NADA ABOU FARHAT

ACTRESS OF DEFIANCE & ARTISTRY

Nada Abou Farhat, one of Lebanon's most appreciated and beloved actresses, embraces challenges. The star of film and stage is taking on a big one in her new project, playing a transgender character in the play "Moughamarat Victoria el-Ajibeh," based on the life of Abdallah Kareem Shoucair, a Lebanese who came of age in the 1950s.

Shoucair was born male but desired to be female. Her mother raised her as a girl and called her Victoria. As she grew up, she hid her birth gender, for a reason we discover during the play. Once the truth was found out, she was kicked out of the house and left HOMEless.

She learned to be independent and became a showgirl, but had a constant inner struggle between herself and her genitals. She had to continue hiding her true self from society.

For Abou Farhat, this role is the latest of many challenges she has taken throughout her career. HOME interviewed this popular actress about her creative choices and her exciting career.

What interested you in this role as Victoria?
This subject is very important for me right now because of the freedom of choice I strongly believe in. Every single person should be free to live their life the way they want. I did not choose to be a woman. I feel like a woman. If I am referred to as a man, I will not accept it, and it would be painful to be referred to as one. This is how any transgender person feels.

The topic of this play is related to the way I think of life. No one should be allowed to trespass on someone else's freedom. We only live once; we should not have to compromise our freedom to live the way we want. This is something I will always fight for.

"You find all these well-educated, open-minded women and dig deep in their lives to find them leading empty lives, hating who they are and how they look; they don't even do the things they love or want to do.

In your last play, "Heble en Cinq," you played Claire, a very weak character. Why did you agree to play that role?
It wasn't my choice; it was Gabriel Yammine's. I wanted to do my own story about when I got pregnant and the fears I had. I wanted to be in a play while being pregnant; I had a very tight deadline.

Gabriel convinced me not to do a play about myself. He created Claire.



"Asrar al Sett Badiaa"

She was like so many women here in Lebanon, pretending to be strong, but when it comes to very important decisions in life, like deciding whether to get married or not, or even getting pregnant and having a child or not, was very weak.

Once such a woman finds herself under pressure, she follows the rules of our patriarchal and familial society. You find all these well-educated, open-minded women and dig deep in their lives to find them leading empty lives, hating who they are and how they look; they don't even do the things they love or want to do. Such women are guided by society, their husbands and even by their children.

Having so many Claires in our society, I was convinced to play this role, even though I didn't like the character and could barely stand playing her.

Nada, at 41, when you look at your career so far, what are some of the milestones?
What I think about frequently is how I went through so many downs — not just downfalls, free-falls. But I also think about how I was able to pick up the pieces and stand back up on both feet.

Clashes with others caused me to make some compromises, such as accepting some roles just for commercial success. That was a mistake. As I matured, I realized the commercial world is the complete opposite of who I am.

Thanks to my persistence to hang on to what I want in life, what I believe in, I got to where I am now. I had no clue at the time I was going to grow and mature to become the peaceful and serene person I am today.

"Such women are guided by society, their husbands and even by their children.

Peaceful in what sense?
I am at a point in my life where I have a clearer idea of what I want. I have clarity on the choices I need to make for my life and my career, and the people I want around me.

My stubbornness to be myself led me to pick people who shared my way of thinking.

When I look back, so much good has happened. I am happy. I am satisfied. I am doing what I like and want in my career.

You put a lot of effort in the roles you play. You do a lot of research, work on your voice, your skills, and you work out. How do you train your spirit?
I live my life by taking it one day at a time, which helps me be comfortable in my own skin and true to myself. In doing so, I am very honest with myself. Because I love myself, I cannot lie to myself.

I love living the moment and the present. I've been told I live the role of the character I am playing. This is because I live my life the same way — to its fullest, focusing on and giving my undivided time and attention to every specific moment.

"Every single person should be free to live their life the way they want.


"Heble En Cinq"

What helped you find your center? Yoga? Religion? Reading? People?
Age, time. This is why I like getting older and more mature. I am living the best phase of my life. I've reached to a point where I am enjoying my body, my sexuality, my abilities, etc. I decided to stay away from the commercial world to be proud of what I am leaving behind.

Is it financially viable to be genuine and not commercial?
Of course it is, if your aim is to make decent money and live a normal life, and not necessarily become a millionaire.

