

**Sadallah Wannous: Towards an indigenous Arabic Epic theater:  
An applied study of *An Evening Entertainment* and *The Adventure of Slave Jaber's Head***

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**Abstract**

The leading Syrian dramatist, Sadallah Wannous (1941-1997), aimed at creating an original Arabic theater. He theorized about the theater of politicization, which has a progressive political content and is intended to instigate the masses to recognize their plight and take part in changing it. To do this, he used anti-realistic techniques that he borrowed from Brecht's epic theater and established a warm improvised dialogue between the stage and the auditorium. In order to create instantaneous connection with the local audience, the dramatist embraced Arabic history and literary traditions and maneuvered them in order to address contemporary Arabic issues. Eventually, the middle period of Wannous's production (1968-1978) is a breakthrough in Arabic theater in which Brechtian epic theater is adapted to Arabic themes and plotlines and is made organically connected to the longings and needs of contemporary Arab audience. The aim of this study is to provide a critique of Wannous's indebtedness to Brecht and to local Arabic tradition, on the one hand, and his own ingenuity in creating an indigenous Arabic theater, on the other. To do so, this article locates Wannous's dramatic contribution in the context of Arabic traditions and Brechtian theater and provides an applied study of two plays; *An Evening Entertainment for the Fifth of June* (1968) and *The Adventure of the Slave Jaber's Head* (1970). The study delves into Wannous's use of local theatrical devices such as the storyteller (Hakawati), and Karakoz and traditional and historical plot lines within an overall epic theatrical form. As a conclusion, this article demonstrates that Wannous's dramatic production in the middle period creatively fuses both Brechtian and traditional Arabic theatrical practices and comes out as a distinctly new Arabic theater.

*Key words:* Alienation, epic theater, indigenous Arabic epic theater, theater of politicization, Syrian drama, Wannous

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## Introduction

The dramatic production of Sadallah Wannous (1941-1997) comprises a significant contribution to modern Arabic theater. His plays reflect his belief that theatrical art is not merely a form of entertainment. Wannous believes the theater has a significant role in educating the masses and stirring them to revolutionary action against all forms of oppression. As the art of theater is not particularly indigenous to Arabic tradition, Wannous aimed consciously at staging performances that are organically connected to Arabic culture and identity. To do this, he evoked existing Arabic theatrical elements, used Middle Eastern literary heritage, and at the same time, he allowed himself to learn a great deal from Western theatrical traditions and experiments. The significance of his innovation lies in his ability to address contemporary Arabic issues by using traditional literary materials and adapting them to Bertolt Brecht's theatrical techniques. The result is a theater with distinct Arabic identity that moves from the "word" to "action" and aims at stirring the Arabic audience to effect a political change. Wannous is not alone in such a practice. He, together with a few other dramatists across the Arab world, realized that folk performance and popular plotlines are not enough to create an original theater. Being influenced by Brecht's theory, they created their own original theater using familiar native plot lines. At the same time, they wrote their own theoretical treatises about their own vision of a new Arabic theater. Wannous (1970) put forth his theory in *Guidelines for a New Arabic Theater*, Al-Ra'i (1968) theorized about the function of the theater in *Improvised Comedy in Egyptian Theater*, and Barshid (1985) envisioned a theory about festive theater in his book *the Limits of the Existing and the Possible in Festive Theater*. All of these three dramatists "theorized for the theatrical composition and called for unified works that combine content, performance and the relation between production and the audience" (Al-Mekhlef, 2000, p. 29). This study aims at providing a critique of Wannous's contribution to Arabic Theater in the middle period of his theatrical production (1968-1978). An analysis of his indebtedness to Brecht's epic theater and his own creativity in *Haflat Samar min Ajl Khamsa Huzeran [An Entertainment for the Fifth of June]* (1968) and *Moghamarat Ra's Al-Mamlouk Jaber [The Adventure of Slave Jaber's Head]* (1970) will form the core of this study. Wannous did not merely adapt Brechtian techniques to the Syrian stage, he combined Brechtian devices with traditional Arabic theatrical practices in order to produce a totally new theatrical experience. He embraced Arabic history and literary tradition and maneuvered the old texts in order to pass on his own revolutionary message which is relevant to contemporary issues. As a result, his theater in the middle period came out as original theatrical expression unprecedented in Syria and the whole Arab world.

### *The aim of Wannous's theater*

Wannous (1970) states that his theater is a response to "systematic oppressive regimes" (p. 107). His aim is to promote the intellectual growth of his audience; to raise awareness rather than edify with the use of clichéd slogans and aphorisms. His goal can be achieved by creating a "dialectical interaction between the stage and the auditorium" (p. 107). In his plays he does not "offer a ready-made awareness", but it is crucial for him to "criticize and analyze a prevailing consciousness which has been driving people to defeatism and submissiveness" (p. 109). He coins the term of the theater of politicization, which is intended to address the "common" people and politicize them by charging his plays with progressive political content. He hopes that the strata of the common people, that have been kept ignorant and marginalized by the plutocracy, will "one day become the champion of revolution and change" (pp. 90-91).

