

ARAB THEATRE AND SYRIAN FOLK CULTURE
COMMENTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SYRIAN
DRAMATIC ART AND THE PRESENT-DAY PUBLIC

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During our research, started in 1983, into the modern theatre in Syria¹, a few facts emerged concerning Syrian theatrical literature in its own right and in comparison to similar experiences in other Arab countries. We therefore decided it would be possible to formulate some ideas on today's Syrian theatrical experience, by analyzing the works of some contemporary writers² and by studying the old popular theatre forms³, and then comparing our conclusions to those of modern Arab critics⁴, helped by direct talks with the various playwrights⁵.

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² Very useful in the field: F. Bulbul, "al-Adab al-masraḥī fi Sūriyya", *al-Ḥayāt al-masraḥiyya*, 3 (1978), pp. 47-56; "Murād as-Sibā'ī", 4-5 (1978), pp. 4-16; "al-Adab al-masraḥī fi Sūriyya: 1950-1967", 6 (1979), pp. 22-36; "Walīd Ihlāsī", 7-8 (1979), pp. 5-14; "Ḥasib Kayālī", 9 (1979), pp. 4-13; "Alī 'Uqla 'Ursān", 13 (1980), pp. 53-66; "Riyād 'Iṣmat", 17-18 (1981), pp. 31-44; N. M. Muḥammad, "Masraḥ Farḥān Bulbul", 19-20 (1982), pp. 12-21; "al-Hallāḡ", 20-27 (1986), pp. 46-66.

³ A partial account of our study in this sector, with a pertinent bibliography, can be found in R. Dorigo Ceccato, "Il teatro d'ombre a Damasco", *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 2, 1984, p. 127-153.

⁴ See 'Adnān ibn Durayl, *al-Adab al-masraḥī fi Sūriyya*, Damascus, s.d.; *al-Masraḥ as-sūrī*, Damascus 1971; Muḥyi d-Dīn aṣ-Ṣubḥī, *al-Adab wa-l-mawqif al-qawmī: al-masraḥ as-sūrī fi s-sittināt*, Damascus 1976; Naṣr ad-Dīn al-Baḥra, *Aḥādīṯ wa-taḡārib masraḥiyya*, Damascus 1977; 'Adil Abū Ṣanab, *Bawākī at-ta'līf al-masraḥī fi Sūriyya*, Damascus 1978; 'Abdallāh Abū Hīf, *at-Ta'sīs: maqālāt fi l-masraḥ as-sūrī*, Damascus 1979; 'Alī 'Uqla 'Ursān, *az-Zawāhir al-masraḥiyya 'inda l-'arab*, Damascus 1981; Ġān al-Kasān, *al-Adab al-masraḥī fi Sūriyya: 1955-1980*, Damascus 1983; Waṣfī al-Mālih, *Tārīḫ al-masraḥ as-sūrī*, Damascus 1984; "al-Ḥaraka al-masraḥiyya fi Sūriyya", in *al-Masraḥ al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir fi mu-wāḡahat al-ḥayāt*, Damascus 1984, pp. 9-108.

⁵ During several stays in Syria, since 1982 till today.

Lately, however, we have been conscious of considerable changes in the Syrian intellectual world, above all in the theatre, and we felt the necessity for an immediate review⁶. In fact, during our stay in Damascus in September 1987, famous playwrights we had been studying for some time were decidedly different compared to when we started our research. They showed a definite inclination for "change", either in their actual genre or in the content of their theatrical works.

We would like to present here a few conclusions derived from our meetings with some of these authors, in particular with Sa'dallāh Wan-nūs, Mamdūh 'Udwān and 'Alī 'Uqla 'Ursān⁷. Each one, through his own individual sensitivity and personal experience, described to us in a different way his feeling of intellectual apprehension; in addition, they had different ideas on the possible cause and highlighted different aspects.

A few basic problems emerged amongst the possible reasons which could have impelled these writers to abandon their previous type of activity. The first consists of the difficult rapport with the audience, who is the direct interlocutor of the theatrical man but not always in harmony with him. The second is determined by the role that dramatic art plays in Syrian society, which does not perhaps fully appreciate its value. The third problem is more significant and could be defined as "existential". It calls attention to many of the doubts which afflict our time, and which are manifested by the research for new experiences in all artistic spheres.

