

Saadallah Wannous: From Existentialist to Activist

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Abstract

Like many of his contemporaries, Saadallah Wannous, a Syrian prominent playwright, demonstrated great appetite for politics, but whether this is a healthy appetite remains a topic for debate. Wannous was one of the major Arab playwrights who shook the conventional Arab theatrical ground off its feet. Most critics identify three stages of his work: the Existential poetic beginning, the progressive political middle-stage, and the self-questioning final-stage. For my paper, I discuss the first two stages as I look at *The Glass Café*, from the first stage and *The King's Elephant* from the second. The suffocating absurd sense of the first play that seems to advance the audience into an imminent ending collides with and complements the sense of political activism and the urgency to “do something” of the second. Thus for this paper, I track the existentialist and later the militant qualities in Wannous’ work both as a reflection of his own private philosophical growth and the general atmosphere of a crumbling Arab world of the time.

Keywords: Arabic drama, Arab theatre, Wannous, existentialist theatre, epic theatre

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To write about Saadallah Wannous in this particular time of Arab political and cultural life is a painful task. Not only did Saadallah Wannous' vision of Arab political and social reform fail, not only did his dream of an Arab theatrical renaissance plummet, but he himself was abandoned, lost to the Arabs and thus to the whole world.

Saadallah Wannous, famed Syrian playwright, director, and theorist, was born in the village of Haseen Albahr, Syria, in 1941. In 1959, he completed his undergraduate studies and headed to Egypt to study journalism at Cairo University. There he was exposed to the strongest theatrical movement in the Arab world at the time, mostly led by Egyptian dramatists and theorists. He immersed himself in the theatrical works of European and American playwrights which focused on existentialism and the absurd. Soon, he started writing his own plays in Arabic in the early 1960s, greatly impacted by existentialist writers such as Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. The existentialist dogma thus marks the first phase of Wannous' theatrical journey, during which he wrote a number of short, one-act plays that subject the Arabic dilemmas of the sixties to the universal questions of that time.

Wannous' second phase was marked by an incident that represented a crossroad to almost all Arabs in the sixties. It was the defeat of 1967, known as the June War, which brought Wannous and his contemporaries back to more realistic grounds looking for answers that could ease the pain of that horrific defeat. Wannous, shattered and shocked, found solace in the works of Socialist theorists and playwrights such as Peter Weiss and Bertolt Brecht, thus committing his second phase as a playwright to the socialist approach, which took theatre to be an active battlefield rather than a passive elitist stage.

However, in the late seventies and throughout the eighties, Wannous fell silent. He felt a denial from the audience who only sought entertainment that helped them forget their agonizing reality, as did all serious dramatists of the time. Margaret Litvin (2011) states that by 1976 "Dismay spread through theatre communities in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere in the Arab world. Many writers went into exile" (p. 141). She explains that although there were a number of factors that might have contributed to this decline such as lack of funding and immigration of writers, still "the lull in production points to playwrights' and directors' basic uncertainty about the purpose of drama. Veiled allegory and direct talk had each run their course, and political justice was no closer. Why should the rest not be silence" (p. 141). Thus, hurt and defeated on both the theatrical and political levels, Wannous thought it best if he said nothing. "His silence in the eighties," says Manal Swairjo (1996) "was another realistic endeavor, in which withdrawal was his defense against the increasing commercialization of theatre and television" (para. 24). This silence, Swairjo further explains, "was his way of facing defeat, not only in war but also in his project of politicization" (para. 12). Thus, with the collapse of the project theatre-politique, the third and last phase of Wannous' theatrical journey started. He came back to the literary Arabic scene in the early 1990s after thirteen years of reassessment and contemplation. Granted, he came back no less political, but also much more individualistic. Of this period Wannous, quoted by Swairjo, says

In the past, ... I used to think that personal suffering and the problems of the individual were issues of a superficial nature and that they should be avoided in writing. ... However I no longer think of the theatre hall and the audience while writing. This allowed me the freedom to borrow from the novel, the art of individual writing ... the role of the intellectual became less fanciful and more realistic in my eyes. This role which

I now believe to be no more than critical, is far more effective than indulging in daily political concerns or preaching packaged ideas and fancy slogans. (para. 13)

Certainly, during the last seventeen years of his career, Wannous succeeded in freeing himself from the audience's dominance, focusing more on the individual character. In his 2001 article on Wannous, Ali Alsouleman states that during the last phase of Wannous' career, his characters "became individual human beings, structured not only according to social reality or an ideological perspective, but to psychological, ontological, and sexual realities" (para. 7). In addition, Alsouleman asserts that the concept of truth "no longer equated reality" (para. 9). Truth became questionable and was "examined within social reality but according to the individual approach of each character" (Alsouleman, para. 9). These two principles of individualism and relative truth, Alsouleman further affirms, "form the principal motif in all (Wannous') plays of the 1990s" a motif that focused on the uncertainty of all previous certainties (para. 9). In this paper, I look at the first two phases of Wannous' theatrical writing (for the vast third is worthy of an independent study itself) discussing two of the most well-known plays from these periods: *The Glass Café* (1966) and *The King's Elephant* (1969), both one-act plays deliberately chosen in a close frame of time so as to show the quick but subtle shift in Wannous' dramatic approach, a shift that reflected the political trauma that befell the Arab intellectual of the time. For this purpose, I examine Wannous' plays through the basic theories of Jean Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht, trying to trace the existential and the social flavors in these plays mixed with that authentic Arabic cultural tang never lost in the playwright's work. Thus, this will be my attempt at tracking the existentialist and later the militant qualities in Wannous' work both as a reflection of his own private philosophical growth and the general atmosphere of a crumbling Arab world of the time.