Any plans to expand your horizons to outside of Lebanon — maybe play roles in another language other than Arabic?
If I am presented with such an opportunity, I will not refuse it, but I will not go looking for one myself. This is not my dream anymore. A fully booked theater for six to seven months is more important than to play one role in one movie.

I know fellow actors and actresses living in Germany and Belgium; they face the same difficulties we face here.

Why do you think you have such a daring character?
From the moment you are born, especially if you are a woman, you are obliged to be strong, daring and revolutionary to survive.

If you want to make a difference, evolve and be taken seriously, you need to overcome the unfairness and hardships you have to face as a human being and a woman.

Let's not forget the upbringing you receive at HOME. We are five female siblings who were brought up in a humble HOME. We were taught to be responsible for ourselves, which is something amazing! We had the privilege of becoming stronger human beings because we were allowed to experiment in life and to learn from our mistakes. I owe my strength to my parents.

What is your most satisfying achievement?
It might sound cliched, but I enjoy the challenge I face in playing the role of every character I choose to play, astonished by the fact that I turn out to actually excel. I keep practicing and reminding myself that I CAN DO IT.

For example, the character I will be playing now, who is transgender — it being a very challenging role. It requires me to do many voices, (with hormones, without hormones, being in public with hormones, being in public without hormones, being alone with hormones and being alone without hormones). I use the slightest opportunities to practice — even in the car while driving — on the different voices until I perfect them. Just like the character I played in "Asrar al Sett Badiaa," I couldn't believe I had the skills to switch from being an old woman to being a young woman, whether through my body or voice.

Another example is dancing. I had no clue I am someone who can dance or even sing.

Do you have any mentors who have left a trace of themselves in your life?
My mentors are the simple people in my life. My aunt, but she died when I was very young. She was not married, had a little shop, not anything special, but she had so much love in her to give. This has left an important trace in me.

Another mentor is my father. He is my spirit, and he's the one I look up to till now when it comes to my healthy lifestyle, the reason I do a lot of sports. He is 82 years old and he still works out, and he still has a job.

I have my mother, who's 73 years old now and has come to an age where she has completed all of her familial duties. At the age of 65, she opened her own business, and she is still enjoying her productive life.

What is your first thought when you hear these names?

Gerard Avedisian
"Don't act, be real."

Roger Assaf
He is authentic and has a young spirit, even at his age.

Philippe Aractingi
He believes in repetition for perfection. For "Tahet al Asef," there is a scene where I have to bang my head against the car window after I find out about the death of my sister. I had to repeat it 47 times to actually become the emotionally wrecked person who lost her sister in that tragedy.

George Khabbaz
He is someone who always worries about me, businesswise. He always encourages me to choose a bigger stage and theater.

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Elie Kamal, your husband
He taught me not to react very quickly to anything that happens around me. I am the complete opposite, and I make matters worse when I'm angry. He taught me to be calm and think twice before I react. He is right!

Nidal Al Achkar
Since I began my acting career with Nidal Al Achkar, she molded basic traits that grew within me and made me who I am. One of the techniques that Nidal taught me is how to have confidence on stage, to overcome my fear and become stronger than the audience in order not to let them pull them down.


"Majnoun Yehke"

Roy Khoury
Roy Khoury taught me the "breathing technique," which I had no idea existed. This helped me a lot as an actress. I have been using this technique in every theatrical role.

Raymond Jebara
I didn't have direct contact with him in my acting career, but he taught me a course for one semester at university. He once called me and said, "You are beautiful and talented, but put some cream on your elbows." (She told us while smiling). He has such an amazing eye for details.

Jawad al-Assadi
Jawad taught me every actor or actress needs to find the animal they can connect to and relate to it to become a better performer. I never use this technique. I only used it with him because he loves an aggressive-looking woman, animal-like — having the movements, the voice, the character and the craziness of an animal.

"We are five female siblings. We had the privilege of becoming stronger human beings because we were allowed to experiment in life and to learn from our mistakes.

Lina Khoury
Lina taught me the necessity of having love among the full cast and crew. In all her plays, she believes there is the need for love among every single cast and crew member, or else the play will not turn out to be a successful one. She made me love old oriental music, "Tarab." I love it and listen to it till now.

Mahmoud Hojeij
It was because of Mahmoud I enrolled myself to take tango lessons. It was a very important phase of my life. I got so attached to tango, and I still dance it today. I would advise everyone to learn tango. It gives a certain feminine poise and elegance. It changes the way a woman walks, talks and feels.

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