

FINAL LOOK

By Adel Heine

Photographed by Ahmed Mobarez

FACE *of the* FUTURE

*Ehaab
Abdou*

MUSIC FOR THE MIND

Ehaab Abdou is many things to many people. To the hundreds of impoverished families he has helped through his NGO, he is a saviour; to the young people he has led, educated and furnished with endless career opportunities, he is an inspiration; and to thousands of others, he's just one hell of an awesome singer/songwriter. Adel Heine meets an exceptional and multi-faceted young Egyptian who is determined to change the world – one person at a time.

*E*haab Abdou started like many a young Egyptian professional, studying business administration at the American University in Cairo. Always keen to participate, the man about campus kicked off his extracurricular career by joining AIESEC – a worldwide student organisation that aims to act as “an international platform for young people to discover and develop their potential so as to have a positive impact on society.” His ascendancy to President of the Egypt chapter in 1995 had a big impact on his life, “It gave me a feeling of empowerment, it taught me when you really want to do something, you can.” A brief post graduation stint in the corporate world grated against Abdou’s socially responsible personality and the world of development came calling with jobs at the Near East Foundation and Canada’s International Development Research

Centre. “I learned a lot from these two wonderful organisations and realised this is the field where I belong.”

Yet Abdou still longed to make a tangible and immediate contribution. So in 1999 he established Fath’het Khier (A Start to Prosperity) along with a few friends. The organisation was to be a micro-finance NGO serving the Moqattam area of Cairo. “At the time there were very few NGOs and most were run by rich individuals who weren’t really focusing on young people, so we decided to establish our own.” The project has so far successfully supported over 500 families in sustainable income-generating projects.

Having found his passion, Abdou set out to excel. “I started to realise I needed to improve my skills and understanding of the development field,” he says. So he went to the US to earn a Masters degree in International Development from the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Towards

the end of his studies, Abdou came into contact with the international Ashoka Foundation, which carefully selects and supports social entrepreneurs through their Fellow Program. The program then helps the selected individuals achieve their goals in sustainable development. Abdou's dream was to create Nahdet El Mahrousa, now one of the most active youth led NGOs in the country. "Our goal is to mobilise young professionals," he says. "We aim to create hope and to reverse the ongoing feeling of apathy and negativity about our country and offer a positive alternative. We tell our young well-educated population that there are no more excuses. If you have a dream for the country, then go for it. If people with a good education don't do it, who else will; and if not now, then when?" Nahdet El Mahrousa offers active support in the practical realisation of ideas, by offering logistical support, guidance through the maze of rules and regulations and finding funding until an idea becomes a national program which serves thousands of people.

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Awe-inspiringly multi-faceted Abdou continues to nurture another passion – music. "I love music; it comes from a need to express myself." During his years at university he would sometimes perform old Egyptian songs for groups of friends, but the musical side of his life had always been relegated to hobby status. Yet, always an enforcer of change, Abdou became increasingly frustrated by the local Arabic music scene. "Arabic music is mostly about *habibi*, even my foreign friends would ask me 'What is *habibi*?' It's the first word they learn! Why are the issues and problems of our society not being captured in our art? I think good music should give the audience a chance to both enjoy the melody and send a message that represents our reality and dreams as well as our pride in what we have." In 2001 he took six months of professional vocal training to further develop his voice, and kicked off a series of critically acclaimed local concerts. His most recent musical outing – dubbed *Ana Masri (I am Egyptian)* – featured his own compositions as well as old and contemporary Egyptian songs, Egyptian Christian hymns and Muslim Sufi chanting. Abdou is very enthusiastic about the concept: "We are reminding people what equality is about," he says.

At the very core of Abdou's philosophy is a search for excellence; both professional and personal. "You have to try to do something positive in whatever you do; by being a good role model, being righteous, honouring people and hopefully being an example to others. When I go to bed every night, I just want to feel that I tried my best." ■

ENIGMA QUESTIONNAIRE

Describe yourself in three words...

Hopeful, creative, impatient.

What is the one thing you would save if your house was on fire?
Either my journals or my laptop where I have written my ideas and reflections.

Who is your hero?

Ghandi.

Which book has had the biggest impact on you?

Actually, there are two. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *The Alchemist*. And I used to love *The Little Prince*!

What do you love most about the Middle East?

The generosity and the hospitality.

What do you hate most about the Middle East?

Unfounded arrogance and the lack of equality in income between religious groups and gender that comes with that arrogance.

How can each of us make a difference in the world?

What has worked for me is to come up with a mission statement for how I want to see myself by the end of the year. Have a clear vision and you will naturally find ways to achieve it.