

For Immediate Release



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Private library of Sa'dallah Wannous welcomed to new home at AUB

Opening a roundtable discussion to celebrate the donation of Sa'dallah Wannous' private library to AUB, his widow told a rapt audience about a conversation she had with him in the days before his death. At one point, he asked her what would be the destiny of their library.

"I assured him: 'Don't worry. I will take care of your library. I promise you it will be in a very beautiful place,'" recalled Fayza Wannous. "Today, on his 75th birthday, I offer him a very precious gift: a very beautiful place for his library."

The event on at the Issam Fares Institute Auditorium was held to recognize the generous gift of the Wannous family in donating his collection of around 4,500 books of modern literature, poetry, politics, philosophy, plays, and novels to the American University of Beirut.

Sa'dallah Wannous (1941-1997) was one of the most prominent Syrian playwrights and public intellectuals of his time, and one of the leading innovators of modern Arab drama. He was also an avid reader and book collector and now, 20 years after his death; this remarkable library has found a new home at AUB.

The event included a stimulating roundtable that began with Dr. Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, an AUB alumna, now at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. She called on AUB to not only hold the collection, but also to include it in the curriculum.

"Generations of students from Lebanon and the Arab region are graduating without knowing about these great literary figures," said Kassab. "If we don't know Sa'dallah Wannous and others, we are facing an intellectual void."

Later, in the Q&A period, Dr. Bilal Orfali of the Department of Arabic and Near Eastern Languages assured everyone that these works would be incorporated in the curricula at AUB.

The second panelist was Farouk Mardam-Bey, a contemporary of Wannous and himself a writer and publisher. He spoke about the years that Sa'dallah lived and studied in Paris during the 1960s and 1970s, where he learned about Western theater: not to imitate it, but in order to make a new, unique Arab theater.

Following this was the former playwright's daughter, who spoke briefly but eloquently about her father and his devotion to books.

"We had no white walls in our home, only shelves filled with books," remarked Dima Wannous. Although these walls made her feel a bit claustrophobic, "these books made him breath better," she said.

Preserving our cultural heritage

In her opening speech at the event, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), Dr. Nadia El Cheikh, spoke about the critical importance of bringing collections such as the Wannous library to AUB.

"Given the plunder and destruction of our region's historical record and heritage, the intensification of collaborations between these various departments and units is essential today more than ever," said Dean El Cheikh, calling on the University Libraries and the departments of FAS, "to have a strategic role in collecting, preserving, and publicizing our regional intellectual heritage."

The University Libraries, where the Wannous library is currently being catalogued and will be held, was represented by Dr. Mariette Atallah Abdel-Hay, Head of the Collection Development and Acquisitions Department. She spoke about the important work being done by the Libraries in seeking out such collections in order to preserve the cultural and intellectual heritage of this region and to make them available to students, educators, and researchers.

Speaking on behalf of the AUB Theater Initiative, Professor Robert Myers described the extensive work that has been done at AUB to bring the plays of Wannous to new and wider audiences, both locally and internationally, and with the active participation of AUB students.

The event was organized by the Department of English, the Department of Arabic and Near Eastern Languages, the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies, the Theater Initiative, and

the University Libraries. Chair of the English Department, Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, concluded the opening session with an eloquent summary of the importance of housing this collection at AUB.

“Having crossed the border into Lebanon from Syria as hidden refugees in a truck, together with other refugees (namely the books of Dr. Fouad Mohammed Fouad), Wannous’ books will hopefully embark on a new afterlife at AUB, where they are accessible to current and future generations of students,” said Dr. Mejcher-Atassi. “It is not that they, Wannous’ books, come alive at AUB; it is AUB who lives in them.”

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 130 programs leading to bachelor’s, master’s, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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