric. Between the years 1966-1968 and 1973-1974, Wannūs received other government grants to study in France, where he attended the Theater of Nations in Paris.

Wannūs published his first plays in 1965 in a volume entitled *Ḥakāyā jawqat al-tamāthīl* (Stories of Statues’ Chorus), which had five short plays, including *Ma’sāt bā’i’ al-dibs al-faqīr* (The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses Vendor), which was formerly published in 1964 in *Al-Ādāb*, the Lebanese literary magazine where he also published critical essays and reviews. After the 1967 defeat of Arab states by Israel, he started writing his first major play, *Haflat*

samar min ajl khamsa ḥazīrān (*Soirée for the 5th of June*), which appeared in 1968. In this play, according to Edward Ziter, he was the only Syrian playwright to directly examine the 1967 War while “redrawing the boundaries of Syrian identity” by fully engaging the audience with the refugees from the occupied Golan Heights region (12). The 1967 War and its aftermath considerably influenced Wannūs and marked a shift in his writing, which produced such significant works as *‘Indamā yal‘ab al-rijāl* (*When Men Play*; 1968), *al-Fīl yā malik al-zamān* (*The Elephant, O Lord of the Ages*; 1969), *Mughāmarat ra’s al-mamlūk Jābir* (*The Adventures of Mamlūk Jābir’s Head*; 1970), the same year he published the “Manifestos,” and *Sahra ma‘a Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī* (*An Evening Entertainment with Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī*; 1972). These plays received special mention by the Sultan Bin Ali Al Owais Foundation, which awarded Wannūs its prestigious Drama Prize in 1989.³ In the same year, he also received recognition at Cairo’s Experimental Theater, Egypt, and at Carthage Theater in Tunisia.

Wannūs was diagnosed with cancer in 1992, but he continued to write, producing several major works in the following year such as *Yawm min zamāninā* (*Just Another Day*), *Mu-namnamāt tārikhīya* (*Historical Miniatures*), and *al-Ishārāt wa-al-taḥawwulāt* (*Rituals of Signs and Metamorphoses*) in 1994. He resigned from the Arab Writers Union in 1995, protesting the expulsion of Adonis, the Syrian-Lebanese writer, from the Union based on Adonis’s meeting with some Israeli intellectuals (Ibrahim n. pag.). His last play, *Malḥamat al-sarāb* (*The Mirage Epic*) was published in 1995. He was chosen by UNESCO’s International Theater Institute in Paris to deliver an address on World Theater Day. On March 27, 1996, he delivered his address, entitled “Al-Masraḥ wa-l-‘aṭash lil-ḥiwār” (“Theater and the Thirst for Dialogue”) (“In Memoriam” 14-15). On May 15, 1997, Wannūs died at age of 56 in Damascus, after a courageous six-year struggle with cancer. His plays and critical writings were an exemplar of social and political critique. His death was considered by many as a loss of a daring, creative playwright and an independent intellectual. When UNESCO sponsored a project to publish and distribute a free newspaper supplement that contained an Arabic literary work in all major

Arabic newspapers, they disclosed that Wannūs was the second most voted for literary figure after the classical Arab poet al-Mutanabbī. In this vote, Wannūs was followed immediately by Nobel laureate Najīb Maḥfūz (“Fi-l-dhikra” n. pag.).

Influences

Wannūs started to read Arabic literature at an early age. At just eleven years old, he owned his first literary text, a book by Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān (1883-1931). Ironically, the book purchase was the outcome of advice from one of his school teachers who allegedly noticed that Wannūs did not do well in the subject of composition, or *ta‘bīr* as it is called in Arabic. He also started reading the works of major Arab writers such as ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād (1889-1964), Mīkhā’il Nu‘aymah (1889-1989), Najīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006), and others. Yet, Tāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973)—the Egyptian critic, literary historian, essayist, and one of the earliest Western-trained academics—seems to have been of substantial influence on him among Arab writers, particularly for Ḥusayn’s challenging and critical views, even though the latter’s legacy started to decline in the 1950s, as military officers started to rule Egypt with less democracy than desired.⁴ Wannūs’s diverse reading led him to Arabic plays, the medium through which he eventually expressed his artistic voice. His study in France and visits to Europe, including the former Soviet Union, allowed him to experience the European cultural scene. From this experience he learned how to understand better the challenges of Arab culture. He realized that intellectuals can have an effective role in transforming society into modernity while keeping and utilizing Arab identity. His theoretical writings, such as the “Manifestos,” show the breadth of his readings of Western and Arab dramatists, a fact rightly credited by Roger Allen who particularly focuses on Wannūs as a prominent example of Arabic drama (“Arabic Drama” 107).

His knowledge of Western ideologies and philosophy allowed him to follow Marxism, which apparently shaped his thought. Given the fact that socialism generally reflected the official party line in Syria, the Ba‘th Party, Wannūs did not have a

problem adapting this thought to the blatant social critique that appears in his writings. It is obvious that he is critical of authoritarian political systems that did not allow freedom of expression, including that of Syria. He was known among intellectuals as less fearful of governments, and did not care if his criticism caused his works to be banned. Yet, even in Syria, whose government often allows works to get through censorship to maintain a semblance of freedom of expression, some of his plays were banned. “My very existence is propaganda,” Wannūs once said, adding, after the Syrian government had banned his play *al-Ighṭiṣāb* (Rape), that two of the leading government newspapers are “barred from even publishing my name” (qtd. in Miller 317). His contributions as a theorist of drama and audience reception seem to be informed by his experience of such censorship in the Arab world.

Heritage, or *turāth*, is a major influence on Wannūs’s plays, and many of them are based on plots informed by historical events or figures. In the context of the intellectual, religious, and social aspects of Arab history, heritage has been a significant reference for many Arabs; it is integrated in their memory and is part of their traditions. Therefore, many intellectuals and reformists, including religious figures, utilized this component of Arab identity in their aspiration for a better reality characterized by dignity, sovereignty, and recognition. Looking back on the period known to historians as the Arab revival, which began with the French expedition in Egypt in 1798 and lasted approximately until the end of the first half of the twentieth century, the scholarly focus on revisiting classical Arabic studies—while being exposed to Western thought, modes of education, and lifestyle—created a division between intellectuals. Some promoted modernization and using Western models to improve the state of Arab countries, while others showed more conservative attitudes, calling for the protection of the Arab and Muslim identities of these countries.⁵ Yet, by the 1960s, the insistence on a total break with the West became more rhetorical than practical, and many intellectuals called for taking the best of Arab heritage without relying completely on it as a model.

As for Wannūs, he is eclectic in resorting to heritage, which he does not see as something that should be romanticized or essentialized. Heritage has a historical dimension, and he be-

believes that the core of any heritage is “time” or the chronological, historical time frame from which it emerged. Moreover, he criticizes those who adopt heritage religiously and conceive of it as a space for showing off achievements or an inventory that answers all questions for all ages. Such a view, which he describes as a *salaft* one, renders heritage—as well as those who adopt it in this way—as having an “arrogant thought” and belonging to “a timeless civilization that contains by force our present as well as our future” (Wannūs, *al-A‘māl al-kāmila* 645).