### Syrian Theater before Wannous

Traditional Arabic culture has some limited theatrical phenomena, but these never developed naturally into a full Western-style theatrical experience. The Syrian folk theatrical tradition can be listed mainly in two forms; shadow puppet theater and dramatic story telling (Nima, 1993, p. 3). The shadow puppet shows feature two famous characters; Karakos and Iwaz. Such performances, which go back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, were satires on political, historical and social issues. They edified “untutored audiences who were eager to see images and hear things they could easily grasp (Nima, 1993, p. 4). The comic element made it the most popular form of entertainment performed in cafes, public houses and social celebrations. On the other hand, dramatic story telling was also a very popular entertainment that was even more accessible to all social strata. A professional storyteller –Hakawati- used sit in cafes that spread all over Damascus. “Literary stylist, comical mime and local wit all rolled into one, the story-teller was a solo performer who... created his appeal through the extraordinary self-contained quality of his talent and ingenuity” (Nima, 1993, p. 7). Not only did he tell stories, but also animated parts of it by impersonating characters with his special movements and voice tones. The Hakawati always created the desired suspense and audience’s involvement. He would break the narration at an exciting point in order to collect dues and guarantee the presence of audience in the following night. The storyteller narrated a selection of stories from the existing literary heritage, most prominently *The One Thousand Nights and Night*. He endowed his characters with socially desirable values in an attempt to edify the young audience and keep the value system intact. With the introduction of TV entertainment, this dramatic practice has become part of past tradition, which is revived only in some cultural occasions.

Western-style theater was only imported to Arabic countries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by practitioners, such as the Lebanese Maroun Al-Naqqash (1817-1855). He adapted plays, such as Moliere’s *L’Avare*, from Italian and French sources, as well as tales from *A Thousand nights and One Night* into Arabic verse (Nima, 1993, p. 8). This tradition continued with Ahmad Abu Khaleel Al-Qabbani (1836-1902), who drew his stories from history and Arab folklore<sup>i</sup>. Al-Qabbani, at the time, was encouraged by the government but resisted by the religious authorities. Playwrights and theatrical performances were scarce. Gifted Syrian writers and actors were attracted to Egypt, where they found a more nourishing atmosphere for art and drama in the first half of the twentieth century. However, Syria witnessed more interest in this art in 1930, and Syrian theater became more distinguished after the Second World War. Plays written in the late 1940s and 1950s dealt mainly with “the problems from which the Syrian society was suffering” (Nima, 1993, p. 13). Such plays, together with European and Egyptian plays, were performed by amateur theater groups until the National Theater Troupe was founded in 1961. This ushered in a surge of theater in the 1960s. “During the next two decades the national Theater produced five or six plays a year” (Nima, 1993, p. 14). Wannous was most attracted to theatrical art as a means of reaching out to the masses. Due to the scarcity of a well-established theatrical tradition, he worked diligently on creating a ‘new’ Arabic theater that communicates efficiently with the ‘common’ people and raises awareness about the real needs of the nation.

### In search for theatrical form and subject matter

With his European and Egyptian theatrical education, Wannous fluctuates between being heavily influenced, in the early period (1961-1967), by existentialism, expressionism, and the absurd, to being heavily influenced by Brecht in the middle period (1967-1978), and finally finding his own

voice and theatrical form in his late drama (1990-1997). As the plays of his first period seem like an extension of Western theater, they were not successfully staged.<sup>ii</sup> The plays of the first period include *Life Forever* (1961), *Medusa Gazes in Life* (1963), *A Corpse on the Pavement* (1963), *The Gush of Blood* (1963), *The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses Seller* (1964), *The Locust* (1964), *The Unknown Messenger in Antigone's Funeral Ceremony* (1965), *The Glass Café* (1965), *The Pin Game* (1965), and *When Men Play* (1966). Aware that these are too elitist and westernized for the local audience, Wannous reaches out to his audience in the middle period by adding local flavor to his subject matters. The middle period of his theatrical production starts with his response to the defeat of Arabic countries in the 1967 war against Israel and ending with 1978 when, temporarily despairing, he stops writing for the theater for 12 years. The plays in this period are *An Evening Entertainment for the Fifth of June* (1968), *The King's Elephant* (1969), *The Adventure of Slave Jaber's Head* (1970), *A Soire with Abi Khalil Al-Qabbani* (1973), *The King is King* (1977), and *The Journey of Hanzalah from Unawareness to Awakening* (1978). The middle period is characterized by the dramatist's unrelenting attempt to stir the audience to action. However, in his late plays, the playwright mitigates the progressive task of his theater. The plays of this period aim less at effecting a revolution and more at raising awareness and propagating freedom. They include *The Rape* (1990), *Historical Miniatures* (1993), *The Epic of Mirage* (1995), *Miserable Dreams* (1994), *A Day of Our Time* (1993), *Rituals of Signs and Metamorphosis* (1994), and *Drunken Days* (1997).

The focus of this study is the middle period, when Wannous internalizes Brecht's theory of the theater, and finds it necessary to search within his local environment for theatrical forms and plot lines that can produce the communicative effect sought by Brecht (Wannous, 1970, p. 97). He discovers in traditional literature and folkloric expressions a potential resource for his drama. However, he realizes that such a practice is a land mine. He is aware of the "narcotic effect" of the plethora of folk literature adapted to public media, and feels exasperated that those but help the authorities spread "more ignorance and banality" (Wannous, 1970, p.96). The challenge in Wannous's case is to discover new ways to introduce familiar plotlines and at the same time stir his audience to think about its situation and take action towards more progress and freedom.

### **Brecht's influence on Wannous**

In the middle period of his dramatic production, Wannous was most drawn to the methods Brecht used in his 'epic theater' and found a possibility of borrowing a great deal of his formal structure to serve Wannous's purpose in politicizing his audience. Brecht's theory and practice (1898-1956) provided Wannous with a new way of viewing the function of theater. According to Brecht, theater should change the world rather than interpret it. "The audience in this view should not be made to feel emotions, they should be made to think" (Esslin, 1960, p.133) The object of epic theater is to 'examine' not 'just to stimulate' emotions (Brecht, 1978, p. 188). Brecht rejected Aristotelian empathy and catharsis of emotions. In his epic theater, he prevented empathy and encouraged, instead, the broad pleasures of a productive life- including the pleasures of learning and the passions of a committed, critical attitude. For Brecht, 'Reason and emotion can't be divided' (Peter, 1994, p.188).