⁶ We do not intend to face the problem from a sociological point of view, nor we pretend to make a systematic analysis about the reasons for a possible crisis in Syrian theatre. We simply want to remark the feeling of apprehension we perceived in some writers, to point out the peculiar nuances in the attitude of each of them, and to describe the situation of Syrian dramatic literature according to their opinion, in September 1987. Owing to the natural evolution of every sector, it is quite possible that today, nearly two years later, the described situations are completely changed.

⁷ These three authors were enclosed in our anthology "Pagine di teatro siriano", *Quaderni di studi arabi*, I (1983), Supplemento.

Sa^cdallāh Wannūs, producer and scenery designer, was already writing for the theatre in the sixties and is one of the most famous men in this field today in Damascus⁸. He explained his present position in the modern Syrian theatrical movement in four concise points. We would like to comment on them.

I) He finds the role of the playwright in today's Syrian Arab society meaningless.

This is a particularly bitter statement from an author famous above all for his support of the politically committed theatre, corrosive and ready to attack, denounce, involve his public. The *masrah at-ta'sīs* declared with enthusiasm in the *Bayānāt li-masrah 'arabī ḡadīd* in the 70s⁹ seems futile to him in present times. Wannūs does not believe it possible today, and perhaps not even necessary, to have a theatre which makes every single citizen face up to the responsibility of choosing for himself, which makes every individual feel involved in his country's political decisions.

II) The author does not see any point in restoring old traditions in theatrical literature.

Indeed, he believes that the modern audience does not understand a work inspired by traditional popular forms of spectacle and finds it completely extraneous to everyday life, so different by now. Yet Wannūs previously used themes and techniques associated with the oldest forms of performance and traditional popular narrative. He drew inspiration from the *sāmīr* or the tales of the *ḥakawātī*, referred to the theatrical life in the 1800s of Naqqāš and Qabbānī, or again was inspired by the stories from *The thousand and one nights*. All this can be found in *Haflat samar li-aḡl ḥams ḥazīrān* (1969), *Muḡāmarat ra's al-mamlūk Ḡābir* (1970), *Sahra ma'a Abī Ḥalīl al-Qabbānī* (1972-73) and in *al-Malik huwa al-malik* (1977). Having recognised a very different public today, it seems that the author intends to put into practice one

⁸ For essential dates on Wannūs, see Udīb 'Izzat, *A'ḏā' Ittihād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab*, Damascus 1980, pp. 651-653,

⁹ *al-Ma'rifa*, 104 (1970), pp. 5-32.

of the theories expounded in the *Bayānāt* according to which a playwright should not worry about following rules or trends, whether western or local, but should solely comply with the real possibilities of understanding of his audience, starting point for any dramatic composition¹⁰.

III) Concerning the relationship between the Arab world and European orientalist, Wannūs sees a sort of "evil intention" in the West's attitude.

He bemoans the unwillingness to know or to make known and to appreciate modern Arab works. He underlines the fact that European publishing houses only publish a few works by famous authors, often posthumously, while almost entirely neglecting up and coming ones. It is the same in the theatrical field, where the translators concentrate their attention on few names, such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm or Maḥmūd Taymūr, and underrate the importance of many other Arab playwrights of today.

His reflections, well-founded or not, reveal a dependence on the West, which has become cause and effect of the scant interest in Arab literature in the world today. We feel this attitude is very different from what we knew of Wannūs, who had always asserted that every work originates from the needs of the author's own cultural environment and is dedicated only to that¹¹.

IV) The author does not intend writing any more new works.

In actual fact, Wannūs has not written anything, or rather has had nothing printed, since *al-Malik huwa al-malik*¹² came out in 1977, even

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹² We analysed this work and the figure of Sa'dallāh Wannūs in "Il teatro contemporaneo in Siria: l'impegno di Sa'dallāh Wannūs", *Quaderni di studi arabi*, I (1983), pp. 53-65; see also R. Allen, "Arabic Drama in Theory and Practice. The Writings of Sa'dallāh Wannūs", *JAL*, 14 (1984), pp. 94-113. The Arabic press took a great interest in this author and in his latest work; see Ismā'īl Fahd Ismā'īl, *al-Kalima al-fi'l fi masrah Sa'dallāh Wannūs*, Beirut 1981; Aḥmad al-Ḥamw, "al-Malik huwa al-malik am ar-raḡul huwa ar-raḡul", *al-*

though, according to the writer, he has written quite a lot in the meantime.

One wonders if this decision to remain silent hides a rejection of the new public. When an audience does not respond any more to an author's message, two possibilities are usually open to him: either he decides to publish nothing else (as Wannūs has done), or he changes his style and the content of his works, adapting himself to the changed needs of the gallery.

