

Title: Zeina
Sub-title: Sugar & Spice
By Amy Mowafi

Following her stellar performance in the hit Ramadan series Aan El-Awan (It is Time) young Egyptian actress Zeina has become a household name. A throwback to the iconic days of black and white Egyptian cinema – a long gone era when actresses embodied true glamour – Zeina’s striking features and show-stopping curves have put her in a league of her own. So when we decided to feature her in Enigma, we wanted to recreate that old-school untouchable magic. As you can see from our fabulous fashion story, Zeina really is a screen siren in the making. And when Managing Editor Amy Mowafi sat down with the young Egyptian actress, she discovered fireworks beneath the feminine façade.

If it happened in the movies you’d think it was cliché. Plucky young girl informs hard-nosed big shot director that she is destined for stardom. Director suspects young girl has a little too much chutzpah for her own good, but secretly admires her panache. Director takes wannabe under his prolific wings. Cue montage of shots...girl is managed, moulded and made into a big screen siren.

If it happened in real life...well it rarely does. But back in the summer of 1996 controversial Egyptian director Enas El Deghiedy was on the beach in Agami, when a plucky 14 year old girl with tumbling dark locks, striking angular features, big brown eyes and a little too much chutzpah for her own good marched right up to her. The teenager informed Deghiedy she was destined for stardom, and marched right off again. Every jaded rule in the book tells you it should never have worked. But, as in all good formulaic movies there was something about the girl that caught her imagination. Or as the girl herself explains, “I think Enas was really intrigued by me.”

At the time El Deghiedy had spent months searching fruitlessly for the perfect young woman to play the lead in what would become one of the most iconic films of the decade – Mozakarat Morahka (Diaries of a Teenager). And then miraculously, the perfect person appeared...and then disappeared just as quickly. For weeks afterwards El Deghiedy searched everywhere, demanding that her assistant track down her beach apparition.

Back in Cairo, Zeina Reda Eldgwy received a phone call from a friend of hers. Depressed, frustrated and under tremendous pressure from his boss, he poured out his troubles. “She wants me to find some random girl she met on the beach,” he told her. “Where the hell am I supposed to start?” Of course, with that one phone call his search had ended. When Zeina turned up – that very same night – to audition for El Deghiedy, she found a queue of girls lined up to see the director. She marched into El Deghiedy’s

office and demanded she get rid of the others. They both knew she was the 'one' and any more auditions would simply be a waste of their time. El Deghiedy was hooked.

Cue two years of training with some of the best talents in the industry. El Deghiedy spent over \$12,000 moulding her young protégé. Zeina was put through endless hours of dance lessons, acting lessons, elocution classes, and then, the night before filming on Mozakarat was due to start, Zeina suddenly pulled out.

Her parents, vehemently against her pursuing an acting career, had little knowledge of their daughter's recent thespian shenanigans. Zeina, not yet 21, had suddenly come to terms with the scope of what she was about embark on and was terrified that once her parents found out, they'd keep her "locked up in the house." Although she had previously landed herself a small role alongside Ahmed Zaki in *Ard Al Khawf* (Land of Fear) – for which her parents eventually forgave her – in terms of personal exposure, Mozakarat was a whole different ball game. El Deghiedy was naturally livid and for the next three years refused to speak to Zeina, despite her attempts at reconciliation. As for the role? That went to an unknown Tunisian actress by the name of Hend Sabry, turning her into an overnight sensation.

It's all a little too made-for-the movies, a little too hyperbolic, but when Zeina tells it, sitting on the terrace of Cairene hotspot Sangria, it sounds entirely plausible. Probably because she's so incredibly nonchalant about the whole incident. It's as if she'd always known it would happen, as if she'd planned it that way. Despite pulling out of Mozakarat, she felt she would still make it big. "I decided I might as well just wait till I was 21, when my parents could no longer force me into anything," she explains. "And during that time I really tried to earn their trust. If your parents are disapproving, you'll never be blessed in anything you do. Right now they're not completely happy but at least they've accepted it."