With such a revolutionary function, Brecht's theater used a set of techniques aiming at breaking the illusion of reality and rejecting the Aristotelian catharsis of feelings. Instead, his

“epic theater” awakens the observers and instigates them to think rationally rather than being emotionally involved. Brecht’s instruction is clear: the theatre must do its best to destroy in the bud any illusion of reality, which will continuously, and mischievously, tend to arise (Esslin, 1960, P.133). In order to attain this effect, Brecht used the narrator who relates events in the past. According to Brecht, epic theater “turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action and forces him to take decisions” (Peter, 1960,p.189). The narrator reminds the spectators that they are not witnessing real events. Rather, they are witnessing an account of events that happened a long time ago. They are to sit back, relax, and reflect on the lessons to be learned from those events of long ago (Esslin, 1960, p.134). In this, Brecht gave up more and more of the methods of stage realism in favor of epic theater methods. “He was using non-naturalistic techniques for naturalistic ends”(Bentley.1946, p.271). The fourth wall of the proscenium-arch theater was broken, and the actors had direct communication with the audience. Such a break of the illusion of reality created an alienation effect (*Verfremdung*), which means “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them. The direct and indirect use of a narrator, the conspicuous use of songs, masks, placards, and images set in a montage narrative sequence would help maintain this level of wonder and alert self-criticism” (Thomson, 1994, p. 191).

The Alienation effect and breaking of the theatrical illusion of reality were embraced wholeheartedly by Wannous in the middle period plays, as these techniques served his artistic needs and ideological mission. Propagating socialist ideology, epic theater was well received by Arab audiences. Such ideology, at the time, was thought of as a panacea for backwardness and dependency. Wannous, as a practitioner of this form, found it a fitting method to raise the awareness of his audience and to instigate a revolutionary change. However, despite his ardent enthusiasm towards Brecht’s dramatic theory, Wannous realized that it was not viable to present Brechtian plays in a local Damascene environment without a totally new configuration (Wannous, 1970, p. 96). Brecht had struggled against the fixed European theatrical forms. He used special techniques in order to break the European audience’s expectation. Whereas, according to Wannous, Arabic audiences are already free from the European theatrical heritage that Brecht rebelled against. Arabic theater has already imported some traditional theatrical forms that allow for breaking the illusion of reality. Thus practicing epic theater was not a matter of straightforward borrowing from Brecht. It required a complex use of the Brechtian devices on the one hand and the traditional forms of Arabic theater on the other, such as Hakawati, rababa singer, and Karakkouz, who can create instantaneous connection and interaction with the audience. Thus Wannous ‘s success lies in culturing Brechtian theatrical techniques in an Arabic milieu.

### **Wannous’s practice: innovation and indebtedness**

Wannous was warned by his French friend, the writer and dramatist Jean Genet, that if he studied, translated, and borrowed from Western knowledge and art, he would be too fascinated, would imitate them in his writing, and eventually would melt in its stream. (Azzam, 2003, p. 110). Genet advised Wannousto reject the Western culture, and especially to shy away from Marxist writers including Brecht (Azzam, 2003,p. 111). However, Wannous eventually digested European theater, especially Brecht’s theory, and found his own voice and the techniques that best communicate his political messages. In his theoretical reasoning, he accounts for his own borrowing from Western theater: “We adapt and prepare [European plays], because we are

looking for our own Arabic vision that corresponds with our reality, or because we are trying to make our theatrical action contemporary and effective here and now” (Wannous, 1970,p.71).It is Bertolt Brecht that fascinated Wannous the most. Nevertheless, the latter found it very difficult to perform Brecht’s plays unaltered in a local environment such as Damascus (Wannous, 1970, p. 96). As Brecht used techniques and “stylistic signifiers” that can be well received and understood by Western audience, Wannous found it imperative to adjust Brecht’s techniques in order to reach out to his own local audience. Lacking a rich theatrical tradition in his Arabic culture, Wannous was self-compelled to create a new theater that resonates with his audience’s longings and needs. He took in the advice given to him by the French director, Jean Mari Serau, who instructed him to start using every folk tale and popular traditions:

Islamic history always had class struggle, even if it was discreet.Popular wisdom always expressed itself in tricks and anecdotes. You have a tradition that is rich in criticism. It is a grave mistake to build your theaters after European models. You yourselves can help theater get out of the hardened forms in Europe. Here, the heavy theatrical tradition become a burden that limits our movement and shackles our ability to think in original ways. But there, where the atmosphere is new, there will be a huge opportunity to have a free spontaneous start full of the warmth of social celebration (Azzam 2003, p. 112).

Ironically, Wannous finds the lack of theatrical tradition in the Arab world as a privilege. Arab audiences are more used to narrative performances and lively interaction between the audience and the Hakawati in public coffee shops. Compared to European audience, who has been well trained to the illusion of reality in the proscenium arch theater, Arab audiences are freer from the theatrical traditions that may dictate certain expectations and responses. The breaking of theatrical illusion, that Brecht worked hard to achieve in Western auditorium, becomes easily possible with Arabic audiences who are less used to make-believe techniques. The plays of the middle period exemplify Wannous’s successful adaptation of Brechtian techniques as well as the use of local themes and subject matter. In the span of this paper, only two plays will be analyzed,*An Evening Entertainment for the Fifth of June* and *The adventure of the Slave Jaber’s head*.

