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Staying In Character

Monica Yunus gets her feet wet by Kathleen Flood Portrait by Bryce Bridges

As Monica Yunus steps into the Doha Grand Hyatt pool in her George Chakra couture dress, she trusts us to do our job so she can do hers.

Monica plays many roles. She is an opera singer; she's a risk taker; she is a catalyst for change. The humanitarian was recently honored for her developments with Sing for Hope at the 21st Century Leaders awards ceremony held at Grand Hyatt Doha in late October.

As the daughter of Muhammad Yunus, recipient of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for establishing the Grameen Bank, a community development bank that makes small loans to the poor, Monica first thought her award was sent to the wrong Yunus. "I really thought that well maybe they're trying to get this letter to my dad or something," she said. "So I was totally taken aback and humbled by the whole thing."

Monica says her father is a revolutionary thinker and absolutely relentless at that, but the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

THE CATALYST

As one of the founders and co-directors of Sing For Hope, her biggest fear is to not have enough time to get everything done that she wants. "I want to sing on the world's greatest stages with as many varieties of artists as possible because it's not just about opera for me. I really love music in general. I'd like to bring music and the arts to as many people as possible through Sing for Hope," Monica says.

Sing for Hope is a non-profit organization that maintains a roster of 600 artists including opera singers, Broadway actors, musicians, dancers, etc., all who donate their time in one of three volunteer service programs.

There is the gala arts track where artists do benefit concerts to raise funds for humanitarian causes like the Children's Aid Society and Habitat for Humanity, as well as the healing arts sector where artists perform in area hospitals and elderly care facilities. An additional focus is the informance arts, where professional teaching artists work with underserved children in schools on a regular basis, supplemented with artists that go in and give live performances.

"These are kids who would have no other opportunity, even in New York, to go see a Broadway show, because they can't afford a \$60 ticket. They would never walk up to the MET, because what is that; I don't know what that is; why would I go there? So we bring it to them. And we're arts activists because we're not necessarily trying to create the next generation of artists per se. Although if that happens – fantastic. We're just allowing, giving the space and creativity and inspiration and skills sets to find one's creative voice," Monica says about the school program.

The children learn about and experience a variety of artists, from the Freedom Singers from the Civil Rights Movement to watching a Cambodian dance troupe that has preserved their culture through dance. Monica says some artists are terrified of going into schools because kids don't have a filter. "You can't take it personally, you have to be a little thick-skinned and ready and willing to work with them. And the same with hospitals, it's not easy to go into a hospital room and perform. There is no glitz and glamour involved in that. I mean that is real outreach."

When Monica visited her native Bangladesh for the first time

with her father, she found the country was pulsating. "It's indescribable because in a way there's a tragic beauty about it and I say that in the best kind of way, I don't say that in a put-down way. There's just sometimes beauty in pain. And I say that as an artist, so I don't want that to be misinterpreted. There's just something so incredible. You will just see moments, just if you're traveling around, you'll see moments, everyday moments that are just so incredible." Monica shares moments like these with children and the sick through Sing for Hope.

"One of the doctors at Mount Sinai, a huge hospital in New York, said 'You know you're giving these patients ... some of them will not leave the hospital, they're not going to make it out. So you're giving them a last piece of beauty from the world.'"

She finds the work addicting because when she experiences a personal moment with a child or patient she gets a high, but different from the kind of high she gets when she's performing.

"You don't always have creative control when you're on stage, someone is directing you, some conductor is telling you to get off the beat. This is personal and I think we all become artists because we want to give that back."

But Monica is careful to focus on one child at a time.

"I'm not going to assume I can help 3 million people at once. When my dad started, that was the best advice that I could hear from him: 'Don't worry about helping a million kids have access to arts education. Worry about one kid in one school.'"

THE SOPRANO

Monica's life is set to music, so sometimes she prefers silence. "My whole world is sound and I live in New York City, so sometimes I just want quiet. There's a music to that."

Sometimes though, opera is misinterpreted. "People say opera stuff is boring – that's not true. It's visceral. It's extremely visceral and anybody who tells me that it's for old people hasn't been to the right opera. They just haven't seen the right performer, I'm sorry. It's not for old people, I hate that."

One of her favorite roles that she's sung is Norina in *Don Pasquale*. "She's a pistol. She's really smart and she's a little conniving. She's a strong female character in opera when so many of them are so weak and wishy-washy." Monica will be singing the role of the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* coming up in February with Opera Omaha in Omaha, Nebraska, USA.

Monica's life as opera singer, when not protecting her voice from smoky environments and loud crowds, is somewhat glamorous.

Like for the ABODE photo shoot, Monica was wearing a George Chakra dress when she opened the Al Bustan Festival in Beirut two years ago and also when she sung with Placido Domingo in Jordan. "Singing with a legend, being onstage with someone I've admired for years, in this stunning ancient spot in the middle of the desert. It doesn't really get any better than that."

But she doesn't let couture, jewels or singing with her mentors distract her from what really matters. Monica is accessible and comfortable to be around; comfortable enough to step into a pool in the gown she accepted her 21st Century Leaders award in.

"Life is too short to have airs. The people that are really at the very top of their game are not hard to talk to, because you have to stay connected to be relevant. Otherwise you just spin an ego, and what good is that? It doesn't do anything, so I'm not interested."