

FEATURES



SARAH SHAHI SCORES A SERIES

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February 2011

It's hard to believe that you are talking about only one person when discussing the life and career of Sarah Shahi. A descendant of Iranian royalty (her great-great-grandfather was a 19th Century Iranian king), Sarah Shahi was born Aahoo Jahansouz Shahi and raised in the small town of Euless, Texas.

She spent her teenaged years in competitive beauty pageants and went on to major in English and Theater at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas before joining the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders and gracing the cover of their 2000 calendar. Also in 2000, a chance meeting with legendary auteur Robert Altman pointed her in the direction of Hollywood, where she has been enjoying life as a working

actor ever since. Her characters have sat next to a naked Will Ferrell in Todd Phillips' *Old School* (2003), slept with Tony Soprano on a 2007 episode of HBO's "The Sopranos," been tangled in triangular love scenarios on Showtime's "The L Word" (2004-2009), and worked as a detective recovering from substance abuse on NBC's "Life" (2007-2009). Along with having racked up ten years of solid TV and film credits, including appearances on "Alias" (2001), "Dawson's Creek" (2003), and "ER" (2003), the radiant actress is also a trained opera singer, a brown belt in Shorin-Ryu karate, a wife (married to actor Steve Howey, whom she met while shooting a 2004 episode of "Reba"), and a mom (William Wolf Howey was born in 2009). With her career and life in full swing, Sarah Shahi now stars in "Fairly Legal," the USA Network's saucy new drama that follows the life of a frustrated lawyer-turned-mediator with an uncanny knack for resolving other people's conflicts and little ability to manage her own.

Though Shahi thinks of herself as a "glasses and beanie girl," her eye-catching beauty is not something that wearing glasses and a beanie can do a very good job of concealing. And when you meet her for the first time, she has a way of immediately making you feel like you've known her for a while, like you're catching up with an old friend. This quality blends nicely with her striking looks and makes Sarah Shahi an extraordinarily nice person to be around.

Venice : Do you remember when you first became interested in acting? And who you consider were your biggest influences?

Sarah Shahi: When I was eight years old, I was completely obsessed with "I Dream of Jeannie." I would picture myself as Jeannie and wonder what I would do if I were in those situations. And then I would just start role-playing. I would watch

“Robin Hood” and start role-playing as Maid Marian. My mom, being a single mother, would take me to work with her and there was a black and white TV that only picked up two stations. Somehow, they always showed Katharine Hepburn and Sophia Loren movies, so Katharine Hepburn and Sophia Loren became huge influences. I would picture myself in the lead role and see how I would feel as that person. I’ve always loved make believe.

How did being a Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader factor into your becoming a film and TV actor?

I wanted to be an actress, but I didn’t know where to begin. In 1995, I was in a production of “Chicago” at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and a background dancer told me that the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders had made an appearance on “Saturday Night Live.” So I tried out for the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders for the sole purpose of getting on “Saturday Night Live.” I didn’t have any cheerleading experience. *[laughs]*

Was being a Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader something that helped prepare you for a career in Hollywood?

Yes. That world is actually a lot more competitive than Hollywood. There’s a lot of backstabbing and it was definitely the toughest audition process I have ever been through. You are constantly learning, rehearsing, and practicing. You have to work very hard and learn to protect yourself. They weigh you out to a hundredth of a pound and if you are above that goal weight, you sit out that game. It was very tough and demanding, especially since I never even wanted to be a cheerleader! I did it because, at the time, I really thought that it would lead me to “Saturday Night Live.” *[laughs]*

During this time, you were an extra on the set of *Dr. T and the Women* (2000) and Robert Altman suggested that you move to Los Angeles. Exactly how did this transpire?

I had no idea who Robert Altman was. He was using the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader rehearsal facilities as the set for his movie. We were told that we were absolutely forbidden to fraternize with the “Hollywood people,” but Robert and I just kind of ended up hanging out and becoming friends on the set, talking about everything except Hollywood and movies. After about two weeks, he asked me what I wanted to do with my life and I told him that I wanted to be an actress. He gave me his contact information and offered to help me. It never even occurred to me to approach him for help.

You had no idea that you had made friends with one of the all-time great Hollywood directors?

