

Laila wears Rohit Bal designed for Maaha throughout

Luscious Laila!

Stunning actress Laila Rouass has set the screen alight with her acting talent and gorgeous looks. **Afsheen Shaikh** meets the soap siren turned movie star

Laila Rouass is no stranger to Asian Woman Magazine. The British-Asian actress unequivocally singled out for her exotic-fused roots, has frequently graced the covers and pages for her fashion sense, looks and illustrious profession but today there is a different aura about her and the last three years may explain why.

Away from prying eyes, she tied the knot, gave birth to her first child and threw herself into a gruelling work schedule, the result of which are three films released this year.

The 32-year-old effortlessly slipped from soap siren in *Hollyoaks* to drama queen in the ridiculous yet compelling series *Footballers' Wives* and is now shining on the silver screen. But while her brief hiatus from the spotlight has been filled with joy, Laila has had to contend with her personal life being dissected in the tabloid press. Here, the raven-haired beauty tentatively lifts the lid on her closely guarded private life, divulges some secrets and talks openly about her replenished career.

I'm ushered into a suite located several floors up in the Wyndham Grand, a lavish hotel overlooking London's Chelsea harbour and favoured by celebrities because of its high levels of security and guaranteed privacy. Not even the lift is accessible without a programmed key. The suite occupied for Laila's photo shoot is scattered with delights to make any girl purr - a modest collection of designer shoes neatly placed on the floor, a Louis Vuitton case flung open on the bed and an array of jewellery and other trinkets laid out on a table.

"Last year was so hectic," she explains as her big, brown eyes glance in my direction. "I had my baby in February and then started filming in May for Shoot on Sight followed by Apron Strings." *Shoot on Sight*, which premiered at the Dubai Film Festival last December, focuses on the recent terrorism attacks in the UK and is loosely based on the shooting of Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell tube station in the summer of 2005. Boasting an elite cast led by Naseeruddin Shah and directed by Jag Mundhra, it's a project Laila feels passionately about.

"Coming from a background of erotic films, Jag Mundhra is such an interesting and brave director, tackling subjects not many people would want to deal with.

"Naseer's character, Tariq Ali is a superintendent in the police force and I play Ruby Kaur, his professional partner. Their relationship is based on mutual respect and it's the purest relationship he has. She's Sikh and he's Muslim but she is more understanding of the choices he has to make and is non-judgemental about it.

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"The film shows how the colour of your skin becomes embroiled in the politics and Tariq has to decide if he can be a police officer and a Muslim at the same time. He goes to the mosque but he's not overtly fundamental in his beliefs, yet he has to question what the right thing to do is." As well as appearing alongside Naseeruddin Shah, Laila also shares the bill with Om Puri. "It was such an honour to work with both of them. I'd go on set just to watch Naseer and Om when I wasn't shooting; it was like watching magic happen," she gushes. "There's such a presence about them from the minute they walk in and it comes across on camera too."

Laila is also keen to talk about *Apron Strings*, which delves into taboo subjects the Asian community prefers to sweep under the rug. Set in New Zealand the plot follows the life of Anita, an Indian celebrity chef who is disowned by her family after she falls pregnant by her white boyfriend.

She explains: "Anita's reaching her 40s while her son is at an age where he is questioning who his father is and why he's never met her side of the family. He then discovers them while she's got a lot of unfinished business with her sister to sort out. When they meet up they realise they have to work through their differences plus Anita has to get to grips with her past returning to haunt her and how this affects the relationship she's presently in. She's fighting people through her personal and professional life when all she wants to do is be herself and she's not the kind of woman to compromise either."

Laila has notched up an impressive list of roles. She's starred opposite Phil Daniels in new film *Freebird*, worked with Sunil Shetty and Rishi Kapoor in *Don't Stop Dreaming*, appeared with Meera Syal in the television adaptation of Syal's novel, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* and had a part in Shekhar Kapur's *The Four Feathers* with the late Heath Ledger. Laila has also now been cast in popular TV show *Primeval* and we can expect to see her on screen in early 2009. "I play the new regular called Dr Sarah Page. She is an Egyptologist. She's a real intellect, quite nerdy but in a totally cool way. She is enthusiastic and the team are so impressed with her knowledge that they ask her to become part of their team", she says.

So, is the character anything like her? "A little bit. I am very enthusiastic about my work. I love what I do and still get excited about acting. Sarah loves what she does and needless to say that fighting all the prehistoric creatures is a real adrenaline rush for her!"

Having taken a one year break from acting to focus on motherhood, Laila is ▶



Shoot on Sight sees powerful performances by (From left) Naseeruddin Shah, Greta Scacchi, Om Puri, Sadie Frost and Avtar Kaul



back on TV and loving it. "I always wanted to take a year off work to spend with my daughter and I have done that. I did a couple of movies but she travelled with me. Now I don't feel too guilty about working. I have a great balance in my life and I want her to see her mum working. It feels great to be back at work on something like this. I am very lucky *Primeval* is such a popular show, it's surreal and great fun to do."

Laila is also philosophical about a Hollywood career. "As an actress you have to be open to all types of genres so of course America appeals to me but you have to love the show you're doing, especially in the States because you sign six year deals. If you don't love the character you're playing, it will be a long struggle. I am open to all types of acting work providing I love the script, the character and the production."

At the Asian Woman cover shoot, the team had a real challenge on their hands. On the one hand the selection of outfits from Variety Silk House were absolutely stunning then to make matters worse Laila looked nothing short of spectacular in every single one! Choosing just one outfit for the cover was hard work!

If you do nothing else this weekend, make a trip down to Variety Silk House and step into fashion heaven with a jaw-dropping selection of saris, lenghas, and other gorgeous and on trend Indian outfits. We challenge you to not fall in love with their collection!

Variety Silk House, 148 to 152 Ealing Road, Wembley, London HA0 4PY, UK
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Laila Loves...



What beauty products do you swear by?
I use Dr Lewinns and Dermalogica as they're fantastic for my skin.

What cosmetic brands do you use?
MAC - I particularly love their eye shadows. I also adore Tigi's Bedhead range of hair products (their chocolate conditioner smells delicious). They've also got an oatmeal body scrub, which is divine.



What's your biggest fashion vice?
Shoes - I have at least half a room full of them. My latest pair is by Giuseppe Zanotti - plain black leather with a strap and a leopard print heel.



What was the last thing you bought?
My jumbo Chanel handbag; it's a classic.

Who's your favourite fashion designer?
I love Indian designers like Tarun Tahiliani and Suneet Varma but I also like Burberry's latest collection and I am really keen on Walé Adeyemi, a British-born Nigerian designer who does some fantastic stuff that's very urban and street.



Who styles you for a big event?
If I want a gown for a special night, I go to Robert de Keyser. He carries a lot of designers and will even loan me outfits if I am going abroad. I'm also lucky as he gives me a good allowance every year so I pop along to Harvey Nichols or Harrods and pick out what I want in every colour!



Which Desperate Housewives' character do you identify with?
I love that show and I think I'm a bit of Bree Van De Kamp. When disaster strikes, get the Marigolds out and clean.

What's been your favourite red carpet moment?
At the 2004 MOBO awards I ha dress made by Scott Henshall a the 2005 MOBOs I wore a beau Cunningham bright red number has got to be one of my favouri don't usually wear a lot of colou



Laila will be seen in *Primeva* this year and in *Shoot on S* the end of July

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