Another critique of the romantic adoption of heritage is that, for Wannūs, it does not differentiate between what is good or acceptable heritage and what is not. In this regard, he asks provoking questions of those who do not want to differentiate between the sorts of heritage Arabs have: “When does heritage start? Where does it end? What does it contain? Which accomplishments should we choose?” (Wannūs, *al-A‘māl al-kāmila* 645). That is why he adopts a revisionary and critical stance on heritage, proposing the adaptation of it “organically” (646), as well as understanding its problematic context. This approach allows Wannūs to provide insights from the history of Arabs and Muslims to recreate situations similar to what contemporary masses face in their struggle with their reality—particularly authoritarianism, corruption, and lack of critical thinking. Like other playwrights, Wannūs also borrowed from heritage some characters and events. For example, he based his play *Sahra ma‘a Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī* (*An Evening Party with Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī*; 1972) on the Syrian pioneer of Arab drama Abū Khalīl al-Qabbānī (1841-1902), whose commitment to the genre has been highly admired by Wannūs. To escape the Ottoman censorship in Damascus, al-Qabbānī resided in Egypt, only to be harassed again by Ismā‘īl Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt. Both al-Qabbānī in Damascus and the Lebanese dramatist Mārūn al-Naqqāsh (1817-1855) are credited for initiating Arab drama, with the former particularly recognized for challenging the *status quo*, receiving accusations by religious leaders of producing plays fraught with heretical and immoral references.⁶ Having defied social norms by trying to provide society with innovative art, these figures became unique models for Wannūs. Thus, Wannūs’s play celebrates al-Qabbānī for his strife in an environment where peo-

ple saw his work as heterodox and immoral. These figures also provide the morale for Wannūs in his own struggle against authoritarianism and the political and social forces that restrain and resist new forms of literary creativity.⁷

Being well-versed in Western thought, Wannūs adopted an idealistic Marxist scheme for political and social justice. Similar to many Syrian intellectuals who were influenced by progressive thought, either directly from the West or inherited from such Arab thinkers as ‘Abd al-Rahmān Al-Kawākibī (1855-1902), Wannūs embraced anti-authoritarian modes of expression. He was influenced by the Sixties movement which took place while he was in France. He believed that socialism was the perfect system and ideology of government, even after the Soviet Union had collapsed. His visits to France, Germany, and the Soviet Union allowed him to follow the cultural scene of cosmopolitan Europe, which became his inspiration for creating similarly thriving modes in his own theater. He recalls a visit to Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in the Soviet Union, where he was fascinated by the French artist Henri Matisse’s *La Danse* and intrigued by “how a portrait can be transformed into a vision” (Wannūs, *al-A‘māl al-kāmila* 718). Based on his familiarity with the creative and critical movements of theater in the West and adapting some of them, Wannūs chose Western political theater as a model for his own.

German political dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is often associated with Wannūs because they both endorsed experimentation, innovation, and alienation. In “On Experimental Theatre” (1940), Brecht traces the development of theater, which shifted from the Enlightenment’s concept of instruction and entertainment (as being the core of theater) to naturalism and expressionism, the dominant modes of theater after World War II. Brecht argues for immersing various creative powers to create an experimental work: “The playwright could work out his experiments in uninterrupted collaboration with actor and stage-designer; he could influence and be influenced” (qtd. in Bentley 102). He adds that the painter and the composer can use their artistic means independently, resulting in an “integrated work of art (or ‘*Gesamtkunstwerk*’)” appearing before the spectator “as a bundle of separate elements” (qtd. in Bentley 103). Wannūs’s “Manifestos” also argue for har-

monizing all different actors in theater to produce what he calls “interactive chemistry.” The components of this chemistry “give the best they have, changing and becoming changed and altering and being altered” (33). Following Brecht’s model—along with Erwin Piscator, with whom Wannūs agrees on the centrality of the interconnection between the actor and the spectator—Wannūs provides Arab theater with new models for experimentation. By using non-traditional tropes of presentation, such as addressing the audience directly and eliminating the supposedly prevailing illusion of the fourth wall, the imaginary barrier in Brechtian theater—with its *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect)—is already broken. The theatrical vision of Wannūs aims at creating a work of art that engages spectators in understanding their reality and provoking them to change it, instead of merely observing it on the stage or outside the theater. This approach goes along with his responsibility as an Arab intellectual in opposition to power, establishing him as an artist with a political, social, and ethical message.

Yet, Wannūs’s creative engagement with, and adaptation of, European theater and its theories is localized, in the sense that it addresses the Arab political reality, which in itself is another influence. This reality directed him towards the theater of politicization, with events in the Arab world and beyond—in the late 1960s—becoming the climax of this politicization. The socio-political content of his theater is demonstrated particularly in the plays that he wrote after the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In the post-war period, Wannūs started to “wonder what relevance writing could still have; he wanted to hold on to the belief in a deed-word, in a deed-theater, in an effective art that could create changes by addressing realities with honesty and depth” (Kassab 56). This historical context is important to understanding the psychology of a playwright who, shortly before the war, was in France, fully exposed to its dynamic culture, restless society, and anti-establishment calls for individual and political liberties. This war brought him to the reality of defeat in his country which belonged to a world where hopes and dreams had been crushed by a shocking display of weakness. Nevertheless, one of the largely disturbing results of the war was the backlash against any forces in society that tried to question the legitimacy of the regimes under whose leadership the defeat took place. What

followed the war was a great deal of acquiescence to authoritarian regimes. The individual was given neither the truth about what happened or why it happened, nor the freedom to seek answers, a situation that Wannūs and other intellectuals tried to resist by works against the political authority.⁸

Wannūs's Career

Wannūs's works have often been classified into phases that reflect his intellectual trajectory and his reaction to the dramatic history of the modern Arab world. He stopped writing from 1977 through 1986, highly discouraged by the lack of freedom (Başal 96). When he did not produce any works between 1989 and 1994, there were speculations that the reason might be the drastic political changes that occurred during that period, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf war against Iraq. However, Wannūs's productivity and works are more often than not influenced by his reaction to, and interaction with, the ideas that feed his work. From a constellation of ideologies that swept the Arab world in the 1950s and the 1960s, existentialism was a fashionable theoretical trend. Even though it was not popular on the social level, it made it to the writings of some Arab authors, as in the case of Najīb Maḥfūz and his controversial *Awlād Ḥārītā* (*Children of the Alley*) in 1959. As for Wannūs, existential themes were developed in such early works as his first play, *al-Ḥayā Abadan* (1961) and *Mīdūzā tuḥaddiq fī al-ḥayā* (1962), and the works he published in 1965, marking the end of this stage of his career with both *'Indamā yal'ab al-rijāl* (When Men Play) and *Juththa 'ala al-raṣīf* (Corpse on the Pavement). These existentialist works demonstrate his focus on the struggle of the individual and the misery caused by authoritarian rule (Ramaḍān 35). These early works attempt to explore and highlight the issues of the individual as influenced by clearly stated social conditions, rather than purely focusing on the existential questions related to the meaning of life or self-making.

