



Courtesy Red Star Production.

Menna Shalabi

Interviewed for *Oryx Premium* by Heba Hashem

The much-admired Egyptian star is back on the big screen after a two-year break.

From a peasant who cooks for rural weddings, to a housemaid with grand dreams, Menna Shalabi's latest roles were a giant leap from the romantic comedy persona that she has long maintained.

But it was no coincidence. The multi-award-winning actress and UNAIDS Goodwill Ambassador has become increasingly selective about the roles she accepts, choosing deep, meaningful storylines that resonate with the real world.

"People are the reason for my success," she tells *Oryx Premium*. "So when I get the chance to play a humanitarian role, I can't say no. You can't think selfishly; you can't turn down a good role in a major film just because your part is minor."

In her latest film *Nawara*, set to be released this month, Menna portrays a housemaid who works for the family of Osama Bek (Mahmoud Hemeda), a headstrong official who represents the obstacle to her dreams, although she doesn't realise this.



As she leaves her small neighbourhood every day to work in the luxurious villa, all she yearns for is to make her world complete by settling into married life, getting a water connection, and other humble ambitions.

The film is set in Cairo following the 2011 revolution, but rather than creating a political viewpoint, it merely observes the situations of ordinary people during this period, and their interactions with each other.

Yet the 34-year-old actress insists that politics is not her cup of tea; that she was compelled by the humanitarian and social aspects of the film. "I had for a while done roles that weren't challenging," she says. "Now I consider roles that nobody else would do."

While previous films saw Menna act alongside other stars, *Nawara* mostly revolves around her, a responsibility she didn't take lightly. "I was worried people would focus on how different I looked rather than on my character, as there's a very fine line between both. But I believed in the role and wanted to be seen as *Nawara*."

And it was her powerful performance in this movie that landed her the Best Actress award at the Dubai International Film Festival 2015.

Having lost weight for her latest projects, Menna is now expected to put on a few pounds for her next feature film, *The Good Face*. Co-starring Laila Elwi and Bassem Samra, it follows the lives of three peasants who work as wedding cooks in rural Egypt, their relationships with others, and occasional struggles.

With such a hectic schedule, it's no surprise that Menna often misses her flights and even train stops. "I was on a train in Paris with friends, and we saw people drumming Adaweyah's *sha'abi* (traditional Egyptian) songs. We got so carried away with them that we missed our station. It took us a while before we found a taxi!"

A carefree spirit, the stylish actress loves shopping overseas and hopes to visit Spain soon, describing it as "cosmopolitan and full of life".

While she admits that she gets special treatment at some airports, it's not something she expects. "If I get recognition, that's great; if not, that's fine. I don't like to provoke people or make exceptions for myself. I just stand in queues and go through customs like everybody else." ☺

The daughter of famous dancer and performer Zizi Mustafa, Menna Shalabi started acting at the age of 16 and made her film debut in *The Magician* when she was 19. But the actress was actually quite shy as a child. That was until her mother realised she was cleverly faking her sickness to skip school and encouraged her to enrol in a professional acting institute.

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