

Sunset Boulevard By Way of Wadi Shahrour:

A Psychological Profile of Our National Norma Desmond

Ahmad Oueini

In biology, senescence is the state or process of aging, the inevitable stage that marks our later life, and that is invariably accompanied by deterioration in certain areas of functioning.

Although aging is common to all mortals, there is a morbid fascination with how it affects celebrities, particularly women who have made a career out of looking beautiful, set many fashion trends, and left indelible marks on the arts and in the field of entertainment.

To dispel the myth that aging is all about deterioration and loss, scientists have coined new terms, such as “successful aging” or “healthy aging”, to refer to those elderly persons who experience a low probability of disease or disability, a high cognitive and physical function capacity, and who are actively engaged with life (Strawbridge, Wallhagen, & Cohen, 2002).

Any reference to an aging entertainment star inevitably brings to mind our national self-proclaimed “legend”, Sabah (born in Wadi Shahrour, Lebanon). But is she really undergoing successful aging?

Recently, on a rerun of Layla Roustom’s, *Noujoum ala al-ard* (i.e. earthbound stars), the classy talk show of circa 1968, richly redolent of the past, yet so contemporaneous, Sabah graced the black and white TV screen with her presence. Interviewed in her own luxury apartment, she was grilled by the skilled hostess for over two hours about her life and career. The show was interspersed with the



A recent picture of Sabah

latest hits lip-synched against a variety of quaint but never cheesy studio backdrops. Sabah was at the top of her game. Resplendent in a feathered 1960s evening overall, considered avant-garde even by that decade’s standards, she sang impeccably. As a speaker, she was poised, sensible, witty,

and charming, even when answering the sacrosanct inquiries about her ageless beauty, extravagant wardrobe, and prodigal daughter, then still under wraps waiting for her big-bang coming of age.

Cut to the present. Sabah guest-starring on a number of lesser variety shows: frail, disoriented, and unseemly. Her exaggerated make-up, elaborate coiffe, shimmering gown, and glistening jewelry cannot hope to camouflage the havoc time has wreaked on her physique. After this visual assault, she proceeds to wage another war, this time, on our aural receptors. With a little 'support' (in more ways than one) to get to the mic (off scene to save face), she stands there like a deer caught in the headlight, and starts warbling with an unsure voice her old favorites with such a strain as if gasping for air, hitting every other note embarrassingly off-key, and consistently losing the tempo, all before a confused audience that does not know whether to cheer, laugh, applaud, gawk, or snicker. Then she struts back to the safety of her seat where an awe-struck host kicks off the interview. With a raspy and strong voice, our star chirpily answers various questions. Her discourse runs the gamut. Some revelations are sagacious, thought-provoking, and insightful, imbued with Sabah's trademark wisdom, and philosophy. Others are giddy to the point of absurdity, while alarmingly nonsensical, or uproariously funny.

However she presents herself, Sabah leaves no one indifferent. People still watch her for the shock value if not for the pleasure or entertainment they derive from doing so.

I am a psychology professor and a personal fan of Sabah's matchless, rock-chiseled instrument and vast repertoire of debonair pop songs that never pretend to be more than blithely optimistic ditties



Lebanese singer and actress, Sabah. Lebanon/Beirut, 1960-1969. Photographer; Georges Abdeni. Collection Jorge Abud Chami ©Fondation Arabe pour l'image

that brighten our day and bring a little smile to our dreary existence. My fascination with and intrigue by Sabah's persona have led me to ponder Sabah's metamorphosis from Lebanon's most venerated pop singer for nearly 40 years (from the mid 1940s to the early 1980s), to the most parodied, the most ridiculed, and the most ridiculous entertainment diva of the Arab World.

The question on my mind, and probably on others' as well, is: "Whatever happened to the good old Sabah we grew up watching and admiring?"

How could she allow herself to slip into this state of ludicrous effeteness?

We should probably blame her for a number of questionable personal and professional choices that have accelerated her downfall and resulted in bad karma.