Fatme Sharafeddine Hassan (1996) asserts that "despite his interest in and knowledge of Western literature, Wannous ... worked on producing a theatre that reflects the peculiar needs of an Arab audience" (para. 4). Thus to Wannous, a theatre is no luxury, it is a necessity, a pleasurable, informative necessity as well as a dangerous proactive one. At the early stage of his work, Wannous believed that theatre should be rooted in culture, answering to the needs of its particular audience. Toward the middle phase, Wannous was inclined to view theatre as a dynamic entity, always with soul, always with dogma. To this extent, Hassan quotes Wannous as the latter asserts that "no theatre should be without an ideology unless it does not want to be effective in society and it declines reaching the moment of deep interaction with the audience" (para. 4). In commemoration of Wannous' keynote speech celebrating the International Day of Theatre in 1996 (Wannous was the first Arab to be chosen for this mission), the staff of *Aljadid* Journal produced an article that presented parts of that speech: "theatre will remain the ideal forum in which man ponders his existential and historical condition. The characteristic that makes theatre a place unparalleled is that the audience breaks out of their wilderness in order to examine the human condition in a collective context." (para. 2). For the purpose of questioning the existential and historical conditions by means of a stage that is a "condition" of society as Wannous words it, he rooted his earlier work in Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy of what is and why "to write" or rather "to create" in general. This particular approach is strongly evident in Wannous' earlier work, as he journeyed to explore the existential meaning of his relationship, as human and writer, to the world.

In his article "What is Literature? Why Write?" Jean Paul Sartre (1949) states that "one of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in

relationship to the world” (p. 1200). This universal search is evident in Wannous’ *The Glass Cafe*, as the play ends with what seems to be an apocalyptic event in projection of the Arab dilemma of the time and its global effect. However, and despite this universal flavor of the play, the essentiality of the audience is evident to the reader. Wannous, in *The Glass Café* as in all of his earlier works, evokes the strong Sartrean vision of identifying and then establishing a relationship with one’s audience (a vision Wannous came to abandon later on) for according to Sartre, “it is we who have invented the laws by which we judge [creative work], it is our history, our love, our gaiety that we recognize in it” (p. 1200). The “we” Sartre speaks of refers to both writer and audience, as “[i]t is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind” (p. 1202). Wannous wrote with universal approaches to a very specific audience, demanding attention and desiring change. It is as Sartre indicates: “to write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language” (p. 1203). This was specifically the mission of Wannous at that stage: to appeal to the audience to bring into existence what he started on stage.

If one wants to “visualize” the idea of *The Glass Café*, one should look at Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Night Café*; the capturing of that painting’s quintessence in Wannous’ text is uncanny: the suffocation, the depression, and the sense of the end of the world. The play brings together a number of men in an Arabic coffee shop, as an original shop of the kind was usually an exclusive men’s gathering-place, with the focal point being the table of the two characters Jassem and Unsi. The play opens with a description of the café with walls that are “made of thick glass stained a light yellow, indicating age and neglect,” and another of the customers with “sameness in their faces; these faces seem to have undergone a slow change that has erased all individual differences and given everyone the same flat look.” Wannous further presses that description of the overpowered spirits of the men: “lost eyes behind eyelids without lashes add to the faces a dry expression, an emptiness. All these drooping features are pervaded by an air of profound forgetfulness and silent dissipation” (p. 413). Wannous hoped this sense of defeat would plead to the Arab reader’s own associations, “trapping” them, as Sartre puts it, into certain feelings. “Words are there like traps,” Sartre states,

to arouse our feelings and to reflect them towards us. Each word is a path of transcendence; it shapes our feelings, names them, and attributes them to an imaginary personage who takes it upon himself to live them for us and who has no other substance than these borrowed passions. (p. 1203)

Throughout the play, Jassem and Unsi play a game of backgammon, Jassem “is totally absorbed in the game” and Unsi “is obviously unable to concentrate” (p. 413). The two characters drift apart throughout the play, each into his own world: Jassem into the game and Unsi into his distractions, which are manifested on stage at the end with a seemingly apocalyptic event.

One year separated the greatest Arab defeat in history from the writing of this play. Fear and anticipation dominate the atmosphere of the play, with “hubbub,” described as “chaotic and dissonant,” resonating throughout the course of events, as if drumming the big catastrophic finale Wannous predicts and depicts at the end (p. 415). In a very Sartrean manner, Wannous tries to ignite the imagination of the spectator which has, Sartre asserts, “not only a regulating function, but a constitutive one. It does not play; it is called upon to recompose the beautiful object beyond the traces left by the artist” (p. 1204). Yes, the aim is to encourage the imagination to recompose

that “beautiful” object, and for an existentialist like Sartre, the paradox is evident, or is it? It might not be so, for Sartre sees beauty in the freedom granted by the act of writing and then the act of reading. “Reading is creation,” Sartre asserts, “my freedom does not only appear to itself as pure autonomy but as creative activity, that is, it is not limited to giving itself its own law but perceives itself as being constitutive of the object” (p. 1209). Thus, to Sartre, freedom seeks to “manifest itself”, leaving a creative work to be defined as “an imaginary presentation of the world” (p. 2011). Consequently, “there is no ‘gloomy literature,’ since, however dark maybe the colours in which one paints the world, one paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it” (p. 1211).

Wannous’ *The Glass Café* is not happy, but it is not gloomy either, it is very much an open text that invites interpretation and understanding both of which could lead to a painful realization, one that is willed, and thus one that is, in a Sartrean sense, beautiful. The conversation in the play is nonrepresentational and yet strongly confrontational. In brief reoccurring dialogues between the Waiter of the café and the Owner, Master Zaza, we are informed, in a number of ways, that the Waiter’s mother “finally blew up” (p. 416). Master Zaza’s initial reaction is “I despise blowing up and all the people who do it” (p. 416). However, this reply does not stop the Waiter from coming back to the subject over and over again: “yesterday she blew up. Her body was covered with boils, and her face was congested and ready to explode” (p. 416). And again:

Even now, Master Zaza, I can hear her voice, as she imitated the sewing machine – it was terrifying! She was crying – or maybe she was laughing – I’m not sure of anything – except that it was a weird, frightening voice. It reminded you of darkness, and nightmares, and spirits lurking in the shadows. (p. 425)

With the strong Sartrean sense of reader-liberation and existential private understating of the world, one dares not provide an interpretation of the incongruous dialogue. However, the political atmosphere of the 1960s provides itself as potential grounds for interpretation, introducing the Waiter’s mother as the past, the loaded history that keeps working its “sewing machine” only to inevitably blow up at the end, leaving essential questions lingering and unanswered.