### ***An Evening Entertainment for the Fifth of June (1968)***

The defeat of Arab countries in June 1967 war against Israel and the loss of land and dignity were the main factors that changed Wannous’s view of the function of theater. Such a defeat was the main motivation for the playwright to abandon the intellectual theater of his first period, to address the masses directly, and to have them involved in their countries’ political decisions. In *An Evening Entertainment for the Fifth of June*(1968), Wannous initiated the practice of breaking the fourth wall in a more literal way than Brecht. His actors sit in the auditorium disguised as audience providing a running commentary against the practices of the director. Thus, a democratic space is created; the audience gets involved in the dialogue and the commentary against the staged action. The message of the play condemns the corruption of Arabic governments that led to the defeat in the 1967 war, and the observers become active participants in delivering this message. This introduced a whole new approach to theater.

The play opens on a lit empty stage with no curtain. The director appears flustered and regretfully announces that the performance will be cancelled. He blames the playwright, Abdul Ghani Al-Shaer, for this embarrassing dilemma. As he starts to discuss the dilemma with the actor who impersonates the playwright, the real Abdul Ghani Al-Shaer emerges from among the audience and complains about this misrepresentation. This is the first of a series of events when the fourth wall is broken and the stage merges with the auditorium. The director had planned, with the script writer, to stage a battle featuring stereotypes of a heroic Arabic soldier and a cowardly Israeli soldier. Such a performance would have conformed to the formal media that aimed at brain washing the audience. However, this time, the script writer refuses to stage this script, thus creating an empty stage and a confounded director who plans to fill the performance time with folk songs and dance. The real Abdul Ghani Al-Shaer rises from among the audience and gets involved in a long discussion with the director. Thus, he breaks further any illusion of reality that may arise with the director staging his version of the story. The breaking of the fourth wall is enhanced further by the audience (actors seated in the auditorium) commenting on the staged events and complaining that their intelligence is insulted as they are exposed to such brainwashing propaganda. While the director describes his projects, actors impersonate characters and mime the narrated events. The setting of the unperformed play would have been a Syrian village in Golan Height, which was annexed to Israel upon the defeat. During the director's narration of the script, actors appear on the stage impersonating peasants who divide themselves into two groups. Some of them prefer evacuation, while others opt to stay and defend their land with whatever primitive weaponry they have. They even go to an extreme of slaughtering their families in order not to be rendered cowardly by their fear for their wives and children. The narration describes the atrocities of war; the Napalm-burnt bodies and destroyed houses. As the director prepares for a variety-theater entertainment in order to fill in the program time, a group of peasants rise from among the audience (again, actors seated in the auditorium) and share their own testimony complaining about the circumstances that made them flee their villages. Having wished to defend their land and keep their dignity, they were impeded by the government and made helpless. Thus, they stage a discussion whereby they, bitterly, criticize the government that facilitated the withdrawal and defeat. They draw a comparison between the Vietnamese peasants under the US raids, on the one hand, and the Syrian peasants, on the other. They hail the ability of the Vietnamese to retain their dignity, and lament the homelessness and the alienation of the displaced Syrians who have evacuated their villages in the Golan Heights. The peasants express their nostalgia and utmost pain for having lost their land. The blaming testimonies of the 'observers' are punctuated by the insulting statements of the pro-government director condemning them as conspirators. The play ends with a mass incarceration of the script writer, the peasants and all the observers who exercised freedom of speech. The multiple events where the fourth wall is broken, culminating in the mass incarceration of the audience, are extremely compelling and thought provoking. Clearly, the play criticizes the autocracy and the corruption of Arabic governments and holds them responsible for the defeat. The prolonged discussions clarify the theme of the play: Arab citizens are downtrodden. They cannot defend their homeland, mainly because they are impoverished and deprived of their dignity, freedom and means of living. Thus it is vital that the local autocracy be removed before dealing with external threat. The multiple alienation effects that accompany the breaking of the fourth wall instigate the audience to rebel against the defeatism and autocracy of government policies.

The dramatization of such a message, in turn, is quite innovatory. The influx of the peasant-observers leaving the auditorium and invading the stage is reminiscent of an incident at Sorbonne University that left a long-term effect on Wannous. Theater students at Sorbonne had rebelled against conventional theater, occupied the stage, and started up a long discussion about the function of the theater. Wannous, here, is hopeful to create a similar democratic space in which the audience is implicated and stirred into action. The democratic dialogue begins: The peasants are angry and refuse to be lulled by musical entertainment. They order the director to remain silent, so they will have a chance to discuss and analyze the reason of the defeat in the 1967 war and the loss of land. This play marks Wannous's search for a new functionality of the theater. Aiming at politicizing the masses and enticing them to revolt, he breaks the fourth wall and seats his actors in the auditorium. He aims at making theater "a process of continuous interaction between the stage and the audience. It learns from the audience and teaches it. It takes and give in a dialectical movement that daily enriches its content and broadens its limits" (Wannous, 1970, p. 27). The dramatist hopes that this way will change the role of the passive observer into an active participant. Through this dialectical presentation, the audience will find it viable to object, to discuss and to have a say in what is presented on the stage. This is an innovatory form that merited a great deal of warm reception among academic critics. However, commenting on this play, Wannous claims that "I am neither searching for a technique nor innovation in form" (Wannous, 1970, p. 238). He asserts that the most important issue for him while writing is not the artistic value for itself but the progressive message whereby he will be able to create "the word-action" theater in which the word will lead to revolutionary action. For him, the theatrical form is integral part of the content, a means to achieve the end which is the dream of a revolution and the action of revolt at the same time (Wannous, 1970, p. 239).