No. *[laughs]* I was 19 and, after we got to know each other a little, I googled him and saw his credits. At the time, the only movie of his that I’d ever heard of was *Popeye* (1980). I remember getting very excited and calling my mom and saying, “Oh, my God! This guy directed *Popeye*!” *[laughs]*

And then what happened?

I had written down the phone numbers he gave me in one of my books about acting and some of the other girls stole it from me.

Some of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders stole Robert Altman’s contact information from you?

Yes. The book was eventually recovered and returned to me with the phone numbers still intact.

So the two of you finally connected?

No. We called each other, leaving messages for three months, but never actually talked. During this time, I started watching his movies. *MASH* (1970), *The Player* (1992), *Short Cuts* (1993), *Pret-a-Porter* (1994). As I learned more about who he was, I became more and more intimidated. I actually became too intimidated to return his call, so I never called him back. I was too scared. Too scared to return Robert Altman’s call. *[laughs]*

You came to Hollywood and built a successful acting career without using your connection to Robert Altman. Do you remember the first thing you did when you arrived in LA?

Drove down Sunset Boulevard like everyone else does when they first come to LA. *[laughs]*

What was the first gig that you booked?

“City Guys” (2000). A Saturday morning, half hour show. I played a cheerleader. I couldn’t get away from being a cheerleader for about a year after I came to Hollywood. I played a cheerleader on “Boston Public” in 2001. I auditioned for the role of cheerleader a lot back then.

You’ve done an impressive amount of work since your cheerleading days. “The L Word” on Showtime, “Life” on NBC, a lot of film and TV roles. Do you have any notable stories or experiences that really stand out?

On my first day of shooting for “The L Word,” I had to do a scene with Kate Moennig, who played my love interest. It was the first time I met Kate and my very first scene on the show. The A.D. looked at me and said, “Okay. Now, Kate is going to give you oral.” [laughs] First day! First scene! That was my introduction to “The L Word.” [laughs] I remember when I first booked the show, my mom asked, “What does L stand for?” I said, “Love, of course. It stands for love.” [laughs]

You played a stripper who spends a weekend in Vegas with Tony Soprano on a very memorable episode of “The Sopranos.” What was it like working with James Gandolfini?

It was great. He is a storyteller and very much a method actor. Our characters took mushrooms and James wanted something that would really taste foul, so he got some vinegar so he could really get that effect. When he had to limp for a scene, he put a spoon in his shoe. He’s also a tremendously giving actor, even when he’s not on camera. Some actors will check their cell phones and read their lines off the script when the camera is not on them. Not James. He gives and gives, even when the camera is not on him. I learned a lot from him.

If you taught an acting class, what would you emphasize most about the craft of acting?

That you just have to pretend to be somebody else as best as you possibly can. Acting is real make believe. That’s the best way I know how to put it. If you can understand that, you can get work as an actor.

Kate Reed, your character on “Fairly Legal,” gave up a successful career as an attorney to become a mediator because she got tired of the unfair nature of the legal system. How did you prepare to play her?

I spent a lot of time dissecting the script and the character with my acting coach (Bill Howey). The show is not procedural heavy, so the most important thing was getting to Kate’s heart, not studying legal procedures or anything like that. We worked on creating a character. Her background. Her history. Figuring her out psychologically and emotionally. She is very childlike and makes her decisions based on her heart and her emotions. We worked a lot on character backstory, but the main focus was her heart.

As a mediator, Kate Reed is an expert at solving conflicts and arriving at a decision that will make both opposing sides happy. Is this a quality that you relate to?

My dad left our family when I was eight. I was raised by a single mother with three children. I had to grow up quickly. I went from eight years old to thirty in about a week. So, with that, yes, I do tend to take on that role in my life. I’ve always been someone that people come to when they want help figuring things out. I think it’s just something that I became as a result of my having to grow up so quickly.

What do you want the audience to get out of watching “Fairly Legal”?

Just to be taken on a journey and to be entertained. I have a lot of fun playing Kate Reed, so I want people to have fun watching her! She’s a flirty, feisty, fun character and it’s a flirty, feisty show. It’s not “Law & Order.” It’s “Sex and the City” meets “Law & Order.” It’s fun. It’s all very tongue-in-cheek. We’re not trying to solve world problems. [laughs] ▼

“Fairly Legal” premieres Thursday, January 20, at 10PM on The USA Network.