

TALENT

Breaking Stereotypes One Laugh At A Time

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'being i] ZXdj cigfhifunniest girl. by Elspeth Dehnert

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Tell us a bit about your background.

I was born and raised here in Jordan. I studied at the University of Jordan and got a degree in finance and business administration. While I was at university, I was always writing stories so I got introduced to the RFC (Royal Film Commission) and through them I took a lot of filmmaking workshops, and I started to produce and write my own things. That led me to the Red Sea Institute of Cinematic Arts where I got an MA in cinematic arts, writing, and producing – it changed my life.

How did you get into the comedy side of TV/film production?

When I was a kid I was always performing. I wrote stories and would gather my cousins to act them out, and my mother would shoot the movie. I really wanted to be a director, and then I discovered that I love producing and writing. I love writing comedy, but I didn’t know that I could perform comedy. The day that I graduated from the Red Sea Institute I went to see the *Bath Bayakha* team in Amman, and I auditioned just for fun. They loved me and asked me to be the lead female actress for the Ramadan 2011 season. I was like “Ok, but I want to write because I came here to write, not act,” and they told me that the actors are the writers. So I wrote all the girly things that related to the episodes. It was amazing.

Tell us more about your time with Bath Bayakha. Why did you leave?

Actually, we had disagreements. They are my friends and I love them, but they wanted the whole show to revolve around Rami and Wissam [the leading male comedians]. And then when people started to know me, they told me that they still want me to be a writer but not the only female lead. So I said it’s fine, just continue on, good luck, and I will go my own way. I had already shot the pilot for *Fe-Male* at that time.

How did the idea for Fe-male come about?

I got the idea for *Fe-Male* a long time ago when I was at school. I always wanted to do a show that presents issues and talks about stuff. Then when I realized people know me, I thought, ok, maybe it’s time now to do my own show. It made sense. It was not planned.

What is the idea or concept behind Fe-Male?

Basically, *Fe-Male* started as an idea to discuss stuff from a girl’s point of view – especially because I’m the only female comedian in Jordan. I knew it would be hard to start on my own because people think that girls are not funny.

Why do you think people assume girls are not funny?

I have no idea! I didn’t know this until I was doing an interview on TV and she said, “Girls are not funny,” and I was like, “Really, ah, maybe...”



There doesn’t seem to be many female comedians in the Middle East and, in specific, Jordan. What kind of challenges do female comedians in this part of the world face?

It was very hard in the beginning, especially because I started on my own. People said, “You’re not funny. You can’t act. You’re stupid, and you don’t represent Arab girls; you are promiscuous.” We have Jordanian actresses, but they don’t go on the streets and experiment. I went in my pajamas to the Friday market and people just couldn’t get it: “How did you do this? How did you go there and stay alive?” And, you know, it wasn’t that bad. It was fun and people were really friendly to me. I have also faced family issues, being a girl and doing this stuff. I have issues with my family; I have issues with the people around me; and of course, with the people who watch me; they really cursed on me. It was very hard. But, to be honest, this was



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in the beginning – 30 percent; 70 percent loved what I did. And then 20 percent, 10 percent, and now it’s maybe 2 percent. I always believe that there is someone who should break a rule. And I would be really happy to see more girls going into comedy and online shows because I would feel that I have made this easier for them. I think now in Jordan, especially now, it’s time for Jordanian TV, comedy, drama, film, and everything to rise.

***Fe-Male* now has a leading male comedian – who plays your fiancé – and the show revolves around the relationship. How did this come about?**

I wanted an episode about relationships between guys and girls. So I thought to take this episode to another level – I want to have a boy’s point of view. And

Rajae [Qawas] was the best choice for me because he’s strong and always complains, so it’s funny and a nice contrast. So, we built the 2012 Ramadan season around the relationship and how we got engaged and the family, the problems. The whole idea for me is to show people that, especially here in Jordan and the Arab world, when you want to get engaged – even though you love each other – it’s all full of stress, family problems, what people say, what my family wants, what your family wants, and it creates tension between the two lovers, who then start fighting and forget why they want to get married. To be honest, I’m shocked by the reaction; the feedback is amazing, and I’m so, so happy about this. I still can’t believe it.

So, it’s like social commentary and

criticizing these little things that happen in the Arab world, but you’re doing it in a funny way.

Exactly, and we laugh at ourselves before we laugh at people. Our comedy is actual, real situations – this is what happens between a guy and a girl, this is what happens between the families – and that’s why it’s really hard, but it’s really nice to know that you have affected people the way you wanted them to be affected, and it means a lot to have accomplished this. It means the world to me actually.

Tell me about your character in the show. Is she anything like you in real life?

The funny thing is that people think that it’s really me because I’m using my real name and Rajae is using his real name. They think that we’re actually married and they think that these are our real families. But it’s nice that they think that because it means that they think it’s real. But you can’t believe the amount of people asking me, “Are you really married to Rajae?” And I’m like, “No guys, it’s acting! He’s married and has a kid.” The way I act is a lot like me; the way I talk, yes, but the character itself, no, it’s not based on me. It’s based on the general idea that everyone has about a girl in the Middle East, and we are trying to break the stereotype in a way. All the girls relate to it. When I walk in the mall they tell me, “I’m engaged and it is exactly what we went through!”

Do you think the Internet is a better platform for comedy than television? How has it contributed to the show’s success?

It’s the reason for the success of the show. I never thought that the Internet would have this effect. Without the Internet, there is no show. It reaches more people. Everyone sees it, and now my target audience is the people who don’t watch TV, and I’m one of these people. Because the Internet gives the freedom for the person to choose what they want to watch; it’s not forced on them by TV. So, if they like you, they like you because they chose to watch you. In the Middle East, most of the young people live with their parents, and I think having the Internet is a way of maybe expressing or having a little thing for themselves – to control what they see.

What are your future plans?

I love writing – it’s my main thing – and I have written a feature film. I’m going to proceed with it when I have time because I’m currently working on a TV series as a producer and actor. After that, I’ll think of *Fe-Male*, and then I’ll see. I want to get into movies more. And, yeah, I’ll see where it goes from there.

Fe-Male is a Filmizjon and Khanabeesh co-production. ■