Or maybe we should blame ourselves, her volatile and less than faithful admirers, fast to replace her with more youthful copycats and to let her down when she most needs our support. Or perhaps we should point our fingers to the music industry,

notorious for disposing of singers based on the volatile laws of supply and demand, and single-handedly responsible for the prevalent culture of bad taste and substandard music. Or we should simply reckon that Sabah's plight is the expected price of fame every major star has to pay for being in the limelight for too long.

Then again, if all of the above were true, how come that divas of the past such as Umm Kulthum or contemporary icons, like Fairouz, have never had to endure Sabah's plight, but instead have commanded respect of mythical proportions? How did they manage to shield themselves from the vicissitudes of time and musical styles and remain unshakably adulated and venerated in our collective conscience?

Norma Desmond is probably Sabah's American alter ego. Their stories bear an eerie resemblance (save the killing impulse). For those of you who never saw Billy Wilder's classic, *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond (a role immortalized by Gloria Swanson), a grandiose and past-her-prime movie star from the silent era living reclusively in a decrepit Hollywood mansion, still believes in her own indestructibility, and deludes herself of a great comeback. Her butler-husband feeds her illusion by protecting her from the harsh reality of the outside world. Norma eventually becomes involved with a small-time writer whom she draws into her web and "keeps" in her mansion to write her a script for the movie she hopes will get her out of forced retirement. Insanely jealous and possessive, she murders him, whereupon she becomes completely demented. Lured downstairs by the police and convinced that she is shooting a scene from her comeback movie, she signals to her fictitious director what became an instant classical movie line: "I'm ready for my close-up now, Mr. DeMille".

One of the most pervasive myths about aging is that, in old age, persons lose their memory, their intellectual capacity, and their ability to think and reason-- or to use the vernacular, they become "senile" (Westen, 1996). In reality, only about 5 percent of the population suffer progressive and irreversible dementia, a disorder marked by global



Sabah and Ahmad Oueini in Sabah's residence. Courtesy of Ahmad Oueini

disturbance of higher mental functions, such as some form of memory loss.

As her interviews prove, Sabah's memory is infallible. She can hardly be suffering from senility. Even physically, she remained healthy, dynamic, and well-preserved until recently.

More likely, Sabah is afflicted with the Norma Desmond syndrome, namely, denial.

Denial is a defense mechanism, a completely unconscious behavior in which a person is faced with a fact that is too painful to accept and rejects it instead, insisting that it is not true despite what may be overwhelming evidence. The subject may deny the reality of the unpleasant fact altogether (simple denial), admit the fact but

deny its seriousness (minimisation), or admit both the fact and seriousness but deny responsibility (transference) (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2003).

Denial may have a salutary effect on one's life when it helps the person move forward despite negative life events. This is called adaptive denial, which facilitates self-growth, such as going on with one's life despite an illness or a disability, and helps challenge formidable gender, race, or socio-economic barriers to earn a degree, land a prestigious job, find a significant other, or win an election.

In my psychology classes at the Lebanese American University (LAU), I always refer to Sabah to illustrate the opposite of adaptive denial – namely, maladaptive denial, one that is counterproductive to one's life, that undermines one's well-being, and that causes irreparable damage to one's reputation.

Sabah reigned supreme for several decades in the Arab World. She built a prolific repertoire of Lebanese and Egyptian accented pop songs, and a very successful movie career which established her as a solid box office name, rivaling native Egyptian actresses, and succeeding where all other equally eligible Lebanese exports had failed (think of Nour El Hoda, Najah Slam, Souad Mohamad, and Hyam Younes). She kept a busy recording, performing, and shooting schedule between Beirut and Cairo. Along with Fairouz, she was the toast of Baalbeck and national festivals, touring the world to packed auditoriums and sold-out performances. She was assured a permanent place in the Hall of Fame of Arabic female divas, in such auspicious company as Fairouz, Asmahan, Umm Kulthum, and Layla Mrad's. In the late 1960s, she reinvented herself as a paragon of elegance and became a trendsetter, managing to seduce her fans with her sex appeal, lavish gowns, and alluring beauty.

Sabah's good fortune seemed unshakable. However, her extravagant lifestyle had planted the seeds of her eventual downfall, and a confluence of unique factors, circumstances, personal, and professional decisions triggered her demise in earnest.