While learning more about European theater in France, Wannūs received advice from a French director to avoid the formulaic nature of European theater. Willing to create an Arab theater that

does not necessarily ignore the stylistic approaches utilized in Europe, Wannūs's energy was redirected after the 1967 war. This unexpected event motivated him to create what he called "the theater of politicization." As he envisions it in his "Manifestos," this theater addresses common people with sociopolitical issues that should concern them, even if they are not aware of them due to a lack of intellectual effort, media coverage, or enlightening art. In the same way Wannūs himself was shocked by the war, he wanted the masses to have the same reaction. In his "Manifestos," he argues that theater started as a political phenomenon, and it should continue to express "a political stance and undertake a political function" (35). This suggests that, even if the audience is given a purely entertaining show, the theater providing such a show is diverting them away from "their essential issues or thinking about their conditions," instead of inciting them to change such conditions, or "fate," as he often refers to it. (Wannūs, *al-A'māl al-kāmila* 42). The theater movement, as he conceives it in the text, is aware of the political role of theater in a society that has other political forces working to deceive or suppress it.

The theater of politicization defines the works that Wannūs published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including *al-Fīl yā malik al-zamān*, *Mughāmarat ra's al-mamlūk Jābir*, and *Sahra ma'a Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī*. This political stage is devoted to provoking the spectator, while showing her/him the reality that they do not see in the public sphere, which is occupied almost exclusively by the coercive Arab regimes and their media, cultural, and mass-indoctrination systems of control. A case in point is *Ḥaflat samar min ajl khamsa ḥazīrān*, which won a prize from Syria and UNESCO the year it was published. It was the first highly political work he had produced since his former plays in 1965. The text is written with an emphasis on events rather than characters, which are absent in the traditional sense, as we read in the introductory lines of the text.

In this play, a director is extremely confused because he cannot deliver the play, "The Whistling of Souls," which the audience has come to attend. The playwright has not handed the director a complete script, and the audience witnesses the dialogue between them concerning this situation. Each one tries to

explain his point of view directly to the audience. In a reference to the 1967 war, the audience then sees the performance of a village divided between those who flee the war and those who want to stay and resist. The soldiers who have been defeated are presented as pathetic subjects who cannot communicate, illustrating the sense of confusion that existed during, and in the wake of, the 1967 war. The government, which is responsible for what has happened, is represented by the director who tries to control the theater (society), but the audience symbolically refuses to remain silent and speaks back to him. This dramatic defiance shows the power of the masses that has been missing for a long time in Arab societies. By resorting to history to immerse the audience in the present, Wannūs's play centralizes the social function of theater. Yet, it does not necessarily follow the historical event; it rather tries, according to Muḥammad 'Azzām, "to read the future and [similar] events that it might bring, by scrutinizing the present and the ability to expose its negative and unhealthy aspects" (206).

This experimental and highly political work dramatizes the ongoing conflict between the government and people, and it does so in an aesthetic manner that annihilates the distance between actor and spectator. In *Soirée for the 5th of June*, Wannūs applies the alienation effect to raise questions about the defeat and to achieve social change that can lead to the avoidance of more defeats. As some critics have pointed out, Wannūs realizes that "the next battle necessitates transforming the spectators into participants, for those who create their reality and aspire to be fully cognizant of such reality—as well as seeking victory in such a battle of change—cannot be merely spectators" ('Ammār 95). In both this play and his "Manifestos," the audience is encouraged to initiate a democratic dialogue for understanding their reality and responding to the circumstances, ideologies, and the actors responsible for creating it, particularly the defeat they receive at interior and exterior fronts. In *Soirée for the 5th of June*, the audience is brought to stage by having actors sitting with the spectators, acting as if they were spontaneously responding to what occurs in the play. This immersion of actors into audience creates a theater within a theater, where the audience is turned from a passive observer to an active character. And the unhappy

ending of the play, involving the “arrest” of the entire audience, suggests that suppression is part and parcel of Arab regimes of his time—regimes that can be resisted effectively if the masses, starting with the audience, are empowered by theater. Involving the audience in the work of art functions as the antithesis of having them marginalized by political leaderships that do not count on their people. Roger Allen gives an analogous example of the Austrian playwright, Peter Handke (b. 1942) whose play was entitled *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (Offending or Insulting the Audience; 1966) and termed an “anti-play.” Allen argues that Wannūs’s actual contribution was to take this approach even further:

[T]he audience is made to watch as, at the play’s conclusion, the theater is closed by actors dressed as soldiers. . . . Theater in this case not only offers a telling commentary on the events of the recent past, but also comes disarmingly close to the actual situation in the public domains of much of the Arabic-speaking world, that very space that in 2014 is being contested in many of its regions following the events of the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011.⁹ (Wannūs, “Soirée” n. pag.)

Nonetheless, Wannūs’s call for the emancipatory performances of theater, staged as social events, remained more theoretical than applied, because of the failure of involving the audience. And he died before he could see it materialize in Syria or other Arab countries.

In a more daring move to challenge these regimes, Wannūs strived to put an alternative ending in his symbolic text *al-Malik huwa al-malik* which proposes killing the unjust king. This revolutionary vision was newly introduced to the Arab audience decades before the Arab revolts started in Tunisia in 2010 and led to toppling four Arab dictators by 2012. What sets this ending apart is its implication of using violence against dictatorial regimes to satisfy the flaming anger of the people and to achieve a better life for society, theoretically. It is worth mentioning that, after this play, Wannūs did not publish any works till 1986. He blamed lack of freedom for this unproductive period.

The plays written in the 1990s constitute the third and final stage of Wannūs's works, including such plays as *al-Ightiṣāb*, *Yawm min zamāninā*, *Ṭuqūs al-ishārāt wa-l-taḥawwulāt*, and *Munamnamāt tārikhīya*. Instead of focusing on the peculiar relationship between authoritarianism—with all its associations, including corruption—and the citizen, Wannūs experiments with new creative forms. His works go beyond depicting Arab society as politically impotent and unable to have a democratic rule, or facing a military invasion and rationally analyzing the reasons behind it. Instead, he insists in this phase of his career on presenting a contingency between constructive dialogue and the practice of freedom, always implying that the individual is in charge, even if s/he is not playing a visible role. That is why his vision of the audience shifts toward conceiving of them as participators, not viewed as mere recipients but rather as co-creators of the theatrical effect. He invites them “to think of their reality and their role in life” (Bin Ṣālīḥ and Ḥammāmī 29-30). In this later stage, he exposes the widening gap between authoritarian regimes and their marginalized citizens that are kept uninformed even about wars. He exposes the ways in which society is affected by this division between the ruler and the ruled, and how the latter needs to question the authority of the former. He opens up new possibilities for dialogue, even between the Israelis and Palestinians as in *al-Ightiṣāb*.

