

By Way of Introduction and Farewell:*

Beyond the Pale

Of his generation, Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannus (1941-1997) is perhaps the best known in the Arab world and the most widely read and performed. After a short piece, *Tales of the Statue-Chorus*, written in 1965, he made his real debut with a savage political satire on the Arab regimes who caused the 1967 defeat. *The 5th of June Party*, written in 1967 in the aftermath of the so-called 'setback' and performed in 1968, took Arab theatrical circles by storm and proved an instant hit. In a highly theatrical form that relied on the interaction of stage and auditorium and invited the active participation of the viewer, it vividly dramatised the traumatic sense of disillusionment and betrayal experienced by all Arabs in those days. It opens with a group of actors preparing to stage a play that dramatises the official media version of what happened in the war, with an officious stage-manager presiding over the proceedings, and ends with a mock audience taking over the stage to tell the real story in a series of scenes that mix acting with commentary and narration. It was a daring theatrical experiment, not only politically (Wannus was called for investigation before the military intelligence service) but artistically as well, and firmly placed Wannus among the avant-garde playwrights of that period.

Wannus's next play, *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber's Head* (1969), was equally revolutionary in its content and dramaturgy and was banned on the opening night. Based on an old popular story, with vague historical origins, it is a cautionary tale against collaboration with

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oppressive rulers and tyrants in the hope of gaining individual salvation. When a city is besieged and the sultan is at a loss how to sneak a message out to ask for outside help, a wily and ambitious slave called Jaber comes up with an ingenious solution to the sultan's dilemma: he shaves his head completely bald, and after the message has been written on it in indelible ink, he lets his hair grow back again until it completely hides it, then slips out of the city. When he reaches his destination, his head is shaved bald and the message is delivered — only the sultan who had promised him wealth and freedom had not forgotten to add at the end of the message a small postscript saying: “please, when you have read the message, chop off Jaber's head.”

This funny story is told in a series of scenes that alternate between the sultan's palace and the city streets and contrast the sumptuous wealth of the former with the abject poverty of the latter. And once more the dramaturgy here, as in *The 5th of June Party*, exploits many of the techniques of Brecht's epic theatre (widely popular in Egypt in the sixties where Wannus spent four years studying journalism at Cairo University) and merges them with some indigenous forms of popular entertainment in an attempt to forge a kind of theatrical experience that would feel ‘authentically’ Arab while forcefully advocating socialism. In this, Wannus was politically and artistically following closely in the footsteps of such Egyptian playwrights as Yusef Idris, Mahmoud Diab, and Naguib Sorour, among others.

In the same year, 1969, Wannus produced another political parable, *The Elephant, O King of All Time*, based on an Indian folktale that portrays the disastrous consequences of fear and submission. Artistically, it is a modest achievement and lacks the acrid humour and

pungent irony of previous works. Four years later, in 1973, Wannus recovered his technical ebullience and *jeu d'esprit* in *An Evening with Abu Khalil El-Qabbani* in which he reverted to his favourite theme: theatre. Unlike the pretentious stage-manager in *The 5th of June Party*, El-Qabbani, one of the earliest pioneers of theatre in the Arab world, was a rebellious artist who defied the traditional religious hostility towards the art of representation in the sixties of the 19th century, had his theatre closed and company disbanded by the authorities, and had to flee Syria for Egypt where he played a seminal role in the development of the Egyptian theatre. The choice of El-Qabbani and his company as a theme was no coincidence; Wannus did not make a secret of his admiration for the man or the kind of popular musical performance he had evolved, and deliberately modelled his *Evening's* entertainment along the lines of a typical Qabbani show.

The same exuberant theatricality informs Wannus's next play, *The King is the King*, which marks the end of the first stage of his dramatic career and its highest point. Here, he borrows a tale from the *Arabian Nights* (as El-Qabbani often did) to argue that no one is born royal, that no king or ruler is recognisable without the props and trappings of power and that the political machine is an elaborately staged masque. In the Arabian tale, a king plays a practical joke on a ruined merchant making him believe he is king for one day. The tale ends happily: the king has his sport and the beggar who swallowed the bait is richly rewarded. In the play, however, the joke is cruelly turned upon the king as he watches with dazed, incredulous eyes his theatrical illusion usurping his crown, queen and courtiers. The dramatic structure is beautifully symmetrical, consisting of two parallel and contrasting parts: one about the transformation of beggar into king and the other about the

transformation of king into beggar. In the stage directions Wannus insists on the use of ritual, stylised movement and gesture, a symbolic setting with a spiral throne, and unnaturally voluminous costumes.

The King is the King was written in 1977 and was followed by a long period of silence which lasted 13 long years. Wannus was not singular in this; other Arab dramatists too went silent at the time, some of them forever. The world had changed around them; many illusions had been shattered, many idols had fallen, the socialist dream had collapsed, and Arab nationalism was no longer a viable cause. Wannus, as he admitted in an interview with Syrian drama critic Mary Elias, needed time to sort out himself and his world. It was a period of deep soul-searching and self revision and he came out of it “washed clean of all illusions,” as he put it. The defiant spirit and fighting optimism of the first stage of his career gave way in the second (and sadly last) to deep intellectual pessimism, bordering on nihilism.

In 1990, Wannus broke his long dramatic silence with an adaptation of Antonio Buero Vallejo's play *La Doble Historia del Doctor Valmy*, set in the context of the Arab-Israeli struggle and renamed *Rape*. In it one detects not only a change of mood, of technique and intellectual outlook, but a broader sympathy, an aversion to brash and facile moral judgements and a new interest in individual human suffering. Here, and in all the plays that followed until his death, the dramatic conflict gains in depth and complexity and is no longer a simple and simplistic confrontation between two separate, well-defined and morally identified forces. The characters are no longer types, symbols or ideas, but real people facing real existential and moral dilemmas. This does not mean that Wannus's last, and by critical consensus greatest plays have left politics behind and turned to ‘human’

themes. Indeed, they are extremely political, but in the deepest, most comprehensive sense of the word — a sense which is best summed up in the slogan “the personal is political”.

If the earlier plays assumed that a better system of government and distribution of wealth would create a better Arab world, the later plays demand no less than a thorough revision and fundamental re-evaluation of the cultural heritage of the Arabs and their way of life, including their attitudes to women, love, sex, marriage and even homosexuality, incest and conjugal fidelity. No wonder that in these last plays — *A Day of Our Times* (1993), *Historical Miniatures* (1993), *Anguished Dreams* and *The Rites of Signs and Changes* (1994), *The Mirage Epic* (1995) and *Drunken Days* (1996) — women are given prominence while the conventions and traditions of the patriarchy are savagely anatomised. Whether the setting is historical or the present, and whether the scope is limited or panoramic, the individual is shown in confrontation with different value systems and modes of apprehending human existence, while the content of experience remains shifting and relative.

Many critics have described these last plays, particularly *The Rites* and *Anguished Dreams*, as the most daring and outspoken in the history of Arab drama. And they are right. They were written, in feverish succession, at a time when Wannus was daily staring death in the face and had nothing more to fear.