When this play was performed after a prolonged period of censorship, Wannous was severely disappointed that the performance ended, not in a political protest, but only in applause. The audience exchanged statements of admiration on the way out. Once the breeze of air, in Damascus streets, cooled them, they were dispersed and everything was forgotten. No public protest followed the performance as Wannous had wished and planned. However, the play's volatile potential was immediately perceived by the Syrian intelligence, which censored the play for a long time<sup>iii</sup>. Even though Wannous was frustrated with the ability of his theater to affect a change, his play is successful in being one step in a long way of revolutionary art.

His following step was to create a more revolutionary progressive attitude within the masses. He imagines a new theatrical form that allows the audience to have a dialectical inner dialogue and grow intellectually (Wannous, 1970, p. 99). His following plays, such as *The King's Elephant* (1969), *A Soiree with Abi Khalil Al-Qabani* (1973), *The Adventure of the Slave Jaber's Head* (1970), and *The King is King* (1977) are, not only great artistic achievements, but, most importantly, achieve effectively the playwright's politicizing aim. His theater of politicization in this period probes the potentials of the stage to communicate dialectically with the auditorium. In his plays after 1968, Wannous practices Brecht's concept of destroying the illusion of reality. However, to achieve his end, he makes use of indigenous Arabic theatrical devices such as Hakawati, the rural Rababa singer, Karakoz, and elements of historical and traditional plotlines. Doing so, he is able to create a direct and instantaneous connection with his local audience, and, at the same time, appeal to its rationality rather than emotions. It is this very combination, that makes Wannous's drama unprecedented in the history of Arabic theater.

***The Adventures of the Slave Jaer's Head(1970)***

In *The Adventure of Slave Jaber's Head*, the playwright aims at mobilizing the masses through a historical camouflage, so that he can evade the censor. He delves into history books about the decline of Abbasid dynasty, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in order to borrow a story that has a contemporary relevance. This is the first play in which he makes full use of Serault's advice to create a theater with traditional Arabic flavor. Wannous's aim is to write a historical play that deals with the current situation. In a note to the director and the performers, he states that "I am looking for a live performance of a story that is relevant to all of us"(235). He hopes the audience will enjoy the performance, be edified by it and inspired to contemplate its destiny(235). Similar to Brecht, Wannous aims, in this play, to awaken the observers and instigate them to think about their responsibility towards a nation. To do so, he chooses a well-known historical anecdote from Al-Abbaside period, and has it narrated by Al-Hakawati. Narration, an epic theater technique, serves as a medium to create a familiar atmosphere and gives the play a distinct local flavor. At the same time, it helps in distancing the audience from any empathy, and makes them prioritize head over heart. By using a well-known story from Arab history, Wannous is able to achieve the Brechtian effect, where audience, already familiar with the narrative, is less emotionally involved with the personal experience and destiny of Jaber, and is able to analyze the implication of the events on the destiny of the whole nation.

The historical incident that the Hakawati's tale revolves around is the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 by the Mongol leader Hulagu Khan. The plot tells about the disagreement between the Caliph of Abbasid Empire and his Vizier (equivalent to the prime minister). In order to settle the conflict, the Vizier decides to seek support from the Caliph's enemy, the King of Persia, even though he is fully aware that the invading Persian army will kill, not only the Caliph and destroy his palace, but will also massacre civilians and destroy the whole city of Baghdad. However as long as the invading army protects the Vizier's interests and enables him to ascend the throne, he does not care about the ensuing losses. The playwright chooses to replace the historical foreign powers of the Mongols by the Persians. Such a replacement is particularly relevant to contemporary Syria, as Iran has been the closest ally to the Assad regime in the past four decades. It seems that Wannous's vision, in 1970, was prophetic, as more recently, since 2011, the Syrian president, Bashar Al-Assad has used Iran and Russia in order to intervene in Syria and instill his control over the dissenters. As the Vizier is besieged by the Caliph's forces, he cannot send a letter to the king of Persia. A smart active slave, called Jaber, comes up with an idea to smuggle the letter out of the city borders. In return, he demands the status of a free man, plenty of money, and the permission to get married to Zomorrod, the Lady's maid. The opportunistic slave offers his head to be shaven, the letter to be tattooed on his scalp, to wait in a dark room until his hair grows long enough to cover the message, and then he can leave the city safely. Passing the rigorous inspection of the Caliph's guards at the city gate, Jaber successfully delivers the letter to the king of Persia, but alas, he is not aware that this letter contains an additional instruction ordering the king of Persia to take Jaber's life. Consequently, Jaber is beheaded; his head is sent back to Baghdad and handed to Zomorrod, who laments the loss of her sweetheart. Her wails coincide with the invasion of Baghdad and the end of Abbasid dynasty.