Wannūs's Manifestos on Theater

Wannūs published “Manifestos for a New Theater” in the Syrian-based literary journal *al-Ma'rifa* in 1970.¹⁰ The text shows his initial interest in theorizing about theater, as his views on its nature and desired effect had been published in some weekly essays in Syrian and Lebanese newspapers and magazines. Such a similar tendency to discuss theater is also reflected by his translation of Jean Vilar's *Tradition of the Theatre* in 1967 and his position as a lecturer in Syria's Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in 1985. Wannūs's effort to create a vision for a new theater, or a new theory thereof, is also indicated by his practice of theater, which always triggered resistance to author-

ity and improvement of the political and intellectual life of the Arab citizen. If the events of 1967 ushered in a new reality characterized by discontent and disappointment with Arab regimes that grew more authoritative, then his voice was among the most distinctive in its engagement with a dialogue concerning social, cultural, and political crises. This call for constructive dialogue lies at the heart of his works and his vision for a politically active subject, inside and outside his theater. He proves to be not only an artist seeking insights from the past, but also as an intellectual who looks into the future, seeking to create a democratic society based on participatory dialogue, following the model of what he suggests in these “Manifestos.”

Concerned with involving the audience in an active way, Wannūs presented his ideas in the “Manifestos” in a lucid, engaging, and highly argumentative manner. He starts by emphasizing the role of the audience, which, according to him, needs to be redefined. The audience should be addressed as the primary element and goal of any theater, and Wannūs highlights the need to “provoke” and enlighten the audience through theater—as if charging them with a different energy, as his choice of the Arabic verb, *shaḥana* (charge) implies. After recognizing that the “striving (*kādiḥa*) masses” must be the target audience whose way of thinking and social awareness should be improved, he postulates certain factors that theater should take into account in order to effect change on the social, cultural, and political levels. A scholar of Wannūs’s works might approach these manifestos in ways that could help unearth their effects and impact on theater as “social events” in the way recommended by the prescriptive sections of Wannūs’s text.¹¹

Notes

- ¹ These plays are *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, *The Evening Party for the Fifth of June*, *The Adventure of the Mamluk Jaber's Head*, and *The Drunken Days*.
- ² For a bibliography of Wannūs's works, see 'Abbūd 213-45; for more on Wannūs, see Allen, "Wannūs" 804; and for more on Syrian drama, see Gouryh 216-20.
- ³ The Foundation records show that he was one of the winners for 1988-1989, while Wannūs's *al-A'māl al-kāmila* (The Complete Works) suggests that he won the award in 1990 (784).
- ⁴ See Wannūs's introduction, "Restoring Ṭāhā Ḥusayn," in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *al-'Aqlānīya al-dīmuqrāṭīya*. The introduction is also available in Sa'dallāh Wannūs's *al-A'māl al-Kāmila* 475-94.
- ⁵ For an interesting classical case, see al-Rāfi'ī.
- ⁶ For more on al-Qabbānī, see Badawī 56-64.
- ⁷ Another Lebanese dramatist and journalist, Salīm Khalīl al-Naqqāsh (1850-1884), participated in establishing Arab theater by also challenging the prevailing social customs. In what seems to be oddly reminiscent of Shakespeare's time, boys and men used to play the female parts in the Lebanese theaters before al-Naqqāsh's time. In a bold move that resulted in strong criticism, he put, for the first time, female performers on stage in Beirut. On al-Naqqāsh, see Badawī 43-54.
- ⁸ When the Kuwaiti actor, director, and professor of drama Khālid Amīn, was asked in an interview by *al-Quds al-'Arabī* newspaper if he could ever produce something related to the Arab Spring, his answer was to refer to Wannūs as someone who had already done so: "If I want to present a theater work related to the Arab revolutions, I will not adopt a violent approach like the one in which these revolutions are presented. Rather, I will be violent in the way I direct my thought to encounter all suppressive forms in life. But as a reminder for myself and others: what shall I produce or add to the works already made by Sa'dallāh Wannūs? A long time ago, this great creative person . . . started writing about these popular revolts, which basically existed in an intellectual form. . . . I will not create anything better than what Wannūs had written, for every time I think of a revolution, I find its spirit in his plays" (12).

- ⁹ Roger Allen's translation of *Soirée for the 5th of June* incorporates both versions of the play, the one published in 1968 in *Mawāqif* and the later (much revised) one published in Wannūs's Complete works.
- ¹⁰ This following translation of the "Manifestos" does not include the few footnotes that Wannūs had in the original text because I did not find these explanatory notes necessary for understanding the arguments in the text. In fact, some of them contain anecdotes that are relevant to Wannūs's contemporary readers, and the act of translating them would have required more explanation and contextualization that would have increased their irrelevance. I used italics for words and phrases that appear in bold in the Arabic text, most likely used by Wannūs for emphasis.
- ¹¹ An introductory note by Wannūs states: "These manifestos were written and published in the October issue of *al-Ma'rifa* journal in 1970. Emphasizing this date is important both to clarify what I meant by 'a short experience in practicing the art of theater,' and to point out that many studies and theories that appeared later had relied significantly on these manifestos, but failed (either by mistake or intentionally!) to refer to the source" (17).

Manifestos Toward a New Theater*

Sa'dallāh Wannūs

(Translated by Asaad Alsaleh)

It is necessary to start these manifestos by pointing out that they are only headlines of topics; more time is needed to explore them. By doing this, we will deepen our understanding of the ways in which they affect cultural and theater-related issues and concerns. They are still no more than headlines because they are the product of a short experience in practicing the art of theater. Every treatise on theater not stemming from actual practice or conscious immersion in theater phenomena cannot reveal the essence of theater or its complex nature as a social and cultural phenomenon. It will not be able to show an effective way for it to grow. Therefore, I am writing these manifestos as theses, attempting to search for an authentic theater, one that understands and tries to realize and adopt an active role in its environment.

1- Starting with the Audience

The central and proper way to discuss theater—its actualization and how to solve its problems—is to start with the audience. In this regard, I attempt here to reverse the traditional method of studying the problems of Arab theater—its crises and its complicated birth. Two factors motivate me to do so. First, these methodologies have a static understanding and a limited and narrow definition of the theater phenomenon. Second, they have only led us to what sounds like a circular process similar

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to “the chicken and the egg” question. At their best, these methods only partially improved theater, and through fragmentary and scattered efforts. They failed to discover a reliable course for a theater “*movement*” or “*direction*.” The improvement was demonstrated by glimpses of success in writing or directing a play or in the performance of an actor. Only on rare occasions was a play successfully performed. These successful moments soon disappeared; progress floundered, without systematically moving in the right direction or establishing solid foundations for theater. Based on my own observation of the theater movement, which thrived thanks to professional groups and national theaters in the beginning of the 1950s and continued into the 1970s, I can say without exaggeration that the problems of theater now are the same as they were during that period. Every critical debate, conference, or roundtable on theater raised the same issues: questions of identity, the author, the scarcity of texts, language, material resources, and, finally, the issue of commitment to the expression of local environment. As a result of practice and some individuals’ experiences, some solutions to these problems were suggested. Apart from these few exceptions, the issues remain unsolved. Even though more than enough decisions are regularly made at every conference, those who work in theater repeatedly raise the same problems in almost the same manner.

