

In Memoriam: Riad Ismat (1947-2020)



By Robert Myers

On May 13 of this year, the theatre, the Arab world and those who care about literature and culture lost a great friend, scholar and brilliant director and playwright, Mohammad Riad Hussein Ismat to the Covid 19 virus. Known to his friends and colleagues as Riad, he was born in Syria in 1947, and graduated from Damascus University in 1968 with a degree in English literature. His protean career as a writer, theatre practitioner, television director and diplomat led him to Pakistan and Qatar, in both of which he served as the Syrian ambassador, and eventually to Illinois, where he lived outside Chicago after departing from Syria in 2012 with his wife Azzah and their three children, Karim, Noura and Sami, who is a theatre artist in Chicago. When Riad passed away he was a teacher of theatre at Northwestern University.

His most prominent post was as Minister of Culture of Syria, a position in which he served from 2010 to 2012, but he also served as Vice-Minister of Culture and Director of Syrian State Radio and Television, and he was the rector of the High Dramatic Institute in Syria from 2000 to 2003. He is, however, best known as the author of over a dozen plays, including *The Game of Love and Revolution*, *The Banana Republic*, *Abla and Antar* and *In Search of Zenobia*. He not only directed a number of his own plays, he also directed Arabic-language productions of Shakespeare, Wedekind, O'Neill and others, and he adapted folk tales, myths and stories from *The 1001 Nights* and also staged classic Greek dramas in Syria. His play *Was Dinner Good, Dear Sister* appeared in English translation in *Short Arabic Plays*, edited by Salma Jayyusi. He published close to three dozen books of plays and cultural and dramatic criticism in Arabic, including *The Arab Theater* and *Sound and Echo: A Study of the Modern Syrian Short Story*, and his most recent study, *Artists, Writers and the Arab Spring*, was published in English by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019. This latter volume, which one inevitably reads for clues about the motives for his own rapid departure from Syria in 2012 (Riad came to Northwestern in 2013 through the Writers at Risk program), is an incisive work of cultural history that finds innumerable calls for structural societal reform and admonitions warning of imminent political upheaval in literary works by Arab writers whose works antedate the so-called Arab spring, sometimes by decades. The volume includes studies of the works of

Nizar Qabbani, Naguib Mahfouz, Tawfik al-Hakim and the Syrian novelist Ghada Samman.

I had the good fortune to meet Riad in 2001 when he was the rector of the High Dramatic Institute in Damascus. I had just completed a collaboration with a Jordanian playwright in Amman and was invited to Damascus to meet Riad, whom I found to be one of the most congenial and cultured people I have met in the world of theatre or anywhere else. He gave me a tour of the school, invited me to his home in the hills above Damascus, where I met his wife, Azzah, who showered me with gifts, and then he and I went to a restaurant for dinner, where we planned a collaboration which, unfortunately, never took place. We met again at a panel on political theatre at Silk Road Rising in Chicago in 2015 and resumed our friendship. I was pleased but not surprised to discover that in addition to teaching, he continued apace writing and directing plays, including a staging at Columbia College in Chicago of the Peter Brook version of the Sufi story *Conference of the Birds*. Although Chris Jones of *The Chicago Tribune* wrote a stirring tribute to Riad's life and work, this extraordinary figure did not receive the attention he merited elsewhere in the English-speaking press, but according to his son, Sami, Riad's life and career were celebrated and acknowledged in publications all over the Arab world. Riad Ismat is one of the many fine artists and splendid human beings who have passed away too soon in recent months, and although we mourn the pain his loss causes his family and the fact that he passed away while he was still a vital force in theatre and the arts, we take consolation in his extraordinary achievements and their continuing resonance for those of us who value the cosmopolitan culture and theatre produced by artists from the Arab world.

[Robert Myers](#) is a professor of English at AUB, director of the Alwaleed Center for American Studies and co-director of AUB's Theater Initiative. He is the author of over fifteen plays, which have been produced all over the U.S. He has produced over half a dozen plays in Lebanon directed by Sahar Assaf, including a site-specific *Blood Wedding* and the world premiere of the English-language version of *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*. In addition to having written numerous articles on theatre and culture, he is co-editor and co-translator with Nada Saab of *Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant*, published by Brill in 2018, and *Sentence to Hope*, a Sa'dallah Wannous reader, published by Yale University Press in 2019. He is co-editor with Sonja Mejcher-Atassi of *Sa'dallah Wannous: Syrian Playwright and Public Intellectual*, a collection of essays that is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.



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