The characterization of the protagonist Jaber is controversial. He is an empathetic figure that commands the admiration of the coffee shop clients as well as the audience. However, he is

selfish and apathetic about the well fare of his city. His acts bring about the total destruction of Baghdad. The ambivalence that Jaber's personality and action give rise to is part of the dialectical nature of the play. In an interview, Wannous explains his intention: "It was always important in my plays to teach my audience through presenting a negative example to them. I take a vice and then magnify its consequence. In that way, I present a practical lesson in my plays"(Wannous, 1970. p. 120). Wannous cleverly maneuvers the audience's response with the conflicting feelings of empathy and condemnation, thus he can bring his political message home. Jaber's ingenuity and courage in inventing the method to smuggle the letter, his youth, and the validity of his quest for freedom strike chords with many contemporary audiences. In fact, he represents many individual entrepreneurs who choose to be partners with the autocratic governments, acquire power and wealth and show disregard for the plight of the majority. Wannous 's play would have failed short of its aim if it ended in catharsis; with the death of a potentially empathetic hero and the wailing of his beloved Zomorrod. This is a risk that the play closely escapes. Wannous manages to control the audience's responses by several devices. He breaks the theatrical illusion of reality by having the café clients and the waiter run a continuous parallel commentary, thus keeping audience distant from and critical of Jaber's action. Although Jaber commands the admiration of the café customers with his vitality and pragmatism, no awe or pity are aroused by his beheading. This falls in line with Brecht's and Wannous's dislike of Aristotelian theater. The intention, here, is to stop at the root any emotional involvement and to replace it, instead, with analytical thinking. Zomorrod's wailing when she receives Jaber's head is not conducive to catharsis as it is distinctly contrasted by the background noises of the invasion of Baghdad by the Persian king and the utter defeat of a whole empire. This effect recalls the chopping of the woods in Chekhov's(1903)*Cherry Orchard*. At this point, the audience is reminded of Jaber's treason of his homeland and fellow countrymen, which overshadows any potential sympathy with Jaber's misfortune. After the heart-rending wail of Zomorrod, the amputated head is placed on the lap of the Hakawati, who represents the sound of judicious history. In this way, the action and feelings shift to the forefront of the café setting. Consequently, the audience's response changes from pathos to reasoning and logic. It is the Hakawati, who, from the beginning, resists the romantic tendency of the clients and is insistent on edifying them through his historical tales. The play within the play does not end on the tragic death of Jaber, but with the actors quitting their character parts and acting as chorus. The exhortation that the chorus chants warns the observers against their own indifference and reminds them of the absolute need to take responsibility for the whole nation. When the clients of the coffee shop are disgruntled with such an ending and insist on listening to a happy story, the following day, about the victories of Bybars, the Hakawati is unsure and says "it all depends on you". The waiter looks directly at the audience and says "You also, good night, till tomorrow" (p. 321). This meta-dramatic statement transfers the sense of responsibility from the stage to the auditorium and implicates the audience. The juxtaposition of contrasting events and moods gives rise to dialectical dramatization of the tragedy of Jaber and Zomorrod, on the one hand, and the tragedy of the destroyed city on the other. It is out of this dialectical presentation that the political lesson of the play unfolds. It is clear, at the end, that the play points the audience towards a consideration of the nation's wellbeing. Such continuous dynamics of breaking the illusion of reality and alienating the audience yield, successfully, the required Brechtian thought provoking effect.

The need for good citizenship and accountability of the individual is dramatized, again, in a subplot, in the bakery scene, where the public of Baghdad are indifferent to the political conflict between the Caliph and the Vizier. Although such an event refers to the remote past, but the message is closely relevant to the contemporary Syria, that Wannous knew, where the masses were excluded from the political decision. Although, on the face of it, both the Vizier and Jaber are condemned for seeking their own individual gains and betraying the whole city, they are not the only ones responsible for the disaster. The people's lack of interest in political matters is revealed to be a by-product and contributing factor of this exclusionary rule. The people are, primarily, preoccupied by their daily struggle for existence (Al-'Anezi, 2006, p. 130). Once they sense the approach of a political crisis, they swarm the bakeries to stock up on bread, hide at home and refrain from expressing their views, lest they become persecuted. Wannous, here, is criticizing the people's lack of involvement, and is enticing them to take a proactive role in saving their country. The choral figures representing the general public of Baghdad explain the secret behind the peace and security; They have learned to "obey", to accept subjugation from the "hangman's ropes embroidered with nails", the "guards' blades", and the "closed cells" (Wannous, 1970, p. 242). Consequently, the people of Baghdad prefer "safety and security". "We bleed day and night in search for daily bread" (Wannous, 1970, p. 243). In the bakery scene, people are mainly concerned about procuring bread, in order to hide at home during the political turmoil. They are too frightened to discuss the nature of the conflict, and one of them is careful to change the topic as an armed guard overhears him. Due to consistent suppression, they are mind-controlled by the authorities. Consequently, they have internalized such exclusion: "Better to be blind among our people than to be blinded by the darkness of the cell" (Wannous, 1970, p.258). The bread buyers are unanimous in their position. They agree on a passive collective attitude, which is clear in their use of proverbs: "he who marries our mother, we call him our uncle" and "Let the clay break itself" (Wannous, 1970, p. 261). Such popular modern Syrian proverbs are particularly relevant in referring to the present status quo in Syria where many people have internalized and accepted their political marginalization. Modern day audience, who use these proverbs on daily basis, will recognize that they are implicated by this reference. The criticism of the complacent attitude of the public runs through the whole play. Such relevance is a very successful use of Brecht's alienation effect (*verfremdung*), as it distances the audience from mere entertainment with remote events, and makes them confront their own perception of their political role. Only the fourth man, - the playwright's mouthpiece- who has served some time in political jail, can see the complete picture. He tries to alarm them to the fact that their passive attitude will not guarantee safety: "They are fighting over our heads. Your miserable heads will receive the hardest blows. We are surrendering our heads to executioners, the worst kind of executioners" (Wannous, 1970, p. 261). However, his words, which call for political awareness and protest, are sadly met by unanimous rejection by the bread buyers, who form two choral groups calling for non- involvement. He is even shunned by both groups on the basis that he is a trouble seeker. The bread buyers step out of their roles and act as choral figures. The departure of the actor from the character role is an anti-naturalistic technique that helps create another alienation effect (*Verfremdung*), through which the audience are able to recognize familiar attitudes of political disinterestedness. The two groups, arguing for safety and non-participation, overpower the visionary fourth man and coerce him into conforming to their attitude. This situation resonates with contemporary audience's own fear of the totalitarian authority. This scene, with its alienating effects, animates the idea of freedom and democracy, and sets it as an intellectual background for the slave Jaber's story. Thus, dialectical reasoning is