That is why I want to reverse these methodologies which limit their scope to the theater stage and do not engage the audience except in a minor and occasional manner. For these methodologies, the audience is merely one of the problems of the theater movement, which explains why most of the solutions suggested for this problem have failed. It also explains the division between our Arab theater and the masses. Therefore, we reverse these methodologies as an attempt to broach the core of the problem through what we consider the right and natural path: the audience. Theater is distinguished from other cultural activities because at its core it is a “social event.” This is how it began and how it continues to be (although in the Italian bourgeois theater this concept diminished). Consequently, any reduction of the theater phenomenon to only a literary study of texts or a judgment of the aesthetics of other elements of theater performance,

whether in their entirety or individually, implies ignorance of the nature of theater as a social phenomenon. This flaw will reduce the social content of theater and distort the role that it should play in our lives. If we study the history of theater carefully, we will realize that, in its original and simple form, the theater phenomenon involved a spectator and an actor who might mingle together in a festival or remain at a distance facing each other. Theater actually begins whenever there is an actor and an audience that watches how the actor plays or takes part in his playing. If one of these elements is missing, theater is invalidated, while those elements added in later, such as the text, direction, and effects, do not negate the theater phenomenon in its basic sense.

This way of defining theater may sound radical, because it neglects a long history of theater development, a heritage rich with texts, and the experience of performed shows. It seems that we need to re-emphasize the role of the audience because it presents a coherent methodology by which we can overcome the painful mess from which our theater movement suffers. By emphasizing audience, we can plan the necessary, original [Arab theater] experience that we seek.

If the audience is the basic principle without which theater cannot exist, it is natural to start with it, whenever we are dealing with the “theater problem” or the problem of culture in general. Doing so will rectify many of the issues we already have and change the nature of questions raised about Arab theater, allowing us to separate legitimate questions from fraudulent, misleading, and marginal ones. In a word, this will allow us to have a straightforward methodology for correct criticism and planning [a path forward].

For me, starting with the audience means that we begin raising questions. Answering such questions will clarify all the core issues concerning theater and will provide positive, but perhaps not final, solutions to them. These questions, which are the basis for ever-growing projects, might be posed as follows.

First, since theater is a social event, whose only meaning is derived from being presented in front of or among an audience, it is necessary to ask: *Who is the audience?* Defining the audience of theater that we want to establish or develop is the first issue we

should tackle, because defining the audience—its social structure, cultural circumstances, problems, and grievances—will determine for us both the ground on which we work and the limits by which we progress. It is also the first step in determining the features of a suitable theater presentation. The audience is no longer comprised of ghosts whose faces, shapes, and inner concerns are hidden by the darkness inside the theater.

Second, after identifying our audience and distinguishing its social and cultural fabric, the next question that we should ask, as many important results are related to it, is: *What should we say to the audience?* The answer to this question is undoubtedly related to the first. That is because defining our audience implies, in one way or another, our stance toward this audience and what we want to convey after we understand its needs and realize theater's potential for change and action. When we choose an audience, we take an intellectual and social stance which will inform our work and the ideas we present.

Third, we have the question that connects both of the aforementioned issues and combines them in the "theater relationship." This question is related to communication with the audience and the style of such communication: *What medium should we use to achieve an actual interaction with the audience?* In other words, what is the form that correlates to the results of the previous two questions, cementing them into a rich relationship without forcing such a relationship or deconstructing it?

Certainly, while these questions might make for a healthy discussion about theater, answering them, after due consideration, can at the same time create a solid criterion for all theatrical works around us. They also imply solutions for most of the problems that theater faces. When we identify the audience at whom we direct our work, we in fact take a social stance that reflects the ideas in our works (as previously mentioned). The definition of "audience" should be considered in its deep, non-superficial, meaning. It is not enough for the person involved in theater to ride the wave and announce that s/he is aiming for the striving masses, only then to create absurd work on the metaphysical crisis of human beings in the universe and present it in closed halls to fifty or one hundred elite audience members.

Identifying the audience is not a term to be consumed senselessly or a slogan showing political and intellectual hypocrisy. It is an action by which we know the real type of audience which the people who create theater aim to reach. When such writers choose their audience, they also choose the problems and aspirations of that audience. They must have an opinion regarding those problems, and search for a special way to express them. They should accumulate stances that blend with each other, creating the “theater phenomenon” and, eventually, its value and dynamism.

By doing so, we will have a practical foundation from which to assess all theater works. If we then want to know about the audience addressed by theater, or the connection between the content of the play and this audience—specifically, about the harmony between the opinion expressed and the intellectual capacity of the audience, on the one hand, and the content of the play, on the other—there will be an amazing outcome. It will facilitate analysis of the work and reveal its originality (or lack thereof), not through abstraction but by practical diagnosis based on political, social, and aesthetic values. Some of those who are interested in theater might be indifferent to these questions. They are perhaps preoccupied only with “superb theater” or a well-equipped theater which opens to any audience, preferably not the mobs who flock to the theater noisily snacking on seeds as they watch. The questions we raise about theater also touch upon such a superb theater. These questions will easily uncover the values adopted by those in charge of this theater. They reveal the final outcome of the author’s work within the context of the historical relationship between his culture and his people. This will be different if he proclaims—rather loudly and even if for hours—that theater is for the people and that it has a social role and responsibility, or some such common rhetorical garbage.

Now, we ask: How do we envision the birth and development of a “theater movement” based on the previous theorization? How can this lead to satisfactory answers, practical ones, regarding the crises of our Arab theater?

We need to start from scratch. Let’s leave aside the formulas of theater, such as its schools and its directions, so that we do not have to fall into the whirlpool of their limitations, forcing us

to choose one or all of them without understanding the grounds on which we experiment, and without considering the necessary conditions and requirements. We start with the first question and identify *who the real audiences are for whom we want to establish our theater*. Our immediate answer is: We want a theater for the masses, the striving classes. Even though such an answer is simple and hackneyed due to its overuse, the context in which we put it has neither simplicity nor the cheap privileges of such a slogan-like expression. Such an answer is not valuable or complete without carefully studying the conditions and problems of these masses. This will enable us to acquire systematic knowledge based on actually living with them and an accurate analysis of their lives, rather than relying on clichés and ready-made stereotypes. This knowledge, which replaces formulas—the easiest way to create a theater experience—is complex. It involves a daily interaction with the audience on different political, social, intellectual, and artistic levels. This interaction requires give and take. It experiments and corrects. It draws from people in real life. Its purpose is to create, along with these spectators, theater presentations which aim to entertain and deepen awareness of their mutual social fate and their problems.

In this case, we go back to the roots. We refuse ready formulas because they are not important—we do not create theater just to prove that we are catching up with civilization and that we know theater as others do. If the latter were our only goal, then we would not need all this effort. Rather, we create a theater because *we want to change and improve a mentality, to widen the collective awareness of the historical fate of all of us*. If this is indeed our goal—and I define it in such a didactic way, even though I know many people who do not share this concept of theater with me—then it is necessary for us to start with those with whom and for whom we work, particularly when we stand among them or in front of them to address them. Based on such a start, we will be able to create works that touch people and create an environment for them to influence and express their responses. We will also develop awareness of our ignorance, stereotypes, and presuppositions that form a mental barrier between us and reality. Living with the masses and interacting with them will destroy such a barrier, and we will recognize

their real needs and how they think and understand. A dialogue will emerge from this understanding, and other forms and stances will be born. Moreover, an original experience of a people-bound theater will emerge, a theater which is attached to them and emanates from their circumstances, while having an impact on them.

