



The Department of English, the Center  
for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies  
(CAMES), and the Center for American  
Studies and Research (CASAR)  
cordially invite you to:

# ON WANNOUS

an international conference

April 1, 2015, 10 am – 7 pm

Issam Fares Institute, Auditorium

## ON WANNOUS

Sa'dallah Wannous (1941–1997) was a Syrian playwright and critic deeply committed to politicizing theater. As a believer in the necessity of change as the basis for building a better world based on freedom, democracy, and social justice, he conceived of theatre as a public forum that would make it possible for people to critically engage with sociopolitical, intellectual and cultural debates. During his lifetime, he and other Arab intellectuals were confronted with a number of political setbacks and increasing despair, especially as a result of the Arab defeats in the June 1967 war and the Gulf war of 1991. Nonetheless, shortly before his death in 1997 he coined the often-cited statement that “we are condemned to hope.”

The conference will, in part, serve as a follow-up to the recent performance of Wannous' play *The Rape*, produced by AUB and Robert Myers, directed by Sahar Assaf, and translated by Nada Saab and Robert Myers, and will explore various aspects of Wannous' life and work. It will consist of two panels, which will bring together scholars, writers and theatre artists from Lebanon, Syria, Germany and the U.S. The conference will end with the screening of *There Are So Many Things Still to Say*, a film about Wannous directed by Omar Amiralay that was shot shortly before Wannous' death.

### ORGANIZATION:

Sahar Assaf, Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, and Robert Myers, with the help of our Graduate Assistant Razan Farhat.

Special thanks to the Department of English, The Office of the Dean of FAS, CAMES, and CASAR for their generous support. We are also grateful to Rula Balbaaki for helping with the translation of the talks by Dima Wannous and Mohammad Al Attar.

## PROGRAM

- 9:30-10:00** Coffee
- 10:00-10:15** Welcome and opening remarks by Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Robert Myers
- 10:15-10:30** Dima Wannous: A Personal View
- 10:30-12:30** **Panel I** – Chair: Sonja Mejcher-Atassi
1. Friederike Pannewick: *Al-Ightisāb*: Wannous’ Passage from Politicization of Theatre to Individual Humanism
  2. Elias Khoury: Wannous: Writer and Public Intellectual
  3. Nada Saab: The Author as Character and Voice in Wannous’ plays
- 12:30-14:00** Lunch Break
- 14:00-16:00** **Panel II** – Chair: Robert Myers
1. Mohammed Al Attar: Wannous’ Influence on My Generation of Playwrights and Theater Makers
  2. Edward Ziter: Wannous and the Call of History
  3. Sahar Assaf: Speaking the Unspeakable: On Directing Wannous
- 16:00-16:15** Closing remarks by Sahar Assaf
- 18:00-19:00** Film Screening, Bathish Auditorium, West Hall  
Omar Amiralay: *There Are So Many Things Still to Say* (ARTE France – Grains de Sable, 49 min, 1997)

## ABSTRACTS

### **Sahar Assaf: Speaking the Unspeakable: On Directing Wannous**

This paper is based on my experience directing the English-language world-premieres of Wannous’ plays *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (2013) and *The Rape* (2015). In performance, much of what happens in *Rituals* and *The Rape* is conveyed through verbal interaction among psychologically complex characters. To manifest the stories on the stage, I utilized a variety of languages specifically related to performance—gestural, semiotic, sonic, etc.—that allowed for multiple readings of the texts.

### **Mohammed Al Attar: Wannous’s Influence on My Generation of Playwrights and Theater Makers**

The paper proposes a re-reading of Wannous’ late plays against the background of the uprisings in the Arab World and, in particular, the Syrian uprising. Wannous’ late plays, written between 1994 and 1997, such as *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, *Historical Miniatures*, and *Drunken Days*, show a shift from the writer/intellectual who wants to change the world with theater to the writer/intellectual who wants to understand the world through theater, and from a theater that has ready answers to a theater that puts forth questions. In these texts, the search for truth in a multiplicity of truths and narratives comes to the fore. This search is closely linked to freedom and liberation.

### **Elias Khoury: Wannous: Writer and Public Intellectual**

The paper deals with Wannous’ role as writer and public intellectual under dictatorship. It explores how art can turn into a platform for a radical cultural and political practice.

### **Friederike Pannewick:** *The Rape*: Wannous' Passage from Politicization of Theater to Individual Humanism

Wannous' political and artistic self-understanding was deeply impacted by the Palestinian conflict. His works are grounded in sociopolitical engagement and what he termed the "politicizing of theater." In the late 1980s, however, he bid farewell to explaining the problems in the Arab world in terms of power relations and chose instead to generate insights into social, individual, and psychological problems. This paper traces the passage from the politicization of theater to individual humanism in *The Rape*.