These short eerie conversations interlace with others no less eerie themselves. Jassem and Unsi play a game of Backgammon that, from Unsi’s posture, seems to be one of life or death. In their opening conversation, we hear them speak of two men, Abu Fahmi and Khartabil Nahlawi, both dead now, after losing the game, Nahlawi to Abu Fahmi and then Abu Fahmi to Unsi himself. Unsi is fearful throughout, “he swallows his words and rolls the dice” as he is “continuing to play, mechanically, while worry becomes more evident in his gray eyes” (p. 415, 420). Jassem on the other hand is presented to be confident and even aggressive. In the middle of a heated discussion about the game, Unsi suddenly asks Jassem “How are things with your children Jassem?” to which Jassem gives a lengthy answer: “My children! I’m not the sort who worries about his children’s problems! I know the right way to deal with *them*. (Inflated.) Spare the rod and spoil the child. We mustn’t indulge them or they’ll drag us into endless problems and stupidities. I like things to be in order. That’s why I won’t tolerate any anarchy or deviation.” (p. 419). The obvious insinuation here is of the then current patriarchal dictatorships that governed Arab societies as subjects, children, unaware of their own good, imbeciles incapable of rational, responsible behavior. Unsi, anticipating a possible reaction, comments: “But – how do I explain this to you? (He hesitates.) Don’t they look at you with strange eyes sometimes? Eyes full of

unfathomable mystery?” (p. 420). To this Jassem asserts his authority: “When I enter the house, they need to feel the earth tremble under their feet. Who dares look me in the face?” (p. 420). Through Unsi and Jassem, Wannous creates sides on the question of authority. He “managed to grant his audience the chance to make moral judgments and openly take sides on issues even before leaving the theatre hall. Their participation was, thus, evaluative and critical, often turning the show into a small-scale social phenomenon” (Swairjo, para. 11). However, for the audience of *The Glass Café*, the situation is dire and the decision is one of life or death as is reflected in the game of backgammon Unsi and Jassem play. As the play progresses, the audience will feel the accumulating pressure to make a decision, viewing a catastrophic ending on the horizon of the drama.

So Wannous wants his audience to make a decision! But how? Sartre asserts that “what the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values” (p. 1206). It is in this inclusive sense of judgment that Wannous hopes his readers indulge. For this purpose, he offers them Unsi’s take on fatherhood:

He’s my son. It was a long time since I’d thought of him. That’s what’s so hard to bear. He was just absent, like a distant memory – like a wife – like the paint on the front door – but – (His voice trembles.) There he was in front of me, only a tile’s distance between us – he was breathing quite calmly – but in his eyes there was a pagan look – as though threatening me – no, not that – maybe reproaching me – no it wasn’t reproach – it was like a whipping – like poison. (p. 421)

The threatening image is intended and, a few lines later, intensified as Unsi informs Jassem that his son “grew – and grew . . . swelling and swelling” until he “concealed” him (p. 421). He remembers the two dead men; he references their bursting, which draws to our mind the bursting of the Waiter’s mother, closing up with a terrifying sentence “they just burst, with no warning” (p. 421). At this point, the audience discovers that they are in a death trap, and before they can emotionally react, Master Zaza “smashes his palm on the glass. His eyes sparkle, he lifts his hand and looks at it. The flea is squashed on a finger” (p. 422). At this moment, the action of the play accelerates, the motion has started; doom’s day is almost here. Immediately after the flea is crushed, “at a table in the middle of the café, a customer’s head falls on his shoulder, completely still” (p. 422). The other customers start shouting “Dead – dead – dead”, and except for that, there is “no reaction or change . . . on the customers’ faces. Their features are too deeply set to be moved at events” (p. 423). The only person reacting is Unsi, a reaction that will consequently lead to a similar fate. Had he chosen not to recognize the “event,” it would not then have essentially happened. After all, it is us, through our consciousness, according to Sartre, who create relation with and thus moral judgment toward the world around us. We bring the world to life as we experience it, otherwise, “earth will remain in its lethargy until other consciousness comes along to awaken it” (Sartre, p. 1200). Thus, Unsi, through his apprehension and fear, establishes a relationship with death, awakens a monster that only he, by willing ignorance of the situation and disregard of his emotions, can kill.

The disposability of the customers resonates like a curse. Right after the Customer’s death, the rest of the customers “all sit and return to their games. Even at the dead man’s table another man now occupies the empty chair, and the games continue” (p. 424). When the Waiter vocalizes the “incident” declaring “We’ve lost a customer, Master Zaza,” Zaza coldly replies

that “[p]lenty of customers have died and the shop’s still teeming with them” (p. 425). The authoritative voice of Zaza declaring the sheer disposability of the customers reflects the actual political scene of the Arab world at the time. Totalitarian regimes, under “fatherly” pretenses, were ruthlessly scolding the people, sometimes using the increasing fear toward the Israeli enemy and other times exploiting the hope for an Arab nationalistic union that would bring all together and sustain victory. To that end, the individual was replaceable and disposable all in the name of the great cause. At this point of the play, once the reader identifies with Unsi and recognizes his fears as not only common but very much legitimate, Unsi starts to lose the backgammon game.