Such experience will allow spontaneous discourse in its appropriate form. Nevertheless, the process is not mechanical or mathematical, where every element leads to the next. I postulate that talent is not diminishing, educational background is available, and both sincerity and enthusiasm exist, but these elements will be enriched and improved by the interaction that we have envisioned. Gradually, we will find ourselves starting a new theater movement with strong foundations that are implanted in the ground of the real audience of any theater. This theater will have amazing characteristics that guarantee its development and continuity of active dialogue with its audience. Based on its incentives and foundations, this movement will identify theater formulas and go back to them with a critical approach so that world theater directions will not be left for haphazard evaluations, or lumped together in one category and treated with the same solemnity that prevails in our schools or culture. The movement that we are proposing here will be aware of its principles, reality, and culture, which will allow it to avoid getting lost between theater formulas and schools. It will not be like “fashion” where choice is based on tastes and thus outside the realm of discussion. This movement considers theater schools to be intellectual entities and theater forms as expressions of particular social and political stances. It also approaches such schools critically so as to be consistent with its principles that are informed, first and foremost, by reality. This will put an end to the perplexity from which our Arab theater is suffering, like a muddled child standing dazzled before a shop window of toys of various models and colors, and who is unable to choose.

Those who follow the relationship between the emergence of cultural trends in the world, particularly in Europe, and their reflection in our environment and culture realize our immense and disappointing loss and how much we need a consistent critical position in order to confront these trends. Such a position will enable us to answer one of the most important questions facing our theater: *Which direction should we follow?*

Because it is rooted in the reality of its audience and aims to achieve the highest degree of connection with, and impact on, that audience, this theater movement should seriously and continuously study its unique experience, style, language, and form, and should do so often. It might try known forms or create special ones—and it will reach this point of creating such forms—but in both scenarios what determines the selection is the practical and real life experience, the one based on daily interaction with the audience: its cultural level, ways of thinking and responding. There will be examination of failure and success, and this will gradually lead to the emergence of proper and developed forms of theater, which are effective and people-oriented. This movement will have a wide horizon for experimentation and selection. It will have a rich heritage of forms and types of expression, which it will use in a better way than that adopted by those who want to build a culture based on folklore, or to remedy cultural deficiency by restoring or developing folklore. Such people respond to superficial reasons for renewing theater and trying it in various forms. Folklore in our theater has another value and a different function. It can be utilized if related to the content of theater while allowing spectators to understand this content. However, its use for superficial and formal reasons is not acceptable.

It is now clear that starting with the audience and looking seriously for an original and useful medium to which it can be connected will save Arab theater from many questions often raised in a disruptive and abstract manner regarding language, style, form, folklore, etc. All these issues will certainly find appropriate solutions. Language will not be discussed in roundtables or TV forums, but will be tested by daily practice. All problems related to language will be solved by such practice, as will be other problems and issues, including the architecture of theater.

The last feature of this movement that we propose is the continuous interaction between the theater and its audience. This movement both learns from the audience and teaches it, taking and giving in a dialectic and daily-expanding process. Undoubtedly, by doing so, we will give the theater phenomenon the energy and inspiration that it once had when it was merely a celebration. Moreover, we will revive its original effectiveness, uniqueness, and social dimension.

If we have a theater movement that adopts these principles, Arab theater will emerge out of its confused displacement. This movement will focus on the real problems, not on preposterous ones. It will originate from its audience and, by having a dialogue with it, it will be giving and taking from it in a mutually enriching relationship. Only then will genuine theater be born, a theater that will stimulate, wherever it takes a place, a social event, a rich dialogue, and an awareness among the audiences, one that is directed to both present reality and the future.

2- The Healthy Beginning of Arab Theater

Anyone who studies the pioneers of Arab theater between the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century will be amazed by their deep knowledge of their audiences and also their brave solutions for the problems they faced, particularly in the initial stage of theater. Their solutions were not the outcome of elitist theoretical reflection but rather of their strong connection with their audiences and daily interaction with them. During that period, theater was a real social event—with such elements as spontaneous alienation, various popular arts, improvisation, intimacy, and other topics stemming from (or modified to reflect) the issues of real life. This theater took place as society was waking up after a long sleep, and it accompanied such revival, understood it with limited capacity, and also contributed to it.

I believe that we need to go back to that period and study it carefully so that we can discover how robust the beginnings were and how the pioneers realized, even with limitations, the nature of theater as a social phenomenon that dwells among people. That is why, even though they adopted the European formulas of theater, they never regarded them as sacred, immutable tenets. Rather, with a great deal of cleverness and insight, they adapted them to fit their sense of their audience. Their works did not have rigid rules, but rather a splendid spontaneity that was inspired by the people themselves, who gathered every evening with their seeds, as the Greeks used to bring food baskets to their stone theaters where they sat on uncomfortable seats. Without following any rituals, they might intervene in the game, expressing their

opinions or even getting involved in discussion. Dr. Muḥammad Najm tells us that a great theater person like Ya‘qūb Ṣannū‘ had a splendid wit through which to respond immediately to his audience, adding some scenes that fit the moment. This daily dialogue, which is a source of disgust to influential theater persons who are committed to formulas and rituals, uses some elements that are foreign to theater only to create an enjoyable experience and allow intimacy with the audience. This is a healthy theater with deep understanding, which differs from the textbook definitions in the theater institution, and against which I have no grudge. It follows the original type of theater, the one that immerses the audience, has a meaning for them, talks about them, comes from their environment, and, above all, entertains them.

The spectator in this theater is immersed with the group, and the group is engaged in the “game” as long as it is not strange or foreign in form or content for the conditions and consciousness of this group. Arab theater pioneers also rightly adapted, rather than represented, world plays, which caused them to be ridiculed by their contemporaries who accused them of both destroying world heritage and being superficial. But those pioneers knew that the value of the play was its expression and attachment to a particular environment, and that presenting world plays in their original form would make them outlandish and inaccessible to the Arab spectator of that period who would not respond to them or be interested in their message, even if they were well structured and entertaining. The pioneers realized this fact and considered such foreign plays only important if they fit their environment and reflected the problems of their spectators. In this case, they used those plays in a daring way, which is similar to what Brecht did with the classical heritage. They made them sound like local plays, addressing local problems that the spectator encountered every day. We were behind and not yet able to reach such realization, even after the influx of the new theater that started in the 1950s, with its principles, academic rules, and ideal models, as in European theater. It is a strange irony that the audience between 1880-1900, who was supposedly culturally backward and almost completely illiterate, could respond to the plays of Molière, Jean Racine, Pierre Corneille, and others as they were adapted by Ya‘qūb Ṣannū‘,

al-Qabbānī, al-Naqqāsh, and al-Qirdāhī, while the audience of the 1950s through the 1970s did not have the same response, despite their more developed education and greater literacy, and the fact that the plays were presented to them in a professional manner, in better equipped and decorated theaters. We may not have statistics on the old audience, but, based on the social effectiveness of the old theater, I can say that our current audience in modern national theaters has not increased [in numbers and sophistication]; if anything, it has perhaps slightly decreased.