On the one hand, her preoccupation with beauty,

youthfulness and elegance, accentuated by a daring wardrobe, unbecoming stage and movie roles (where she played anachronistically younger women), and seductive lyrics constantly referencing her irresistibility, have helped create the myth that Sabah is ageless, which led the media to obsess about her real age and unjustifiably inflate it. Ever since I was a child, people used to speculate that Sabah must be in her 1960s or 1970s, but owed her youthful appearance to extreme make-up and countless plastic surgeries.

On the other hand, in an ongoing quest for love resulting from an emotional void that has its roots in a miserable childhood, marred by physical abuse and limited means, Sabah found herself tying the knot one time too many, a fact which has largely undermined her respectability. Although a close inspection of the men she was involved with shows that she was mostly victimized, the Arab culture frowns upon women who marry repeatedly, and equates multiple marriages with loose morals. Her daughter's endless stream of faux-pas and reckless behavior produced unwanted negative publicity, made Sabah a regular tabloid headliner, and further eroded her reputation.

Finally, to sustain her unrestrained lifestyle and formidable financial obligations towards her family, Sabah mercilessly abused her voice, accepting endless engagements in second-rate night clubs around the world, especially after the Lebanese war had crippled the entertainment industry and left most performers out of work. By 1982, she found herself with a severe vocal impediment (hoarseness and breathiness) which proved irreversible this time, at the relatively young age of 55. Although the vigor of her voice remained intact, her fans found it hard to accept the new and unimproved version of Sabah, coming back to reclaim her place in the Lebanese musical comedy in a misguided role of a twenty-something woman looking for her father in "Wadi Shamseen". This role ominously signaled the end of her career and was her swan song. Although she managed to stay afloat for at least another two decades, this was mostly due to capitalizing on her erstwhile popularity, larger-than-life persona and good will, rather than consequential artistic output.

This decade is marked by a jaw-dropping marriage of convenience (with a young dancer several decades her junior), grotesque movie roles, eminently forgettable songs, eerily flashy gowns, unbecoming hair-dos, and uninspired musical plays which ended up bombing at the box office. I had the opportunity to watch her in the lackluster, “*al-Ustura - The Sequel*” back in 1997. I felt so embarrassed for her when I found myself in an audience of no more than 10 people. By that time, the mere mention of Sabah’s name elicited more laughter than respect, more pity than admiration. She had become a caricature of herself, yet continued to delude herself by singing live (gauchely), discussing plans to star in upcoming Baalbeck festivals, and to release new CDs, completely oblivious to her obsolescence. In short, she heavily engaged in maladaptive denial, convincing herself that her art and appearance are still coveted assets.

How come Fairouz and Umm Kulthum never had to endure Sabah’s falling out of grace? The answer is at best speculative.

They never played the “youthfulness” or “elegance” game, and never cultivated the myth of the femme fatale. They were detached yet effective mouthpieces to their lyricists, and unlike Sabah, never incarnated the subjects they were singing, and never accentuated their songs with seductive melismas or salacious come-ons, bound to be dismissed as sheer camp.

They were hence allowed to age gracefully, and their voice’s weariness, an inevitable by-product of aging, was readily accepted, embraced, even celebrated.

Further, both divas have led virtually uneventful personal lives that presented little juicy material for the sensation-hungry media. Although Umm Kulthum’s career coincided with critical milestones of Egypt’s history, her notoriety and ubiquitous presence in magazines was mainly attributed to her incomparable voice, powerhouse personality, militancy against the Israeli occupation and endorsement of Nasser’s pan-Arabism. Despite their unfulfilling marriages, Fairouz and Umm Kulthum

never took miscalculated chances and never caused scandals or stirred controversy, thereby preserving their dignity and maintaining their credibility both as performers and women.