Hassan talks about the cultural authenticity of Wannous’ theatre as ingrained in Arabism and thus very relevant to its intended audience. She asserts that Wannous “is known for his advice to fellow Arab playwrights to utilize their knowledge of the audience’s viewing habits while creating theatre” (para. 7). Every theatrical move Wannous creates, aims at effective change assumed by the audience, and for that purpose, says Hassan, “he focuses his attention on devising the best techniques that allow the audience to react to the events and the message” (para. 5). The backgammon game is part of the Arab recreational habits of the time. Every Arabic man plays it, everyone understands not only the rules of the game, but also the significance of these rules and the magnitude of the final result. The win is a celebration of the whole café, and the defeat is brilliant material for all to scoff and jeer, no hard feelings, it is just the public nature of the game. Wannous uses this familiarity of the game, making it a focal point in the play around which all the incidents revolve; the game is yet another “technique” that should help the audience “react to the events and the message” (Hassan, para. 5).

According to Sartre, a work of art is a “directed creation” that is an “absolute beginning.” Therefore, Sartre explains, this work of art is “brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work” (p. 1203). Wannous appeals to that sense of freedom in his readers to establish an atmosphere of the exact opposite: suffocation. When the Waiter asks Master Zaza “what day is it?” the question brings about an explosive answer, one that reveals Zaza’s imminent sense of danger, that of the freeing of the café’s customers. An intended paradox is revealed in Zaza’s answer that manifests itself between the readers’ sense of freedom and the customers’ eternal imprisonment as Zaza exclaims

What are you asking me? What do you mean by this insolence? What kind of obscenity is this? “What day is it” (Unsi takes notes and listens, pale-faced.) *Of!* I must keep quiet about this. You layabout, you criminal, I *thought* you were changing! First a suspicious word or two – then you come and ask me – no I won’t allow – I might tolerate a few stupidities – but I will *not* allow such silly questions to creep in among us. This treachery! You know very well what’s forbidden here. You know the rules of the job – and still you – no – don’t let me – (p. 427)

Zaza’s desire to imprison the customers in an everlasting game of backgammon is vindicated through a fatherly sense of protection, one that conforms to the attitude of the patriarchal Arab governments of the time. “That’s all we need” says Zaza, “to hang calendars on the walls and terrorize our customers with the ticking of clocks” (p. 427). Time, a daunting concept indeed to characters stripped of any power of will, becomes a trap in this play, a dimension that leads to nowhere. Wannous, in order to free his readers, traps his own characters, threatening the whole

concept of their existence as will be made clear through the terrifying ending of the play. Sartre states that

One cannot address oneself to freedom as such by means of constraint, fascination, or entreaties. There is only one way of attaining it: first, by recognizing it, then, by having confidence in it, and finally, by requiring of it an act, an act in its own name – that is, in the name of the confidence that one brings to it. (p. 1204)

Wannous treads the Sartrean path of attaining freedom as he creates recognition, attempts to conquer the audience's confidence and finally arouses not only their desire but also their dire need for it as an act.

This recognition comes about as Unsi starts to obsessively ask the question “what day is it?” Left without an answer, Unsi realizes the first sign of the end as “he sees a small pebble bang against the glass, quite softly.” As Jassem declares “well, I’ve beaten you,” Unsi declares “a stone fell on us, I saw it shudder the glass walls.” To this statement, Jassem moves away from Unsi to another spot leaving him “in the grip of terror, agitations and desperation.” Now another pebble falls and “Unsi is the only one who sees and hears it.” The Waiter tries to calm Unsi down as the latter exclaims “we can’t ignore what’s happening to us – someone’s belting us with rocks – and still no one moves a muscle.” Unsi asks the question of the source of danger that Wannous wants his audience to invite to the scene: “who are they? What do they want?” driving that audience to doubt all their preconceptions, as Unsi declares “everything we suppose to be fixed and certain could collapse and rot away” (p. 427-429). However, none of the café’s customers seem to realize the catastrophic incident. Even Jassem, to whose friendship Unsi appeals, demotes the event to the backgammon loss Unsi suffered. In a final long monologue, Unsi implores the customers:

we can’t let what we’ve built collapse on top of us . . . Oh God! Everything was so quiet - time passing peacefully – as if it wasn’t passing at all . . . We’ll die! We’ve died already – we *are* dead – look, friends! (The Glass cracks.) The walls are cracking! Get up for just one second – we must try – we must support each other . . . It’s stupid to go on as we are – won’t you come out of your apathy? Let’s do something, anything. (p. 430-431)

The café’s customers seem to be totally hypnotized as Unsi “runs about among them, repeating what he did with Jassem – turning each head toward the glass wall then releasing it . . . As he releases each head, it turns to its original position, frozen, frowning” (p. 431). Unsi realizes a crowd to be throwing the pebbles, his son among them. He calls on the Waiter’s attention to listen, the Waiter acknowledges the sounds that are “like seconds passing”. Finally we realize the violators: they are the violated, people who have exploded in the past, and their pebbles are nothing but the seconds passing. The ending of the play comes pregnant with an ending: Unsi is carried away through “the side door where the coffin disappeared”, crying words that “echo softly until the curtain falls” saying: “everything’s crumbling – it’s crumbling – it’s crumb -” (p. 432). Through these last words of Unsi, Wannous charges his audience, hoping to awaken them to their horrifying reality of collective impotence, to the slaughtering of the Arab awareness that takes place through plummeting people into the routine of their daily renderings. Wannous screams in his *Café* but to no avail, displaying a pessimistic view, which is often introduced in Wannous’ drama as a warning rather than a real surrender to the circumstances.