Before I leave the issue of adapting world theater to the local environment, which was a healthy phenomenon in the old Arab theater, I want to remind those who ridicule such beginnings and regard them as a sort of spoof that the basic element of success in a contemporary play is being both aware of the environment and able to prepare foreign texts for theater in a way that makes them seem as if they were written for local people. Take, for example, Al-Tayyib al-Şiddīqī from Morocco. The Odéon Theater was full of applause for al-Şiddīqī and his cast after presenting Molière's *The Tricks of Scapin* in the Festival of Theater of the Nations, because he replaced Scapin with Juḥā, the popular Arab character. The applause was directed at his originality and serious search intending to bring about an interaction between such heritage and the world theater, creating a new environment with its special nature and problems. We are unfortunately still far from learning this lesson of spontaneous adaptation from our predecessors, which they accomplished despite their lack of education and the difficult circumstances of their period.

Again, I believe that it is very useful to go back to those beginnings and to learn about their positive experiences. With only glimpses of light and little help, the pioneers started their theater when the state of education was weak but with a high level of sensitivity toward both the nature and needs of their society. Their works were like unsettling events in a critical period when the region was going through a revival to change its conditions. Those who want to neglect such revival and are afraid of it nevertheless recognize the effective influence of such unsettling events that the pioneers launched in their night performances. In

his book, *al-Masrahīya fī-l-adab al-‘arabī al-ḥadīth* [Drama in Modern Arabic Literature], Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm points out that he found in old newspapers some reports on the beginning of theater, such as this one:

The state received from the Ma‘ārif [Knowledge] Supervision Department a decree indicating that the political newspapers in the [nation’s] sates should be supervised by the Department and the government, and that plays should be sent to Istanbul to be scrutinized before they are performed. I believe that after these orders, theater will never flourish in our land. (75)

From the beginning, authorities recognized the danger of theater as a factor for demolishing, changing, or shaking the *status quo* and deeply rooted old values. That is why the Ottomans closed the theater of Abū Khalīl al-Qabbānī, who was forced to leave Syria and settle in Egypt. The ruler of Egypt, the Khedive, also closed the theater of Ya‘qūb Ṣannū‘ and exiled him.

From the experience of these pioneers, we learn not only about the immense trials they faced, but also about the means by which they transformed their shows into unsettling events, not relying exclusively on the text and its critique of common values and shameful conditions. Rather, they went beyond that to make the show itself an unsettling event. By using the above-mentioned elements, the show could succeed in creating a group of people who would feel their collectiveness and the unity of their problems—thanks to transcending the distance between the stage and the hall (where the audience is), utilizing all-inclusive alienation, intimacy, improvisation, and interaction in the show. Furthermore, these people were “theaterized,” perhaps in the same sense of theater as postulated by Yūsuf Idrīs.** At the same time, they realized the deep meaning and significance of their collective and social identity.

This point, which shows the healthy beginnings of theater, has been overlooked and thus needs more careful analysis and research, using a methodology that accommodates the previous arguments. Unfortunately, in his important study about the beginnings of Arab theater, which were characterized by confusion and

underestimation, Yūsuf Idrīs only studied those texts and their sources and evaluated their originality. Sadly, those texts and the principles of the European bourgeois theater were his criteria in evaluating and judging these pioneering experiences. I am certainly not belittling the value of his work which is indispensable for any researcher or student and a book that fills a great gap in the Arabic library. Yet, in my opinion, it is not a sufficient source on past theater experience and an analysis of its social foundations and historical effectiveness, because Idrīs neglected the core of this phenomenon, which is the “*dramatic performance*.”

3- Theater is a Collective Work

After reading the first paragraph of these “Manifestos,” it is common for someone to ask, “Who will launch such a theater movement with these principles?” or more precisely, “Who will be able to start such a movement, which involves a good deal of both fertility and strife?”

Certainly, it will not be a single individual’s work, regardless of his or her genius or various talents. It is obvious that theater is a collective endeavor, but most of the time the consequence of that fact is confusion. The common conception of the collectiveness of theater is viewed as a combination of individual efforts accruing so as to produce a work. This conception considers the collective as collection and gathering of individuals working on their own. It also looks at theater as a series of consecutive processes: an author who composes a text at home; a producer who selects a text and trains actors to perform it; an actor who memorizes the role and performs it; an artist who designs the decorations; a musician who composes musical pieces if any are used; and a costume designer. Then, these processes, which might be done individually or at best through dialogue, contribute to producing the play. This is the traditional and common concept of theater in our countries. I think it is a superficial and uninspired understanding, one that is thus unable to stimulate the energy and magical powers of theater as described by [the French playwright and theater director Antonin] Artaud. The result of this understanding is dull, sloppy, and poor performances.

My own understanding of the collective work of theater is categorically different from the one mentioned above, which coincided with a period of theatrical malaise and bankruptcy. Collective work is not merely an assembly of individual efforts, but a creation where the richness of the group, continuous dialogue, and persistent research supply such creation. We are looking for *the interaction of a group of energies participating in a mutual and gradual creation which contains the strength and identity of the group*. If the commonly understood collective work is like a chain whose links are interconnected, our proposed collective is like *interactive chemistry*, whose elements give the best they have, changing and becoming changed, altering and being altered—a highly charged process that results in a heated and amazing structure. We do not want to reduce individuals to nothing, but rather to nourish their utmost potential and capabilities so that they get rid of their narrow and useless individuality, with its egotistic concerns, while being involved in a wonderful act of creation.

By “collective work,” I mean the emergence of a group of individuals who share harmony, a clear vision, sincere enthusiasm, and an unflagging talent for research and exploration. They will start an experience of a new kind that breaks the routine of theater, and emerge as a group (not individuals) in building a theater that achieves the original inspiration: a collective revolution in a stagnant environment. No writer, director, actor, or other participant will be *working on his own* or separated from other members in this group. The work will strive to be a continuous dialogue that moves in two directions: both *inside the group*, to clarify and deepen ideas and to design and build the work; and *between the group and spectators*, or the audience they are facing. These two dialogues must go hand in hand, and one should be reflected by the other in a dialectic manner that achieves success and positive outcomes for theater.

If we review the most important theater experiences in the world, we will find that they had such structure and elements. Greek theater, Shakespeare’s, and Brecht’s were all collective-work oriented. It is unfortunate that history has neglected the collectiveness of these experiences and only recorded a name or

two. This is so because it was impossible to record the liveliness of a performance acted in theaters full of people, or in an Elizabethan theater where the group melded and was creating theater at the same time. The many changes that Shakespeare and Brecht made to the play-text—during rehearsals, discussions with the actors before and after the show, and responses of the audience—are evidence that theater is a collective creation, a living experience being renewed every day with each new performance.

So, if we go back to the question of the theater movement that we envision, we can answer the question that we raised. It starts with the audience, but can only be exercised by a group such as the one that we have just described, a group full of youthfulness, with a clear vision and goal. It originates from and addresses the audience, while being based on the principles that we have explained.