allowed to run simultaneously in the auditorium. On the one hand, Jaber isa sympathetic slave who is entitled to his personal freedom. While, on the other hand, he is seen as a traitor who falls short of being accountable for the well fare of the people. The need for democracy theme, which is dramatized in the bakery scene, informs the response of the audience towards Jaber's two-fold case.

The café setting, in which Jaber's story is narrated and acted out, is functional in serving the purpose of Wannous's progressive theater. The traditional character of Al- Hakawati, as a narrator of stories, was a main stay in Damascus cafes and a main source of dramatic entertainment in Arabic speaking countries before the modern broadcast media was introduced. He would choose a spot in the open air or a café and would recite tales from the great saga of Arab lore, often accompanied by musical instrument. The main plot of treachery is a play within a play performed intermittently with the Hakawati's narration. Any illusion of reality would be broken as the actors bring in their basic stage props and act out scenes while the Hakawati breaks into silence. Thought provoking effect is made possible, as the actors do not totally impersonate the characters. The moral is not to be derived simply by the plot itself but also by the meta-dramatic interaction between the actors and the clients of the café. The setting of the café is very significant in creating an interactive atmosphere and communicating the moral. Borrowing from Brecht, Wannous's stage "approximated the lecture hall, to which audiences come in the expectation that they will be informed, and also the circus arena, where an audience, without identification or illusion, watches performers exhibit their special skills. (Esslin, 1960, p. 135). The clients of the café refuse to listen to the important news on the radio, as they resist having a "heart ache". Instead, they all choose to listen to a popular song "This is Love" by the famous singer Om Kalthoum. They insist on having the Hakawati tell the story of the victories of Zaher Bybars, who was a slave that defeated the Mongols and ascended the throne after killing the sovereign. The clients representing the modern day audience, are living in denial. They are frustrated with the "era of turbulence and chaos that they are living in and would like to be entertained with the romantic wish fulfilling notion of the "right defeating wrong" and the "justice beating oppression" (Wannous, 1970, p. 240). ). The coffee shop setting allows for breaking the illusion of reality as the Hakawati tells his contemporary audience, who are the café customers and the auditorium audience at the same time, that he is narrating a story from the decadent history of the Arab Abbaside Empire. He argues that "such stories are necessary" (Wannous, 1970, p. 240) and persuades his audience that this is not a time of victory thus they have to be edified about the stories of defeat before they are narcotized by the stories of the victories of Zaher Bybars. In a note to the director and performers, the playwright explained that the "coffee shop is not only a setting. It is the whole theater; the stage and the auditorium combined" (234). It creates "intimacy among the audience and allows for a spontaneous performance with a moral" (234). Clearly, the café setting provides the appropriate Brechtian lecture hall atmosphere that Wannous uses to put forth his progressive message.

The response of the audience towards the theme is manipulated by the use of Brechtian dialectics. In this background of terrorizing authority and defeated public, there arises two figures with opposing attitudes. The binary oppositions of the two foils, Jaber and Mansour, lead to dialectical reasoning. On the one hand, the protagonist is Slave Jaber, 25 years, ambitious, clever and energetic. He is adamant at changing his slavish lot by making the best of the conflict between the state leaders. He will do what it takes to gain high status regardless of the welfare of

the city. Despite his admirable qualities, he is an opportunist that justifies his immorality with a pragmatic argument. "What is important is to be inclined towards the winner in the right time" (247). On the other hand, his foil is the minor character, Slave Mansour, who is more mature and cares primarily about the safety of the people. Such contrast creates a dialectical rationalization in the auditorium, very similar to Brecht's practice in the *Caucasian Chalk circle* with the contrastive characters of the lady and the maid. It is significant that the conscientious Mansour does not lead the action but rather criticizes Jaber's opportunism and encourages free thinking. He realizes that this conflict will wreak havoc with the inhabitants of Baghdad. "If the conflict ever ignites fire, the subjects will be the coal to feed it." (247). It is also noteworthy that the clients of the coffee shop, representing modern audience, empathize with the self-seeking slave: "he is street-wise" (247). The same actor that acts Mansour appears again, in the bakery scene, as man no. 4, expressing a similar trend of caring for the public good and insisting on being in the know about the nature of the political crisis: "Yes you are right. I fear them just like you and I felt that my heart was about to stop beating. But are we going to remain blind to the truth, not knowing where the events are taking us?" (p. 258). The two foils, Jaber and Mansour, including the fourth man, enact the binary oppositions of selfish individuality and social responsibility. It is such a contrast that invites the audience to reason dialectically. The clients in the coffee shop, who are the observers of the play within the play, recognize the actor playing Man no. 4 being the same as the actor playing Mansour, and that both of them have similar tendency towards freedom from oppression. They complain again that he is an instigator of protest: "Do not carry the ladder sideways" (259). At this point the actor in the play within the play stops acting his part and addresses the client directly: "Only if I could. This is an obsession. if it gets in your head, it is very difficult to remove it" (259). This "obsession" signifies the craving for democracy, an inclination towards more involvement in the political arena, towards having a voice. This situation functions dialectically on multiple levels. On the one hand, the actor does not totally impersonate the character. He goes in and out of the character easily, thus any identification with the character is suspended, and replaced by critical awareness of the intellectual stance that the character represents. The breaking of the fourth wall helps create a Brechtian alienation effect that helps the audience realize that its own political indifference will lead to the destruction of the country. With such dialectical dynamics, any denigration of the historical Baghdadi inhabitants is a wake-up call for the modern audience. For example, the Vizir's disparaging remark about the insignificance of the masses-"The people? Who cares about the people. They do not pose any threats. It is enough to wag the baton, for them to be erased and to be swallowed by the darkness of their own homes." (272)- can now be understood to belittle the contemporary Arab audience and is hoped to start a revolution against such oligarchy.