At the end of 1987, Wannūs's attitude was still rather bitter and he seemed dissatisfied more than anything else with his audience, with whom he was not making contact. According to the writer, people's taste in theatre has greatly changed and the messages in committed literature from the sixties have no meaning today. Just like the efforts by Salmān, Qatāya, Ibrāhīm al-Kīlānī, ʿĀdil Abū Šanab or ʿAdnān ibn Durayl for the creation of really new and autonomous Arab theatre¹³ seem to belong to the distant past; as also the exhortations and studies by Alfred Faraġ, ʿAlī ʿUqla ʿUrsān, ʿAbdallāh Abū Hayf, or ʿUmar ad-Daqqāq¹⁴; or those of Badr ad-Dīn al-ʿUrūdakī, Rafīq aṣ-Šabbān, Riyād ʿIṣmat, Naṣr ad-Dīn al-Baħra¹⁵. People at the end of the eighties love commercial theatre, easy to understand and with few problems. The difficulty of Wannūs seems to be exactly that of adapting himself to this type of mentality, far from his ideals as a socially and politically committed writer.

Mawqif al-adabī, 86 (1978), pp. 116-126; this article was followed by an answer from Wannūs himself: "Ḥawla muqāranat ad-duktūr al-Ḥamw bayna masrahiyyatī al-Malik huwa al-malik wa-Raġul bi-raġul", *al-Mawqif al-adabī*, 90 (1978), pp. 93-110. See also: Zahīr Ḥasan, "al-Malik huwa al-malik wa-masraḥ al-mir'āt", *al-Ādāb*, July 1978, pp. 92ff; ʿAbdalkarīm ʿUmrayn, "al-Malik huwa al-malik bayna taqrīr Wannūs wa-stifhām Bulbul", *al-Hayāt al-masrahiyya*, 28-29 (1987), pp. 195-200.

¹³ To this subject they devoted a special issue for theatre in *al-Maʿrifa*, 34 (1964).

¹⁴ Whose articles can be found in a second special issue about theatre in *al-Maʿrifa*, 104-105 (1970).

¹⁵ Also in *al-Mawqif al-adabī*, 1 (1972), several articles were devoted to drama, above all in sight of the creation of a really independent Arabic theatre.

One detail which came to light just recently in November 1988, makes one suspect however, that the writer is showing a more open attitude towards the modern audience. During the last International Theatre Festival in Damascus¹⁶, Wannūs presented a re-elaboration of *al-Malik huwa al-malik*. It was completely changed, introducing considerable number of songs, very modern scenery and playing upon satire and paradox. The very complex costumes of the characters in the original work, minutely described as an indispensable part to the development of the play, are now made fun of and reduced to essentials, similar to the simple dressing up of children: a large red funnel represents the king's crown, for example; his regal mantle is made of tin foil; and so on¹⁷.

It is not yet clear, however, which path Wannūs intends to take, if he really is considering the idea of changing his way of making theatre. An essay by Hālida Sa'īd in the magazine "at-Ṭarīq" in 1985¹⁸ is interesting in helping to understand the author and his artistic development up to the middle of the eighties. It makes the evolution of the playwright's thoughts from the time of the *Bayānāt* very clear. Only Wannūs himself can help us understand the last four years and his future intentions.

¹⁶ About the International Theatre Festival in Damascus, which began in 1969, see Yūsuf al-ʿĀnī, *at-Taḡriba al-masrahiyya*, Beirut 1979, pp. 66-76; Ġān al-Kasān, *al-Wilāda at-tāniya li-l-masrah fī Sūriyya: 1955-1980*, Damascus 1983, pp. 227-241. The last edition of the Festival, i.e. the eleventh, was held in Damascus in November 1988.

¹⁷ On the other side, we underline the presentation of the royal figure in the first edition of the play in 1976 (first act, first scene), where the cloak and the crown are described in details, together with the royal throne, sceptre and hall, very rich and luxurious.

¹⁸ Hālida Sa'īd, "Qirā'a fī masrah Sa'dallāh Wannūs", *at-Ṭarīq* 2 (1985), pp. 194-216.

Mamdūh 'Udwān¹⁹ also spoke to us about a crisis in the theatre, questioning the future of Syrian literature in this field. His analysis of the causes of the crisis, however, led to very different conclusions from those of Wannūs, as can be seen from his main points.