Artistically, Fairouz got a lot of help from her Pygmalion Assi Rahbani (with his brother Mansour in tow) who carefully groomed her, crafted her triumphant career, cultivated her mystic public persona, and virtually made all the professional decisions for her. Meanwhile, Sabah, with only her instincts to fall back on to build her career, never erred on the side of caution. While she managed to pull it off with more hits than misses (at least initially), the little guidance she received got her stuck in a conforming and predictable repertoire of reasonably popular working class ditties which either celebrate the glory of marriage to a pauper *Al-Bassata* (i.e. urray for the simple life!), or dwell on the heartbreak of deception by flaky city-boys *Allah Yu’suf ‘Umr il hob* (i.e. cursed be love!), or narrate her flirts with the apple vendor *Mare’ Biya’ il tuffah* (i.e. the apple vendor is passing by) or the building custodian *Ya natur il binayeh* (i.e. hey building custodian). Luckily, her teaming up with some big names in the business yielded more versatile and respectable songs and musical plays. Her occasional forays into the Rahbani or Abdel Wahab territory resulted in gems like *An Nada* (i.e. my love interest), *Jeeb il Mejwez* (i.e. get the *mejwez* - an instrument used in Lebanese villages which consists of a dual flute), *Adday’a* (i.e. take me back to the village), and *Sana Helwa* (i.e. the Arabic version of “Happy Birthday to you” with added stanzas). Romeo Lahoud, her mentor during the early 1970s, takes a lot of credit for propelling her to the height of elegance and class, adorning her repertoire with innovative songs like *Akhadu il rih* (i.e. they took the wind and left me alone), *Lamma a tareek il ‘ayn*, and *M’aalla’ wo mtalla’* (i.e. stuck yet free), and compositions that reek of history and culture. Alas, these collaborations were short-lived, and before long, Sabah was back to recording lesser songs or chewing the scenery in senseless local movie productions.

Many of us rightly believe that Sabah should have retired from singing and media appearance as soon

as she realized her vocal deficiencies, instead of causing irreparable damage to her image. Many also argue that she should have remained single, steering clear from the string of increasingly young suitors, and keeping a low profile altogether. However, these naysayers do not realize that Sabah's personal and artistic lives have fused inextricably. Retirement would mean a death sentence. There are many lessons to be learned from Layla Mrad's demise (after her early retirement, she slipped into oblivion and died a penniless recluse).

Can we blame Sabah for looking for intimacy, love, and adulation all in the wrong places when so many men had failed her, exploited her, and deserted her?

Can we blame her for craving attention, affection, and popularity?

Can we blame her for refusing to "move over" overnight once her artistic gifts started to dwindle, after enjoying the limelight and entertaining millions for so many years?

Can we blame her for being let down by a system that never assures long-term financial comfort to entertainers who reach their autumn years and are forced to continue working beyond their productive years to make ends meet?

Can we blame her for holding on to her fame of yesteryears, refusing to admit to a terrifying reality, without a dependable companion or a mentally stable child by her side?

With her natural proclivities for self-grandeur and psychopathology notwithstanding, we, her fans, the studio system, the entertainment industry, and the public at large, have unwittingly conspired to push Sabah into her pitiful state, denying her the right to reach "successful aging".

We indulged her delusions, hypocritically cheered her grotesque appearance and dubious singing, and invited her over and again to our shows to guarantee a quick laugh and satisfy our pathological curiosity.

In my opinion, show producers should take serious measures to put an end to this self-destructive spree by discouraging her from singing live or singing at all. Show hosts should not query about her upcoming musical plans. Hairdressers and fashion designers should stop flamboyantly showcasing her as a ditzzy starlet. Instead, our efforts should be directed towards preserving her legacy, throwing lavish tributes, inviting young singers to reprise her hits, releasing all her body of work on CD compilations, immortalizing her with statues and eponymous conservatory wings, and assuring her the financial comfort she amply deserves by paying her unsettled royalties from sold or broadcast songs and TV reruns.

Whether or not we appreciate her art or are moved by her songs, we should all recognize her great impact on Lebanese and Arab music, and work harder on altering her public image. In short, we should confer dignity upon this great dame. Perhaps, then, she may regain some of her good judgment, accept reality, and as Eriskon has argued, reach the ego integration stage, i.e., a sense of wholeness, an acceptance that all is well and can only get better... Only this time, she may mean her signature invitation of hope, "Tomorrow rises the sun of *Eid* that ushers in a new day..." (i.e. *bukra bteshrok shams al-eid*).

Ahmad Oueini is associate professor of Education and chairperson of the Department of Education at the Lebanese American University.
Email: aouei@lau.edu.lb

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