And make it she did. As soon as she was old enough, she landed her first big role, starring alongside Hend Sabry and Tamer Hosny in the 2004 Eid blockbuster *Halet Hob* (State of Love). Her follow up role in 2005's *El Hayat Montaha El Laza* (Life's the Ultimate Pleasure), co-starring Hanan Turk and Yuri Mrakadi, saw her walk away with a slew of fan-nominated awards. In 2006, Zeina stepped into Yasmine Abdel Aziz's shoes in the film *90 Minutes after Abdel Aziz* fell out with producers over the size of her part. However playing the role of Nesma, the poor downtrodden girl who falls in love with a boy from the rich side of the tracks, was one she'd live to regret. "I wish I'd never taken that role, well done to Yasmine for pulling out," she says. The film was slated by the critics and bombed at the box office. Her saving grace? Not one, but two hit Ramadan TV series. 2006's *Aan El-Awan* (It is Time), in which she acted alongside Arab singing icon Warda, and *Hadrat Al Muttaham Abi* (My Father, the Accused) starring Egyptian superstar Nour El Sherif, ensured that every night, for a whole month, Zeina's face was broadcast into millions of homes, turning her into a household name. "I knew I'd eventually get what I wanted," she says.

It's an inbred confidence that repeatedly rears its head at the most opportune moments. Zeina is a big believer in the powers of persuasion. Put an obstacle in her way and she'll convince her way around it. At 17 she got engaged despite her parents' warnings, "I made them believe it would be OK." It wasn't. They were right, she broke off the engagement and that was that. "There is never any reason to lie about anything or do anything behind anyone's back," she says. "You just need to make people think like you."

Judge a book by its feminine cover, and the steeliness is unexpected. On the outside Zeina is all creamy curves, arresting features; a Penelope Cruz for the Middle East. Up on screen she looks like a 'butter wouldn't melt' angel. On the inside however she's all hard edges, a bundle of barely containable fireworks. From the moment she speaks, there's no doubt that she's the straightest of shooters. She'll tell it like it is and stuff the consequences. When we first meet on the Enigma shoot, she manages to list the faults of a whole roster of young Egyptian leading ladies in the space of a single blow-drying session; my journalistic presence doing little to deter her. "I don't understand how you can put stars on your magazine cover who in real life have no dress sense," she says, proceeding to list them by name. "A lot of time, money and effort goes into what I wear, and then you take some actresses, clean them up, put them in a designer outfit, and no one can tell difference. It's not fair!"

And yet, one never gets the sense that any of her salacious statements are the least bit malicious. Because nine times out of 10, she's simply saying out loud what you were thinking anyway. And every comment is inevitably followed by her contagious sandblasted laugh, which makes you feel like you're the only one in on the secret. It's a heady contrast: pretty package vs. explosive insides, and it's one that directors are keen to exploit. "I was interviewed on this TV programme once, and I was so open that after the show I got phone calls from people telling me I was crazy. But then one guy, who is very important, called me up and said he was proud of what I did and that other actors should learn from me. He told me to never change my attitude. And you know what I thought? The people who really understand and who really matter, they get me, so who cares about everyone else?" After some prodding she tells me who the guy is – the son of a high profile government personality.

Zeina refuses to make any Faustian bargains with the acting establishment...no on-screen kissing or depravity, and no real life drinking, smoking, drugs or sex before marriage. "The man I marry needs to respect me, and if I kiss and stuff on screen, then he never will. I don't want to be that actress who people would rather not be seen with; the type of girl who women don't want their husbands to talk to." She won't go preaching however. "If I'm in a situation where people are getting drunk and they want me to join in, I'll just say no thanks. There's no point in making them feel uncomfortable by telling them I think it's haram (religiously forbidden). But at the end of the day it is haram and that's why I don't do it." One such situation however saw her calling some famous young acting cohorts "really pathetic." Having ridiculed her when she refused to join them in a hash smoking session, she gave them a serious piece of her fiery mind.

But will her conservatism affect her success? “Of course not! Look at Mona Zaki, she refuses to do anything sexual on screen and she’s the biggest star right now!” What of her older cohorts, the Youssras and Mervat Amins of this world? “Yes, they are icons and everyone respects them, but society has completely changed. When they were at their peak, my mother could ride the bus wearing a mini skirt, but today we can’t walk down the street without getting harassed, which I think is very sad.”