The core of the political message is communicated again in a lecture form. As the characters strip out of their roles and chorally chant in the epilogue, they break the fourth wall and directly address the clients of the café as well as the audience in the auditorium.

Group: From the deep night of Baghdad we speak to you. From the night of woe, death and corpses we speak to you. You say we do not care, whoever marries our mother we call our uncle. No one can deter you. Each is entitled to an opinion. ....

But if you cast an eye one day and found yourselves strangers in your own homes. If you are bitten by famine and became homeless,

Zomorrod: If heads rolled and death received you on the door step of a bleak morning

Group: When a heavy night full of sorrows befalls, do not forget that one day you said "We do not care; whoever marries our mother we call our uncle.

From the deep night of Baghdad, we speak to you" (319-320)

This straightforward didactic message is made more poignant by the Brechtian use of songs and stylized acting.

What testifies to the success of Wannous's adaptation of Brechtian 'epic theater' techniques is the fact that the play was censored, despite its authentic historicity. Its contemporary reference and the politicizing power were clear to authorities. The play continued to be unjustly neglected by the authorities and remained unperformed in Syrian theaters until 1984, when it was produced by Jawad Al-Asadi, a young Iraqi director (Al-'Anezi, 2006, p. 130). Even then, it was not allowed to be performed in an unofficial venue, ie. in a café as the playwright had originally intended.<sup>iv</sup>

The censorship that was enforced in the pre-Assad years continued on in the 1970s as the country was under martial law. Wannous attempted to produce this play in 1971 and aimed at directing it himself, His main reason was that he did not want the audience to misinterpret it. He also did not wish to have another person harmed, in case censorship was imposed and cross examination was enforced. All was ready in that day of the dress rehearsal in October 1971 when a government official attended, frowned and decided that the play was inappropriate. Wannous was eventually summoned for investigation (Al-'Anezi. 2006. p .132). Although multiple cases of censorship points primarily to the lack of democracy in Syria, but, more importantly, it stresses the fact that this is an excellent testimony for the play's strong potential in raising awareness among the masses and stirring them to action. Wannous's theater thus is a whole new experience that works effectively in stirring the audience to think. To sum up his creativity, it is fair to reiterate that Wannous did not merely appropriate Brecht's texts. Although he greatly admired his dramaturgy and ideology, he insisted on "separating Brecht's theatrical theory and his texts" (Wannous. 1970. p. 98). His innovation was to find indigenous cultural components that enabled him to practice Brecht's theory and implant it in a new environment that has its unique Arabic history and culture.

## Conclusion

The "epic theater" techniques that Wannous adapts to the Syrian stage accomplished the artistic and didactic end that the playwright sets out to realize. Such an adaptation was an artistic response to the defeat in June 5<sup>th</sup> war, as Wannous felt the prompt need to find a new theatrical form to deal with the contemporary post-war issues, and to politicize the masses. The middle period plays, including both plays studied herein, use local themes and historical episodes charged with contemporary reference in order to communicate his politicizing intentions. These plays take on the form of a variety theater, which enable the playwright to avoid the inflexible forms of traditional European theater. The Brechtian techniques that Wannous uses are by no means a mere reproduction of Brechtian plays. Although Wannous excelled in practicing the devices of epic theater such as the historical narration, the breaking of the fourth wall and the alienation effect, his plays can well be considered as a new original Arabic theater that deeply relates to the modern local audience. Such theater, as Wannous had envisioned in his preface (1970, p. 235), adequately entertain the observers and push them to contemplate their own destiny.

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<sup>i</sup>Other dramatists include Iskandar Azar (1855-1919), Adeib Isshaq (1856-1885), Abou Hadi Al-Wafa'ay (1842-1909), Muhammad Al-Shalabi (1867-1916), Saleem Anjouri (1856-1936), Toma Ayoub (1861-1991). Two clubs in Damascus staged theatrical performance in 1930s. These are the Art Club and the Music and Performing club.

<sup>ii</sup>The only exception is *The Tragedy of the Poor Molasses seller*, (Al-Haj, 2003, p. 119), as it is relevant to the suffering of people under a police state.

<sup>iii</sup>It was only allowed to be staged after the coup administered by Hafez Al-Assad in 1970. The factors that lead to the defeat were then ascribed to the previous regime.

<sup>iv</sup>It is also noteworthy that the ban was lifted in 1973 once, and the play was chosen as the official entry for a cultural exchange program between Syria and the German Democratic Republic. The main aim apparently was to demonstrate to Western socialists that Syria enjoyed a good margin of democracy and that it was a liberal country that does not gag dissenters.