

Imprint: Feature

Title: Egypt's Russian Doll

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From ballerina to silver screen darling, for nearly a decade Nelly Karim's artistic passion has gripped audiences across the region. For the first time since giving birth to her third baby, Nelly Karim – looking stunning in gowns from Dior's dazzling Fall / Winter collection - steps back into the spotlight.

Faten (as in Hamama) is worried that Nelly Karim may have decided to ditch the spotlight in favour of a more domesticated life. Having recently given birth to her third child (two months ago to be exact), Nelly has been conspicuously off the stage, off our screens and off the radar. So a rather aggravated Faten called Nelly up demanding an explanation. "Faten just wanted to make sure that I hadn't decided to give it all up and stay at home," says Nelly, casually, as she reaches for her first coffee and cigarette of the morning. In Arab cinema speak, this is the equivalent of nonchalantly mentioning that Liz (as in Taylor) is enquiring after your career status. Yet after nearly a decade in the industry, Nelly's nonchalance is to be expected.

Ever since the award-winning ballerina pirouetted off the stage and straight onto our screens in the all-singing all-dancing all-performing TV extravaganza that is *Fawazeer* (circa 1999), her professional life has been nothing less than charmed. A slew of critically acclaimed TV and film roles followed. She landed a hotly contested role in legendary Egyptian director Youssef Chahine's auto-biographical movie *Alexandria-New York* (2004) and was cast as the daughter of silver screen icon Faten Hamama in one of the most famed Egyptian TV series in recent times, 2000's *Wagh El Quamar (In the Face of the Moon)*. So before long it just felt like Nelly had always been there; part of the fabric of the fame industry. She's made it look easy, and today, sat in our photographer's studio, she's making it sound easy. "When I was a child I dreamed of dancing in *Fawazeer*, and it happened. So I just think if you dream something, there's no reason why it can't happen. As for the acting, it was just something at the back of my head." As simple as that? Probably not, but Nelly isn't the type to give much away. There's a distance about her, a definite awareness and enforcement of her personal space; not so much in the physical, but definitely in the mental and emotional. Her answers are curt and contained, designed to give you the exact information you need, nothing less and most definitely nothing more. Even her famous features, petite, delicate, almost as if drawn – exude a certain 'you can look but I'm too delicate to touch' sensibility. She has the perfectly formed petite pout, the signature tumbling long locks (now honey highlighted) and the small almond shaped eyes. In fact she's reminiscent of those perfectly painted wooden Russian dolls. No matter how hard you try, there's only so much you can demand from them. I ask her how she's coping having returned to work only two months after giving birth. "Fine, thank you," she says. "My mother helps me, so all is well, thank God." And that's it. I quiz her on her new film, *Et Abelnna Abl Kida (We've Met Before)*, due for release early next year. "I play the sort of average girl anyone is likely to meet," she says. And that's that.

I don't think I've caught her on an off day, I think she's just genuinely uncomfortable with the demands of the publicity, paparazzi and public persona side of the industry. "I hate it," she says, in a rare moment of passionate exchange. "I understand this is the price I have to pay for doing the job I do. But it just has nothing to do with the acting or the dancing. When I'm out with my family and children and people are constantly coming up asking for a photo or an autograph, a lot of times it can get too much. Sometimes you just need to be left alone; to have a single hour to yourself." To that end she's just returned from a summer spent far from the madding crowd at El Gouna by the Red Sea, rather than at the season's hotspots on Egypt's North Coast. "No one pays me any attention there so it's perfect," she says. "I was wondering round in my bathing suit at eight months pregnant and no one gave me a second look."

For a classically trained dancer, who virtual grew up on the stage, literally treading the boards on the tips of her toes, the violent aversion to 'fame', with all its cheap modern day 'sell-your-soul' connotations, is perhaps understandable. For her it is all about the art, the beauty of the performance. Thanks to her Russian mother, she spent her formative years in the former Soviet Union, a period she says imbued her with a love of "real art and culture." It was there, that she joined her first professional ballet school, learnt to play the piano and became addicted to the raw thrill of a live audience. "I love being on stage," she says. "Because the audience is right there for you, the response is on the spot, you hear the applause, and you know that you've done a great job. It's so different to cinema, which is so impersonal. You film a scene, and then it's edited into someone else's vision and then six months later the audience finally gets to see it on a screen."

In 1991 Nelly moved back with her family to Egypt and immediately secured a prestigious place at the Academy of Arts in the Cairo Ballet Institute and the Cairo Ballet Company. In less than a year she was receiving accolades, winning first prize in the high profile Cairo Ballet Competition. She went on to perform all over the world from Japan to Moscow, sweeping audiences and critics off their feet with soaring performances in the biggest ballet classics – from Swan Lake to Balero. She even studied choreography, eventually opening up her own ballet school. "There's just a lack of appreciation for this art form in Egypt," she says with a sad resignation in her voice. "TV and cinema on the other hand naturally have mass appeal. That medium reaches everyone and it does so quickly, which is why I'm focusing on the acting at the moment. But ballet will always be my great love." Today she might be better known as a silver screen star, but she still lives by the most credible of credos, "Someone once said you have to love the art, and not yourself in the art. That's how I approach the acting profession. People like Youssef Chahine and Faten Hamama have achieved their greatness because they are so truly passionate about the *art* of cinema."

Even as a mother, Nelly is determined to imbue her children - the two older of whom also speak fluent Russian - with that same level of artistic passion. "As soon as my daughter turned three years old, I started taking her to dance and piano lessons," she says. "It's very important to nurture talent and give children as many skills as possible, so in the future they can do anything they want." Motherhood however may just take its toll on her love affair with the ballet. The once devastatingly taut and famous figure of hers has filled out, taking on a Monroesque quality. It's sexy and sensual, and it suits her, giving her a sort of 1940's glamour goddess appeal, but of course, it's not all that suitable to the stage. "I feel more like a balloon than a ballerina

at the moment,” she says. “I had to have a C-section with my last baby, so it’s even harder to shift the weight. But I’ve been on a strict diet for nearly twenty days, so slowly but surely I’m getting there.”

Whatever happens to Nelly - marriage, childbirth, a successful silver-screen career – nothing can keep her away from the powerful lure of the stage. As she replied to Faten over the phone, “Don’t worry *habibti*, I’m always going to dance.”