Alsouleman talks about Wannous’ perception of truth and the way he introduced it in the early stages of his writing:

In the pre-1980s phase, reality was based on certainty. This certainty controlled and characterized the two major dualities in the dramatic world, the duality of the ruler and the ruled and the duality of the stage and the audience. Wannous did not question the nature of this truth, but instead explored how it could be brought to the stage and presented to the audience in such a way that there was no doubt about it. (para. 8)

Wannous, in his *Glass Café*, seemed very certain of that duality, emphasizing the responsibility of the “ruled” equivalent in this context to that of the “audience.” This responsibility manifests itself in the freedom that should be sought after by the “ruled” and as such the “audience.” For according to Sartre, “the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject – freedom” (p. 1212). Wannous, early on in his career, desired that freedom as a subject of his writing, for, as Sartre words it, “the freedom of writing implies the freedom of the citizen. One does not write for slaves” (p. 1212). Wannous sensed the core connection between his freedom as a writer and his freedom as a citizen; this immensely politicized job obtains its power from the principle of the free citizen, while at the same time the citizen is free and freed only when this dangerous job is protected. To this end Sartre states

The art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy. When one is threatened, the other is too. And it is not enough to defend them with the pen. A day comes when the pen is forced to stop, and the writer must then take up arms. Thus, however you might have come to it, whatever the opinions you might have professed, literature throws you into battle. Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are committed, willy-nilly. (p. 1212-1213)

The battle never seized for Wannous and he lived as an activist through his pen, totally convinced that the theatre can serve no better job than being a political arena in which ideas are shaped and from which change begins. For Wannous, a theatrical performance, Alsouleman states, “was a social and political event aimed to create a dialogue with the audience in order to increase its awareness of the political condition and the collective reality of the individual” (para. 6). This dialogue became meager for Wannous in the next phase of his theatrical career and life in general. A dialogue was not enough; an action has to stem from the performance, one that aims at real effective change.

In closing his keynote speech of the International Day of Theatre 1996, Wannous states “we are doomed by hope, and what takes place today cannot be the end of history” (*AlJadid* Staff, para. 7). Wannous was certainly “doomed with hope” all his life, the hope that transformed him and transferred him to the post 1967 phase. It was only hope that could have salvaged the spirits of those who continued to exert themselves after 1967, as they maintained their dreams of a true reformation of Arab regimes and an actual deliverance from the defeat of that wretched year. Wannous, like many Arab intellectuals of the time, was urged to move from the reserved sense of existentialism toward the more active sense of communism and socialism, pressed by the urgency of the political state of the time. Arab contemporaries of the time, particularly young nationalist men who saw in Jamal Abdunnassir a savior, maybe more a mystic redeemer, who was going to pull the Israeli knife out of their Arabic wounded dignity, felt that a transition was mandatory following what they felt was a horrendous defeat of 1967; for them it was time to renounce the existentialist Sarterian dark view that dominated the Arab academic and political scene for a more active and vigorous role, for a dynamic stand whereby they stop complaining about the absence of a solution and turn toward creating one.

Bertolt Brecht's concept of the Epic theatre came to perfectly answer Wannous' search of an active stage. Brecht (2004) explains that an epic theatre is one that leads to critical action, bringing the stage and its audience to life. It is a theatre that instructs, entertains, but most importantly, it is a theatre that invokes the flame of action. The spectator of an epic theatre, no longer a passive viewer who surrenders his emotions and thus his judgment to the characters of the play, is a real and effective participant. To this extent Brecht affirms:

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The suffering of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (p. 920)

It is that unthinkable which Brecht wants to bring to the theatrical table, the sense of abhorrence that obliges the spectator to sarcastically deal with pain in an attempt to conquer it, thus the laugh at the weeping and the weep for the laughing. In the epic theatre, the spectator says "it's got to stop" thus constructing judgment and initiating action. To this end, Brecht invites a sense of estrangement to his stage. He insists on the importance of the alienation of both actor and spectator, for, actors should abstain from "going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism to him," and as such a spectator "was no longer in anyway allowed to submit to the experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play" (p. 920). Brecht believes that through inviting both actor and spectator to remain detached, the actor will become more inviting of the spectators' criticism and the spectator will be less partial on account of excess of emotions. "The production (of an epic theatre) took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation," Brecht asserts, "the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up" (p. 920). Thus it is the force of habit, Brecht confirms, that slaughters the ability to understand and thus affect change. "What is 'natural' must have the force of what is startling" says Brecht, "this is the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different" (p. 290). It is that "startling" effect that Wannous sought out in the Brechtian theatre, an effect he hoped would awaken the defeated and shattered Arab masses of the late 1960s.

During these gruesome years, and with the triggering of "the Arab defeat of the 1967 war against Israel," Swairjo states, "political Arab theatre was borne" (para. 7). Indeed, the defeat of 1967 came to stab the Arab sense of nationalism in the heart; nevertheless, it "resulted in the creation of a new level of awareness among artists and intellectuals, particularly toward the government-controlled press and its infiltration of popular culture" (para. 7). To this effect, Litvin states that

The June War shifted the vocabulary and goals of Arab drama. Beyond the military humiliation at Israel's hands, many Syrian and Egyptian writers recorded their sense of outrage at the discovery that their own governments had lied to them. The lack of democratic openness was seen as a key reason for the Arab countries' dismal military

performance. Many recalled the extravagant assurances, long after the decisive battles had been lost, that victory was imminent . . . These governments neither wanted told the truth nor wanted to hear it. What was the point of sending them gently coded messages? (p. 117)

Thus, the Arabic press of the time was on trial; the media had participated in heightening the level of agony for the Arab masses as the radio of Cairo, the most respected among Arab media sources, continued to declare and assert the Arab's victory and the destruction of the Israeli army, particularly their air forces, over and over again. The news of the defeat-to-come hit hard, leaving the masses shattered and the intellectuals swarmed with feelings of betrayal and guilt: betrayal of the ideology and guilt toward the blind-sighted masses; they should have known better. As such, the political theatre was the answer for the intellectuals as well as the masses of the time. To this effect, Litvin explains that

the 1967 defeat fundamentally altered Arab conceptions of political theatre's role. A well-developed high culture was no longer enough to guarantee the world's respect—indeed, it began to look like an impediment. Psychological interiority was no help: what mattered was not to deserve agentive power, but to seize it. Disappointed in their regimes, dramatists stopped addressing subtly allegorical plays to the government; instead, they appealed directly to the audiences, trying to arouse them to participate in political life. (p. 114)