I) 'Udwān blames censorship more than the public.

According to the author, a work is nowadays subjected to about a year of government controls before it can be published. This is extremely frustrating for writers, who are consequently discouraged from writing new works. It is interesting to note, however, that 'Udwān does not seem to feel the effect of these restrictions very much, as he has continued to write and publish even in the last few years, as well as putting on his plays in the theatre. On the contrary, he has shown a creative vigour and an innovative urge which most certainly do not reflect a situation of crisis. In the last four years he has published *Ziyārat al-malika* (Ṭarābulus 1984), *al-Wuḥūš lā tuḡannī* (Tūnis 1986), *Ḥāl ad-dunyā*; *al-Haddāma* (Dimašq 1986), *al-Qīma*; *az-Zabbāl* (Dimašq 1987). *al-Qīma* and *az-Zabbāl* were performed by the *Ahwāl* theatrical company in Damascus in 1986 and in 1987 respectively.

II) He bemoans the lack of financial support from the government for performances of plays in the capital's theatres.

For example, it seems that he had to rent at his own expense the al-Qabbānī theatre in order to present his work *az-Zabbāl*, on which he had worked at least six months. In addition, he only succeeded in having the theatre at his disposal for just over one week²⁰. According to the author, if he had been able to rely on a State contribution, the run could have been much longer and very successful.

We have a few doubts on that score. We are not at all certain that audiences would have appreciated a work such as *az-Zabbāl* for long. It is undoubtedly an interesting work from an artistic point of view, but

¹⁹ For biographical notes about the author, see Adīb 'Izzat wa-Isīmā'il 'Amūr, *A'dā' Ittihad al-Kuttāb al-'Arab*, Damascus 1984², pp. 488-489.

²⁰ The pamphlet described it in program since 3rd October 1987. On the 12th and the 13th it was still on stage.

quite heavy for the average taste. It is a monologue, with the author revealing his social intentions through a description of very sad feelings and situations, lived and felt by the protagonist in an almost desperate manner. The pessimistic nature of the work, despite the vivacity and miming ability of the actor Zīnātī Qudsiyya²¹, led us to the conclusion that it is not a play to win wide public acclaim.

III) The author believes that the comic element can lead to the grotesque and thereby rouse the audience.

We also have some doubts about this statement. In fact, we fear that ʿUdwān overrates somewhat the cultural maturity of his audiences, who in our opinion are more likely to remain at the level of the immediate comicality of the lines without always discerning the grotesque side.

Humorism, so cleverly used by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm in his social comedies²², in which the comic element stimulated sometimes even bitter thoughts, here seemed to us to be used well but was not always understood by today's Syrian audiences. We had the opportunity to attend one of the last performances of *az-Zabbāl* at the Qabbānī theatre in Autumn 1987. The audience enjoyed the play and laughter echoed in the theatre, but no one seemed to perceive the author's pessimistic message nor reflect on the deep significance or social implications contained in the protagonist's lines.

IV) ʿUdwān is convinced, however, that at present (October 1987), the difficulty over publishing is simply due to the lack of paper in the country.

Once again, by identifying the causes of problems in the Arab literary and theatre world with external and contingent facts, the writer tends to excuse his public, relieving them of all blame.

His optimism also surprised us as it bears no relation to what we remember of him from the past. In 1982, when he first told us his liter-

²¹ Qudsiyya himself was interpreter and director of the monologue by ʿUdwān *al-Qima*, presented in 1986.

²² About Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and humour in his theatre, see M. Mandūr, *al-Masrah*, Cairo 1963, pp. 107-108.

ary theories, he seemed to us to be a disillusioned and pessimistic author who had decided to write more for himself than worrying about being understood by the public. Most of his works at that time were poems, collected into volumes which he was obliged to publish abroad because of a censorship ban in his own country²³. He certainly does not appear to us to be a happy and satisfied man, neither with the public nor with the official critics. His gradual adaptation to not always easy environmental conditions has perhaps led him to make unaccustomed choices. Currently he is writing more plays than poetry, even though he talks about "crisis in the theatre" just like everyone else, and seems to have found his best creative medium in monologues²⁴. We wonder if his feverish activity in this field and his apparent optimism concerning the spectators' maturity does not in fact hide his profound discouragement. We do not wish to put forward unqualified hypotheses, but the question does come to mind if 'Udwān is not perhaps being an ostrich and hiding his head in the sand so as not to see things as they really are. The fact that he recently gave up his job as a journalist in order to dedicate himself entirely to translations, is in our opinion symptomatic: choosing to spread the thoughts of others instead of one's own has a smack of abnegation.