### **Nada Saab:** The Author as Character and Voice in Wannous' Plays

In the last scene of *The Rape* one of the play's main characters enters and summons a new character, his creator, Wannous, to come onstage. The summoning of the author is indeed an unusual move in theatre, but is one that is consonant with other strategies that Wannous employs to insure that his own voice is heard. Storytellers, medieval historical chroniclers, and choruses are examples of characters and entities to which he lends his voice in his plays. The study focuses on this presence of Wannous in his plays and on his appropriations of various literary traditions to achieve this purpose.

### **Edward Ziter:** Wannous and the Call of History

As nostalgia for, and invocations of, a noble past resonate across the Arab mediascape, it is important to reexamine Wannous' career-long interrogation of the use and abuse of Arab history. In plays ranging from the expressionistic *Cleansing the Blood*, and the epic *Historical Miniatures*, to the realistic *Drunken Days*, the "call of our noble past" is invoked by characters who inspire resistance, justify violence and distract and placate populations. Wannous not simply examines the use of history but models an alternate historiography, one with the expansiveness of poetry. Such a historiography is neither positivist nor materialist but seeks to redeem the seemingly lost potential of the past in present action.

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

**Sahar Assaf** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Fine Arts and Art History at the American University of Beirut. She directed *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* and *The Rape*, by Wannous, in addition to *Watch Your Step: Beirut Heritage Walking Tour*, a performance about memories of the Lebanese civil war. In 2014, Assaf was selected to participate in the renowned Directors' Lab at Lincoln Center in New York City.

**Mohammed Al Attar** is a playwright and dramaturg. He studied at Damascus University, the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus and Goldsmiths in London. His works have been performed in Damascus, London, New York, Seoul, Berlin, and elsewhere. They include: *Withdrawal* (2007), *Smash* (2008), *Online* (2011), *A Chance Encounter* (2012), *Intimacy* (2013), and *Antigone of Syria* (2014). Al-Attar has written for numerous magazines and newspapers, with a special focus on the Syrian uprising.

**Elias Khoury** is a novelist, critic and public intellectual. He is the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* and a Visiting Professor at LAU. He has also taught at Columbia, New York University and the American University of Beirut. He has published more than ten novels, which have been translated into several languages. They include *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (1994), *The Kingdom of Strangers* (1996), *Gate of the Sun* (1998), *Yalo* (2008), *As Though She Were Sleeping* (2011) and *The Broken Mirrors: Sinalcol* (2015) of Arabic and comparative literature.

**Sonja Mejcher-Atassi** is an Associate Professor and the Chairperson of the Department of English at the American University of Beirut. Her publications include *reading across modern arabic literature and art; Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World;* and *Writing a 'Tool for Change': 'Abd al-Rahman Munif Remembered*, in addition to numerous articles on cultural production in the Arab world, especially on modern and contemporary literature and book art.

**Robert Myers** ([www.robert-myers.com](http://www.robert-myers.com)) is a Professor of English and Creative Writing and Director of the Center for American Studies (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut. He is a cultural historian, translator and the author of numerous stage plays, including *Atwater: Fixin' to Die*, *The Lynching of Leo Frank*, *Unmanned* and *Mesopotamia*. He co-translated *Baghdadi Bath*, by Jawad al-Assadi, and received a MacArthur grant with Silk Road Rising Theatre to co-translate Wannous' *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* with Nada Saab. He also co-translated *The Rape* with Nada Saab. He has published widely on theatre and culture.

**Friederike Pannewick** is a Professor of Arabic literature at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at the University of Marburg. She is also the co-director of Travelling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Near Eastern Literatures at the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin. Her publications include *Martyrdom and Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity*; *Das Wagnis Tradition: Arabische Wege der Theatralität*, and numerous other studies on Arabic literature and theater.

**Nada Saab** is an Assistant Professor of Arabic Studies at the Lebanese American University. She has written several studies on Arabic drama and translated plays by Sa'dallah Wannous, 'Issam Mahfouz, and Jawad al-Assadi from Arabic into English. She is currently working on a book on Levantine drama, co-authored with Robert Myers, to be published by Brill.

**Dima Wannous** is a journalist and writer. She studied French literature and translation at the University of Damascus and the Sorbonne in Paris. She writes on cultural and political topics for a number of Arab and foreign newspapers and has also worked in media broadcast (radio and television). She has published a collection of short stories entitled *Details*, which were translated into German and English, and a novel called *Chair*. In 2009, she received the Beirut 39 prize for young writers.

**Edward Ziter** is an Associate Professor of Theater History and Chair of the Department of Drama at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. He is author of *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* and *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*. He has published articles in *Theatre Survey*, *Theatre Journal*, *TDR*, *Theatre Research International*, *The Wordsworth Circle*, and several anthologies.