Thus, Wannous' attention shifted directly to the audience, toiling to activate their interest in a role bigger than that of the spectator. However, this whole shift in movement “could not but make use of the experiences of Western political dramatists,” only Wannous, as he dived into the project, never lost sight of his original audience and of the deeply rooted conventions of Arabic theatre (Swairjo, par. 70). In 1969, Wannous called for an Arab festival for Theater Arts in cooperation with a number of playwrights to be held in Damascus, introducing his “theatre of politicization,” as a substitute for the traditional “political theatre.” Swairjo explains that Wannous “intended theatre to play a more positive role in the process of social and political change. . . . Theatre was the battle he chose to fight at a time when conventional political and military wars were being lost” (para. 9). Wannous will live to see this project fail. He will, starting in the early 1980s, retreat from all public life with a broken heart for thirteen years before coming back with a new spirit and a new plan, only for death to take him away from reaching his impossible dream.

Wannous wrote his play *The King's Elephant* on the very same year of the festival's commencement. The play came as a shriek, a slap on the face, a harsh awakening for the masses, numbed in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat. At that time, Wannous, like many Arab intellectuals of the day, found refuge in the principles of Socialism. He soon took interest in the Socialist theories of Brecht and those of his epic theatre, though never losing sight of the distinctiveness of the Arabic theatre and its audience, resolving to “techniques of the early pioneers of Syrian theatre, such as Abu Khalil Alqabbani and Maroun An Naqash” (Swairjo, para. 16). Whereas the techniques and the many theatrical elements of Wannous were in essence Arabic, the ideological foundation was very much Brechtian. “From Brecht,” asserts Swairjo, “Wannous extracted for his own work two points: first, a well-defined mission for theatre that changes the world rather than simply explains it; and second, Brecht's vision of the role of history in determining fate” (para. 16). That desire for change which develops from the lessons of history is clearly evident in

Wannous' *The King's Elephant*. In his endeavor to set that change in motion, Wannous starts from a focal Brechtian principle: that of the alienated character. Through that sense of estrangement with which Wannous tries to saturate the play, the events of history, distant and not so very distant, become lucid, and once history is comprehensible, as per the Brechtian theory, an innate desire for change strongly surfaces, a desire that stems from anger, despondence, and a tremendous sense of dread. For this purpose, all of the male and female characters of *The King's Elephant* are numbered rather than named; intentionally robbing them of any individualistic sense. The characters speak in jumbled voices, and when they come to individual lines, they ejaculate words in a mechanical style. Every now and then, a unique sentence is uttered, but no sooner, the words are either covered or muttered over by the surrounding crowd, stripping them from any sense of coherence. The play starts with a lament of a grieving destitute crowd, coming from an alley "with tumbledown houses, miserable and covered with filth" (p. 434). The crowd exchanges condoling cliché sentences on the yet another death of one of their children under the feet of the king's elephant. When Man 4 sums up the news: "a beautiful little child, crushed by that huge elephant of the king's," Man 3 elaborates that this elephant "trumpeted the way he always does, then he charged, and the boys panicked and ran off in all directions. But al-Fahd's son tripped and fell, ... The elephant rushed up to him and trampled him" (p. 435). The crowd continues to ask for God's help and mercy as they relate the incidents. The conversation, short and fragmented at the beginning, starts to convey some substance as it advances. Man 5 admits: "the men were terrified. No one moved until the elephant had gone away" and Woman 3 asserts: "no one dares to speak" (p. 436). This sentence initiates a dangerous conversation led ironically by the women:

Woman 2: Your life isn't safe any more, or your livelihood either.

Woman 3: And no one dares say anything.

Man 3 & Man 5: Say something?

Man 4: The women are going off their heads.

Man 2 (shaking his head): As if you can say something, just like that.

Man 4: She doesn't know what she's asking.

Man 3: It's the King's elephant, woman! (p. 436-437)

This objection stemming from terror does nothing but further dilute that terror, leading to more criticism of the elephant:

Man 5: I've never seen a lot of elephants in my time. Every king's had one. But I've never seen an elephant so vicious and arrogant as this one.

Man 8: Every day brings some new misery. All brought by this elephant.

Man 3: Careful what you say.

Man 4 & man 5: It's the King's elephant.

Man 7: And the king loves his elephant.

Woman 3(sobbing): What about us? Don't we love our children? (p. 437-438)

This conversation brings the play to a new level of self-examination, as the characters tread on red lines and infringe upon the unspoken. It is at this point that the personal becomes political.

Tony Kushner (1997) discusses the idea of "the personal" as it is employed sometimes to blind the masses; he states:

Everything is personal; everything is political, we are trained to see the personal, the psychological (although our psychological understanding is usually pretty unsophisticated). We are less able to see the political; in life, as in art, much energy is

devoted toward blurring the political meaning of events, or even that events *have* a political meaning. (p. 22)

Much of that blurring Kushner speaks of occurs at the beginning of Wannous' play, as people ascribe the incident to other reasons such as the child being "unlucky" as described by Woman1, or on account of fate, an idea confirmed by Man 5, who upon hearing the character of a little girl, introduced as simply "Girl," objecting to putting a child in a large coffin, says: "there are coffins for old and young" (p. 536, 437). Furthermore, the incident at that stage is described as "a tragedy" (436) by Man 2, a description that, according to Kushner, undermines the crime, inviting tears instead of rage, the latter being the sensible reaction to a crime. Kushner states: "'tragic,' like 'natural,' is one of those rhetorical dead ends that stops the mind from reaching to the full awfulness and criminality of an event. The correct response to tragedy is tears, not rage" (p. 22). Wannous does not allow the tragic to take over, for very quickly and following the verbal demur above, ending with a comparison between the king's love for his elephant and the people's love for their children, the character of Zakaria makes its first appearance.