This group will be full of capabilities, not pre-conceived ideas and formulas. Through daily practice, creative efforts, and continuous dialogue, it will realize its full potential and that of its environment, creating a healthy and lively theater—a growing theater that does not become frozen in formulas and static frames. With such a clear goal, this theater will shake the audience, disturb them, and stimulate their awareness, as if it possessed electrical power.

In a collective movement which blends with the audience, we can awaken and embody the common ground between actors and audience, fulfilling the most important goal of theater: to unite as a group and to understand our common fate and its laws.

4- We Must Provoke, Not Calm Down

Theater started as—and remains—a political phenomenon. Even if it seems to disregard politics or avoid political problems, concerns, and whirlpools, it expresses a political stance and undertakes a political function, which is, in brief, to divert people from showing any interest in their essential issues or thinking about their conditions, but also to distract them from attempts to change them. In almost every culture, at all times and everywhere, being politics-oriented is the essence of theater. Everything that I have mentioned above stems from this fact and underlines it.

Therefore, all members of the group that will establish the pillars of a “*theater movement*” should have *an awareness of its political role* and of the dangers involved in playing such a role. Based on its formation and the originality of its connection with its environment, this movement will be aware of the nature of conflict, a social conflict that it reflects in theater. It also realizes the reality of the “fate,” a political and historical fate, of which it aspires to be simultaneously aware.

But regardless of the clarity which may appear to simplify the issue and lead to confirmed results, there are still slippery slopes that may lead to totally different results. The role of theater and its possible effects within its own environment are complex and difficult questions. If there is no continuous alertness, it is possible to deviate from, or betray, such a role. In recent years, we have seen some theater works that produce something contrary to what they wanted to say, contributing to deception and misleading elements in society.

Of course, we are not constructing extreme illusions about what theater can do in any given society. According to Brecht, “theater cannot achieve revolution or alter the structure of society.” We know that theater is only one of other daily and long-term efforts that have the potential to contribute to change. When such change is achieved, the starting point is not the theater or its stage. Nevertheless, theater has its role in change, and it can be an astonishing substitute in periods of repression and organized non-politicization. Through its collectiveness and its daily and active relationship with people, it can give the illusion of involvement in political work or activity. One cannot help but feel a great power enabling people to shake, even if only partially, the iron wall of non-politicization. Most importantly, we should be profoundly aware of the complex and difficult nature of theater’s role. It is a double role; achieving a balance is very critical and sensitive, for it has to discover, explain, and define (to the audience) the nature of conflicts that are happening in their surroundings, based on its awareness of them. It should reflect the conditions of the audience after analyzing them and revealing their hidden aspects. At the same time, it must confront people in order to encourage them to start changing their current fate,

based on theater's awareness that political fate is not final but able to change once the potential for change is materialized and the people have decided to embark on it.

The Arab theater that we want is aware of its dual tasks: to teach and to provoke its spectators. It does not bring relief to spectators or alleviate their plight. Instead, it makes them anxious and annoyed. In the long run, it prepares them to start the process of changing fate. Yet, as I have mentioned earlier, there are dangers involved in such a tedious task. If theater fails to discover the truth or errs in its analysis of societal conditions, it becomes a medium of ignorance and deception. If it does not know how to do its job—to use its methods and tools to provoke spectators and encourage them to act—it becomes a tool for *venting*, freeing the spectator from the elements of hatred, anger, or anxiety. The effect will be to increase the power [of the people] to tolerate their miserable situation. It will paralyze them and endorse the *status quo*. There is a thin and transparent line between something that aims to provoke and something that aims to calm down. I can give more examples of plays and performances that failed to distinguish between these two types of theater, ending in the latter, even though they started with a strong charging approach. They eventually ended up serving precisely those entities that they wanted to criticize. In such cases, spectators leave the theater satisfied, quiet and smiling, as if their concerns have been left behind on their theater seats. This type of theater may make the theater movement that we are envisioning spend the night criticizing itself, trying to find out why it failed and what mistake it had committed! We are not concerned with those who are delighted with this [superficial] success, who wait for people to congratulate them and show their satisfaction and happiness when the performance is over. They are far removed from the function of the theater that we want and need.

5-What Is Demanded from the Spectator?

Based on what has been discussed thus far, particularly on the definition of theater as a social phenomenon, we see that the spectator and actor are simply what constitutes theater. They can

be targets for improvement, as suggested by the German playwright Piscator, for both of these elements are responsible for this improvement and its success to different degrees. Undoubtedly, spectators can play a positive role in directing theater, but we need to counsel (and strongly encourage) them to play such a role, so that we can send theater in a suitable direction and reform its foundations.

In order for spectators to play such a role, they need to transform themselves and adopt a new and different way, unlike our current spectators.

First: The spectator needs to know the importance of his opinion regarding any theater production, because s/he is the target of everything being presented. The value of theater production is related to the position taken by the spectator.

Second: The negativity and inactivity of spectators toward theater and its stage should come to an end. They should realize that everything in front of them is relevant to them, and they have to take a position towards it.

Third: Spectators should know that adopting a stance regarding any performance is a responsibility, one that has critical and important results for the individual and the condition of their country. That is why they need to change their school-like environment where they are passive recipients. They need to remember their important role as spectators and refuse to be manipulated or deceived. They should pay attention to what is being said and shown without falling into the trap set by deceptive, trivial, and fraudulent theater people.

Spectators are required to intervene when they are witnessing triviality, deception, or outright lying, and to stop those who try to numb or divert the individual from essential problems and issues. If they do not see themselves represented on stage, they should intervene and teach the actors a lesson about their society. If they have the impression that their picture is distorted, they should shout at its forgers and stop the performance.

Spectators always need to remember that what is taking place concerns them. They should not be prevented from countering lying, deception, and trivialization because of social etiquette or the stupid school traditions of respect. After all, they are not at elemen-

tary school where one is supposed to listen carefully and submissively. Rather, they are the fundamental half of any theater performance—its [effect on them is the] goal, but also the one responsible for it. That is why spectators should exercise their full rights and play a complete and positive role by filling the theater sphere that is assigned to them. They can either refuse or accept what is presented, or even boycott some productions. They can say whatever they want, and even correct what is being said. In summary, they should not passively accept what is given without objection or examination. Does this mean they should be imprudent?

Yes, the spectator should be aware and prudent. That is when trivialization and lies will be removed from theater. That is when theater becomes an effective social and cultural activity, one that brings the stage and the hall of spectators together in a strong and rich dialectical relationship.

These are the main headlines for wider topics which demand revision and reconsideration more than once.

Translator's Note

** Wannūs is referring to Yūsuf Idrīs (1927-1991), an Egyptian short story writer and novelist who contributed significantly to Egyptian theater. After abandoning medical practice, Idrīs devoted his life to literature. His play *al-Farafir* (1964)—roughly translated as the Flipflap, Flutterbug, or Little Mousey—whose performance in Egypt became a hit was characterized by breaking the barrier with the audience, as actors directly addressed the audience. He also wrote *Naḥw masrah 'Arabī* (Toward an Arab Theater). For more on Idrīs and *al-Farafir*, see Burt.

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