

## LAILA ABOU-SAIF



**A young Egyptian feminist who seeks self-realization through the films she has been producing. The heroines of her films share her spirit of defiance and a burning indefatigable desire to do something.**

Early Arab women feminists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries fought for their claims by forming clubs and associations, delivering public speeches, engaging in social work and using their literary talents for the presentation of women's problems through the medium of books and papers.

Nowadays they have the opportunity to adopt new methods which were not possible for their predecessors. Communication media have multiplied. Besides papers and magazines, they have the radio, television and theater programs, national and international women's conferences, university centers and institutes for women studies. They have the support of international organizations like the U.N. which organized in 1975 the Woman's International Year.

Laila Abou-Saif is a young Egyptian intellectual who belongs to a bourgeois family. To escape a marriage she refused, she went to the United States where she studied drama, an art for which she was naturally qualified. After 7 years of work at the University of Illinois, she obtained a Ph.D. in theatrical production, then came back to work in her native country. She could have stayed in the States where she would have joined an emigrant sister in New York. Back in Cairo, she had the chance to parade like any other bourgeois Egyptian woman on the Cairo boulevards. But she preferred to put her dramatic talents at the service of her country women. She chose to live in Egypt where she would try to effect the needed change not only through her theatrical programs but also through her life and by direct contact with the people around her. By so doing, she gave up among other things a salary of 1000 Egyptian Pounds she was receiving as teacher and director of theater at Lawrence University, Wisconsin, and was satisfied with one of 60 Egyptian pounds she received as teacher at the Egyptian Institute for theatre. But, after two years of work there, she decided to work independently.

About her experience in independent living Laila says: "A woman with personal freedom is seen as a threat. If she tries to be independent she will be labelled promiscuous or immoral. She is thus unable to contribute anything to society. People here do not understand the concept of living alone. They cannot comprehend the enjoyment I feel in humming a tune in solitude as I water my plants or in slouching in a corner sipping a coffee... They even feel sorry for the unmarried. I am used to comments like "Poor Laila, she is unmarried ; poor thing, she has no children."

Laila has not been discouraged, however, by threats nor by discouraging comments. Obligated to give up her wish of contributing to women's emancipation by being an actress, a profession considered by society as unfit for a decent woman, she decided to be a theater director and soon discovered that in this position, she could say more than she could ever have said as an actress.

### Ambitious Plan

Her main fight at the moment is to try to change the existing Egyptian Family status law, to get women their rights in terms of divorce, custody of the children, property settlements and so on. Here she feels that women are at their greatest disadvantage.

The main channel of her activities is the theater. She started with a western sophisticated play which was not well understood by the audience. Then she resorted to Egyptian themes, using popular forms of entertainment and folklore as a vehicle: "she became Egyptianized instead of westernized." Her first theatrical attempt in this field was a play which handled the theme of "honor crimes," on which she worked for many months but it was censored and she had to give it up. Then she turned to film-making and was able after six years of work, to produce a film entitled "Where Is my Freedom ?" It is a portrait of nine militant women who achieved success in their professions in spite of laws, social mores and religious sanctions. They included the first woman to remove her veil in public (Huda Shirawi), a painter jailed for five years because of her political beliefs, a school teacher, a social worker and the owner of a pharmacy. There was also footage of women in divorce courts, village women and, in general, women of Egypt's lower classes.

In 1979, she produced "Shafeeqa and Metwalli," a modified version of her play dealing with "honor crimes" which had earlier been censored. It is the tragedy of a young village girl who was led to wayward conduct during her brother's absence and had to incur his savage revenge upon his return.

Now Laila is working on a dramatization of the life of Shajarat el-Durr, a woman who ruled Egypt for 40 days in the 13th century.

Her theatrical work does not prevent her from attempting other forms of social activity. In company of a few European women feminists, who from 15 were finally reduced to 4, she went to Iran to protest against the veiling of Iranian women. She and her companions had to wear the tchador in order to visit the Ayatullah who accepted to give them a few minutes of his time. In spite of the deception she went through, she was able to meet, in secret, a few anti-tchador Iranian women who seemed to live in a climate of fear, but the atmosphere changed when she met a group who daringly supported nationalist and progressive ideals.

Laila Abou-Saif is not only the first woman film producer in Egypt; she is also one of the few dynamic feminists who courageously defy public opinion by their non-conventional way of life, their modernistic views and their faith in woman's potentials.

### Sources :

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