Her no holds barred attitude is undoubtedly the basis for the reels of press coverage given to alleged tensions between her and nearly every one of her female co-stars. And yet Zeina insists it’s all just media dramatics. “None of it is true,” she says. “Or at least most of it has a logical explanation.” After filming *El Hayat Montaha El Laza*, co-star Menna Shalaby had a field day with the press, livid that Zeina had been given a more prominent position on the movie’s poster. Shalaby said, “They gave me less credit in order to highlight the new actress Zeina.” She also hinted that Zeina had actually convinced them to do it.

“It’s ridiculous,” says Zeina. “The day of the photo shoot for the poster, Menna’s outfit simply clashed with Hanan Turk’s outfit. Since Hanan stood at the front, Menna could not be put directly next to her. It’s as simple as that.” And when journalists pressed Zeina for a reaction, she refused to comment. “Look, if it happened to me, I’d be upset too,” says Zeina. “But I’d never talk badly about someone in the press. Besides, I was filming in Hurghada when the posters were designed, and I don’t yet have enough influence to impact the marketing of a film from hundreds of kilometres away! But hey, it worked out in my favour!”

Persistent rumours of a relationship, even an engagement, with singer and actor Tamer Hosny are also dismissed. “We really are just good friends and I knew him long before we filmed *Halet Hob* together,” she says. “Anyway he is engaged to someone else! And I’ve known the girl he’s with forever. I’m the one who kept telling him they should get engaged!”

Along with God, Zeina’s parents are a recurring theme in her conversations. Dig your way below the brazenness, and what you have is the average Arab girl next door. The second of five children, her father is a pilot, her mother is “an accountant but more important, like the head of the department.” She was brought up by her grandparents until she went to secondary school, and her veiled mother is her biggest influence and the creator of all her boundaries. “When journalists first started calling my house, my mother would threaten to call the police,” she says laughing. “And when I wanted to go to film school, my mum took the application and gave it to the business department at Ain Shams University. She’s terrified all my siblings will get married off and I’m going to end up single like Youssra.” Currently in the third year of her business degree, graduation is proving elusive. “This year was the second time I didn’t turn up for my exams. I don’t have time to study because of work, and now that people know who I am, it would be so embarrassing if I failed.”

Zeina’s release comes in the form of travel, with London as her favourite city. “In Egypt I’m so careful about how I dress, who I’m seen with and where I go, but when I’m away

it doesn't matter." she says. "I'll strike up a conversation with salesgirls in a store and arrange to go out with them so I can see the country as it really is." But the 'good Egyptian girl' mentality never lags far behind. When she discovers I know the man whom she'd recently met and "sort of liked" in London, I'm faced with an avalanche of questions. "Does he drink? Is he from a good family? Does he go out with loads of girls?"

London is also home to her greatest passion...shopping. "Clothes are really important to me. Anyone can act, but few people have the whole package. Style is essential and I spend all my money on clothes; as a star you have to look really special. When I walk into a room, I want heads to turn. Whenever I travel I come back with a whole trunk full of international fashion magazines so I can keep up with the latest trends. I want people to think of me as exceptionally stylish. And I love to be different. HEND SABRY once asked me to go shopping with her, and when she picked out the same outfit as me, I decided not buy it."

However her desire to hog the sartorial limelight seems not to be translating to her career. Most stars on the brink of superstardom would grab the first leading lady script that came their way. Not Zeina. In the last six months, she has turned down countless starring roles. "All the scripts I receive feature stars that are either as famous or less famous than me," she says. "And I'm not sure I'm ready to carry a whole film by myself. I don't think my name alone will fill seats yet. I want to act with stars that are much more famous, at least until I'm absolutely sure I can headline a movie." Yet one role she has her heart firmly set on, is that of Bousayna in the upcoming TV series version of the blockbuster movie *The Yacoubian Building*. Ironically, it's the very same role that turned HEND SABRY into a superstar. She recently signed a contract to play a small role alongside Robert De Niro in a soon to be filmed Hollywood production, and during a recent movie premiere, director Enas El Deghiedy marched up to her, congratulated her, and informed her that she always knew she was destined for stardom.

If it happened in the movies you'd think it clichéd, but when Zeina tells it, it sounds like a perfectly plausible story about the rise of a screen siren.