Zakaria is the only named character in the play. With his debut, the personal immediately shifts to the political. He addresses the people despite their "fear and alarm" with the personal in their life that is truly only political: "don't we have enough troubles already? Poverty, misery-" (p. 438). To that, the people start to account for all the misery in their lives:

Man 11: Injustice. Forced labor.

Man 2: God knows –

Zakaria: Disease.

Man 12: Hunger.

Zakaria: Taxes beyond what we even earn.

Man 5: God knows!

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

Zakaria: And now, on top of everything, comes the elephant. (p. 438)

It becomes evident to the characters, at this point, that the systematic decline of their life is no coincidence as they start to relate certain "tragedies" to their origins as crimes. As a socialist, Wannous makes use of people's expressions of faith in the play to demonstrate their abandonment by God and thus their dire need to look after themselves. The many unanswered pleadings for God's mercy and forgiveness are also reminiscent of Wannous' existential approach which is made evident in Zakaria's conversation with the people:

Man 5: Patience is the gateway to salvation

Zakaria: But how much longer can we be patient?

Voices (mingled, one after the other): Until God sends us His mercy.

Zakaria: We'll be dead before that comes. We've had enough of poverty.

...

Voices: Lord forgive us! God's will be done. Eyes see what hands can't reach. Leave it to God, the most compassionate and merciful.

Zakaria: No! – It's past endurance now.

Man 3: Past endurance or not, what can we do?

Zakaria: Act. (p. 440)

Wannous' existentialist inclination is shown here through the lines of Zakaria, as he points out God's abandonment of people: "we'll be dead before that comes," highlighting the collaboration between the political and religious institutions in building up people's miseries. "It's past endurance now" declares Zakaria, announcing an alteration in Wannous' dramatic approach. It is

the last word in the above conversation, the word “act” that completes the shift of Wannous, the existentialist playwright, to the realm of Brechtian socialism.

In pointing out how the theatre “began to be instructive,” Brecht states that “oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation” (p. 920). However, theatre does not stop there, Brecht asserts, for “the theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it” (p. 920). Zakaria tries to engender that desire (or rather dire need) for change in the people. However, his approach, despite its boldness for the town’s people, can still seem a little awkward to the Western reader. Zakaria’s plan is to “go to the king together. We’ll tell him our grievances, about all the harm we’re suffering. We’ll beg him to stop his elephant harming us any more” (p. 440). This plan takes two things into consideration: first the fact that this is the town people’s first attempt at any objection, and second the Eastern view of the ruler as some sort of divinity that calls for a devout approach. Wannous does not make a martyr of Zakaria, but a possible Arabic hero, one who speaks the language of the masses and to whom they can relate. However, once an initial plan is set, people start to remember inflated stories about the elephant:

Man 3: They say when he leaves the palace, or goes back in, the royal band plays.

Man 9: Whatever he wants, he gets by right. Whatever he does, it has the force of law.

Man 5: The King nearly divorced his wife. Because she wasn’t nice enough to the elephant. (p. 441)

Zakaria tries to use logic to defuse these stories asserting that people are “blowing things out of proportion” and that the King’s servants who spread such stories only do so because “it’s part of their job” (p. 441). He also uses other hypotheses to ease people’s fears: “and who knows? Maybe the king doesn’t realize what his elephant’s doing to us” (p. 443). Wannous here points at a level of public apprehension that is mostly created by the many years of oppressive hegemony that leads to total public paralysis. He thus uses Zakaria to disrobe the myth that is an accumulation of centuries, demonstrating the Arabic battle of the time against the myth of that “elephant in the room” no one wants or is able to logically address.

The principle of morality is very evidently under interrogation in the play. Brecht states that “it is not only moral considerations that make hunger, cold and oppression hard to bear” (p. 922). According to him, the function of theatre is not merely “to arouse moral objections to such circumstances . . . but to discover means of their elimination” (p. 922). To Wannous, emerging with his fellow Arab intellectuals from the crushing defeat of 1967, the question was not merely of the moral but also of the rightful. These young intellectuals of the time sought not the mercy of the rulers, as was the earlier convention, but their own dignity as citizens which can only be realized in a just and liberal system. Through the character of Zakaria, we hear of the principle of the right of the citizen, of the finally vocalized desire for change, as well as of the need for collective effort. Throughout the rehearsal, people’s voices go in unison and then become inharmonious; reflecting the doubts and fears within a public that struggles to speak out. The plan is for Zakaria to shout “the elephant, lord of all time” (p. 446) and for the rest of the crowd to shout back one of the elephant’s crimes. This collective method of speaking, observant of the Socialist spectacle of the time, is the only way, Wannous seems to say, that can guarantee the public’s safety and success. However, the disarray of the town’s people foretells a gloomy ending, one that will come as a shock even to the broken and dispirited audience of the time.

