

Remembering a dear friend and collaborator

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Rest in Peace, Dear Friend



On May 13, 2020, acclaimed Syrian writer, director, theatre scholar, critic, and friend of Silk Road Rising, Mohammad Riad Hussain Ismat, died at the age of 73 at Glenbrook Hospital in Glenview, Illinois. The cause of death was COVID-19. Riad led a remarkable life and a distinguished career that spanned six decades. He was a prolific writer and a highly respected theatre, film, and literary critic. A true Renaissance man, he was equally at home writing stage plays, screenplays, non-fiction, short stories, essays, and reviews. Riad's ability to cross genres and disciplines won him numerous accolades

and awards. Riad also taught acting, directing, and mime, and helped popularize the Stanislavsky-method in Syria. A champion of global theatre and cultural exchange, it was his lifelong love affair with his home city of Damascus that perhaps most influenced his artistic aesthetic, universalist values, and urbane cosmopolitanism.

In 2010 Riad was appointed Syria's Minister of Culture, a post that he held until June 2012, when he left Syria under duress of the civil war, first for France, and then the United States. Later that year, he and his family settled in Evanston, Illinois. His previous posts in Syria included: Rector of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts (Damascus), Director-General of Syrian State Radio and Television, Assistant to the Minister of Culture, and Syrian Ambassadorships to Pakistan and Qatar. After settling in Evanston, Riad served two years as the Buffett Center Visiting Scholar at Northwestern University. He also taught courses at North Central College (Naperville, Illinois), Columbia College Chicago, and Chicago's Newberry Library. He wrote regularly for Alhurra Broadcasting and continued to write books, plays, and criticism until falling ill.



Silk Road Rising and the Evanston Public Library co-sponsored two public lectures of Riad's: "Shakespeare in the Middle East" (February 8, 2016) and "Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams in Damascus" (February 1, 2017). In the latter, Riad described how Syrian audiences received the plays of Miller and Williams (in Arabic translation) and how such seminal American dramas as *Death of a Salesman* and *The Glass Menagerie* seamlessly morphed into uniquely Syrian stories. In plays once thought to define the American canon, Arab audiences found themselves, their families, their communities, and their values.



"Dramatizing Resistance: Saadallah Wannous and the State of Contemporary Arab Theatre" panel at Silk Road Rising featuring moderator Jamil Khoury and panelists (from left to right) Sahar Assef, Riad Ismat, Nabeel Khoury, Robert Myers, and Nada Saab.

Always the cultural ambassador, Riad participated in Silk Road Rising's panel discussion "Dramatizing Resistance: Saadallah Wannous and the State of Contemporary Arab Theatre" (March 10, 2014). It should be noted that Riad was the only panelist who had actually *known* the late great Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous. They were in fact contemporaries. Building on his many such relationships, Riad's most recent book, *Artists, Writers and the Arab Spring* (2018), presents a fascinating history of the literary and artistic voices that helped inspire resistance to totalitarianism and oppression.



Khoury knew Riad as a friend, a font of wisdom, and an interculturalist in the truest sense of the word. They, and so many others in the Silk Road Rising community, will remember Riad as the gentle, thoughtful, elegant, and gracious man that he was; the artist, the intellectual, the diplomat, the caring soul. Riad translated Jamil's play *Mosque Alert* into Arabic. The translation now lives as a testimony to their friendship and the trust and respect they had for each other. Malik and Jamil consider themselves honored and blessed to have known Riad Ismat.



Riad with his wife, Azzah Konbaz, and two of his three children, Sami and Noura

Riad is survived by his wife Azzah Konbaz and their three children, Sami, Karim, and Noura.

May Riad's memory live eternal and may future generations draw strength and inspiration from the legacy of his life.

A Tribute to Riad Ismat

by Professor Robert Myers
American University of Beirut

I had the pleasure of meeting Riad Ismat in Damascus in November 2001 when he was the Rector of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. Riad was one of the most amiable, erudite, and debonair men I have ever met. He showed me around the Institute, and when I saw the students' classes and exercises and rehearsals, I was surprised by the extent of Russian influence on the theater in Syria. Of course, if I had known anything about Arab theater then I would not have been. [Read more...](#)

Mohammad Riad Hussain Ismat

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