We discussed the same problems with 'Alī 'Uqla 'Ursān²⁵, president of the *Ittihād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab*. Our suspicion that there is situation of uneasiness between the public at large and committed Syrian authors, above all in the theatre, was confirmed. 'Ursān too gave us his opinion, condensed to a few essential points:

- A) The Syrian Arab theatre has not evolved since the seventies.
- B) Poetry is in the same state²⁶.

²³ Compare with the list of his works till 1982, in 'Izzat wa-'Amūr, *A'dā'*, p. 499.

²⁴ In fact both his most recent plays *az-Zabbāl* and *al-Qīma* are monologues.

²⁵ See biographical notes in 'Izzat, *A'dā'*, pp. 401-404.

²⁶ Yet the author, in a so-called unlucky period for poetry, just published his first collection of poems only some years ago, *Šaṭī' al-ġurba*, Damascus 1986.

C) Only the novel has developed in these last few years²⁷.

‘Ursān is one of the most fervent supporters of the importance of dramatic activity in modern literature and these comments are therefore very surprising. Even more surprising was that during our last meeting he invited us to read his latest novel *Sabrat al-ġulān*²⁸, consequently pushing us towards studying contemporary Syrian narrative rather than dramatic literature.

Knowing ‘Ursān well not only as a theatre producer and historian but also as the author of numerous dramatic works²⁹, his attitude was bound to arouse our curiosity. Although he did not make any clear comment on our thoughts concerning the causes of the crisis in the theatre, his own change of interests confirms its existence. If ‘Ursān, a true man of the theatre, suddenly dedicates himself to narrative works and writes a novel, this can only indicate that interest in dramatic literature in Syria is somehow declining.

This author did not mention any problem concerning the change in public taste, nor did he complain about a lack of audience sympathy for the committed theatre nor point out anything lacking in state organisation. Instead, he talked about “literary tendencies”. Being used to analyzing his country’s literature, ‘Ursān perceived the crisis in the theatre, but saw the main cause as coming from the writers themselves. In his opinion they are no longer able to write outstanding works.

He judges this period of stasis to be transitory and has decided that other literary styles merit consideration by scholars and critics, while waiting for the times to mature and give back to the theatre the role it deserves.

It is significant that ‘Ursān considers both theatre and poetry to be in the same situation of stagnation. Not by chance are these the two

²⁷ About modern Arabic novel, see F. Mūsā, *Fī r-riwāya l-‘arabiyya l-mu‘āšira*, Cairo 1971; ‘A. R. ‘Īd, *Dirāsāt naqdiyya fī r-riwāya wa-l-qissa*, Damascus 1980.

²⁸ Published for the first time in Damascus in 1982 and then reprinted in 1987.

²⁹ Compare with the list of his works in ‘Izzat wa-‘Amūr, *A‘dā’*, p. 404.

literary forms which most need a deep feeling of understanding between each author and his public.

The relationship between the modern Syrian playwright and the contemporary audience is therefore at the root of the problem and the heterogeneity of the audiences seems to aggravate the problem further.

Although many people want an easy and commercial theatre, there is on the other hand a more cultured class who feels the emptiness of such productions and looks for valid alternatives. Sometimes rhetoric, euphuism and politicisation suffocate artistic impulses, creating theatrical forms which in turn fall short of expectations. At the same time, there is a progressive tendency by intellectuals to turn to the outside, to divert the attention from the real problems by creating a series of "distractions".

One of the last numbers of "*al-Ḥayāt al-maṣraḥiyya*"³⁰ is almost entirely composed of translations of European works and studies on Western authors³¹. Syria, cradle of the modern Arab theatre, seems to be tired and prefers to turn its attention elsewhere.

And yet, the restlessness of Syrian youth and their characteristic intellectual curiosity are the sign that the way of the theatre is still open. Students crowd the theatres, greedy for what is new, and although sometimes they turn away disappointed this should not prevent a search for other expressive possibilities more understandable to them. On the other hand, the ambiguities, contradictions and difficulties which line the path of Syrian dramatic literature, as well as the actual disputations which trouble both audiences and writers, are, however, proof that interest is still alive for this form of art.

³⁰ 28-29 (1987).

³¹ There we can find studies about Greek tragedies, Dario Fo's dramatic art, about Bergmann and his works. Of thirteen articles, eight are translations.