The class distinction between the destitute public and their king is magnified as the crowd approaches the king’s palace. “Everyone is struck by a mounting sense of awe and fear,” says

Wannous in his stage directions, as the people's voices sing their own deprivation: "we'll soon have a sight of the splendid throne. It's making me weak at the knee. What a hall! My heart's pounding. Look at the carpets. The walls are glittering like sunlight" (p. 447-448). Zakaria, the Arabic hero, gives the people his final instructions: "we'll show we know how to behave in front of the king. Won't we? We must be totally courteous. We'll enter in perfect file, bow respectfully, then submit our complaint to the king" (p. 448). Through the words of his own hero, Wannous criticizes the Arabic revolutionary mentality, one that still hopes, out of fear, to find middle ground with its oppressive ruler. The progression of the incidents only testifies to Wannous' critique of the Arab insipid hero of the time. The "commons of the city," when permitted to see the King, become immediately motionless in their fear: "the faces freeze, and their fear turns to chilly silence. All the heads, including Zakaria's, are bowed. They stumble on, bowing as low as they can, unable to stand up straight again" (p. 448-449). Zakaria, after a period of silence releases his call "the elephant, lord of all time!" only to be answered with "tremulous" words (p. 449). Zakaria repeats his sentence, more steadily every time, only to be answered with the same fragmented words. The only person attempting to give a clear reply albeit "in a low voice" is the Girl who is stopped by her mother from finishing her sentence (p. 449). Zakaria "desperate now, turning to the bowed, panic-stricken bodies", repeats his call to no avail. As a consequence to this abandonment, he moves toward the king and "in a most skillful and accomplished fashion" he declares:

We love the elephant lord of all time. We love and cherish the elephant, sire, as you yourself do. When he walks in the city, our hearts fill with delight. We're happy indeed to see him – so much, sire, that life without him is unimaginable now. And yet, Your Majesty, we mark how the elephant, by reason of his loneliness, fails to receive his due share of happiness and joy. Loneliness is a wretched state, My Lord; and so we, your loyal and loving subjects, come to you today to beg that you will find the elephant a wife, a consort to relieve his loneliness – in the hope that, then, he may have scores, no hundreds, thousands, of offspring, to fill the entire city. (p. 450)

Zakaria's speech seems to deliver a punishment to the languid group as well as reveal the dangerous deficiency in the then-current notion of the hero. Zakaria was impulsive, naive in his expectations, and above all uncertain about his own goals; a portrait of a hero that was not uncommon within the active Arabic opposition of the time. To that effect, Litvin explains that although the 1967 defeat aroused the dramatists' calls for the public to participate in political life, it was Jamal Abdul-Nasser's death in September 1970 that "added a dark subtext to such calls" as his image as a hero who stood for liberalism and democracy was also dying; he lied to the public, and he resorted to the same oppressive methods he claimed to battle (p. 114). This decline of the beloved leader led the then twenty-eight year old Wannous and his fellow young writers to lose faith in the idea of a savior and to draw a dark ending to their heroes who surely cannot be superior to or meet a better fate than that of Nasser's. Zakaria is thus lost to his people as he is "rewarded with the post of Resident Companion to the elephant," an insinuation of the hero-defector that was manufactured by the oppressive authority and the apprehensive public of the time (p. 450). The play ends with a lit stage, as the actors line up before the audience abandoning their characters and speaking the following line:

Group: That was the story.

Actor 5: Which we acted.

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

Actor 7: Do you know now why elephants exist?

Actor 3: Do you know now why elephants breed?

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

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

Group: A violent, bloody story, which one day we'll act for you. (p. 451)

The abandonment of the characters toward the end is an ultimate celebration of the Brechtian method of estrangement; one that frees the actors from the characters' fears, permitting them a more active role in the reformation movement. The closing is conventional, but not so much so to the audience of the early seventies. This audience was struggling with many elephants awaiting their departure from the theatre. There was a dire need for a reaching out to that audience, for a direct dialogue. The play is dark, like all of Wannous' work of the time; its only anticipated hope lies in its calling for an active role of the audience, one that can affect real change.

According to Brecht, the moral is not enough to determine right and wrong, for it is often subjective and can be used to further oppress rather than relief. The moral should be decided in accordance with people's needs and for the purpose of their well being, but this is not the whole story. The moral can only be effective if it helped identifying its opposite, the immoral, for the purpose of its elimination. Thus, to Brecht, the epic theatre can be moral for as long as it uses the concept not only for the realization of the immoral, not only for the objection to it, but also for the purpose of changing it. Kushner questions the source of cruelty in life. All the horrific stories, he inquires, do they "speak about the cruelty of life or about the cruelty of poverty and racism?" (p. 22). This question is Brechtian in nature, for it is one that deals with the source of the immoral and hints at the creators of that immorality as well. Wannous realized that very subjective nature of the immoral in his play, as the problems of the town's people were presented to be very intimate to their own circumstances. The universal message is, however, that whenever the immoral is identified, it must be changed.

Swairjo states that calling for "a comprehensive dialogue between individuals as well as between nations," Wannous sees "theatre as a starting point for launching such dialogue, which could grow to include all nations and cultures of the world" (para. 2). Throughout his theatrical journey, starting from the existential search, on to the more concrete social and communist matter-of-fact approach, all the way to the individualistic, more psychological methodology, Wannous never lost sight of his founding ideology, never overlooked his real purpose of change, never drifted away from the path of his much anticipated final destination, a destination that sorrowfully, he never reached. Wannous tried, during the last few years of his career to free his writing from the pure political, and in this he found a freedom he never experienced before. Wannous continued to have a dream, only he realized that he cannot and should not alter that dream for his audience; he had to write freely, he needed to involve the personal; history needed to take a back step, opening the way for the individual in him; in that sense, and only in that sense, did Wannous realize his dream and free himself.

The two plays included in this paper are chosen to represent a stream of thought that was running through Arab academia during the ten years before and after the war of 1967. It was a time of existential desperation followed by another of active militarism that was to be directed not only toward the foreign enemy but at the enemy within, the totalitarian regimes and governments. Wannous' message, first pessimistic and existential, later a bit more optimistic and active, was very simple, maybe even a bit naïve for the twenty-first century reader, but it was

nevertheless not so simple at its own time, nor so different. He wanted to affect change, to move from the passivity of the existential stance to the proactive position of the social stance as exhibited by his two plays. Wannous' work will always stand as a reminder of a more hopeful time, a time long gone with all its hopes and aspirations for any real change.

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