

# Alone With Them All

**Lina Abyad**

## The First Encounter

On the steps of the Fine Arts building.  
I rediscover this campus after fifteen years of absence.

I see a woman step forward. She should be in her mid-fifties. I have the impression of someone who is walking in another space, another time. There is nothing usual or common about her. The way she dresses, the strong red colour of her hair, but most strikingly the way she moves. Her silhouette is in contrast to that of the students: they are 20 years old but look tired and drag along. As for Renée, she moves as if parading on a catwalk.

She vanishes into the staircase that leads to the classes of the Fine Arts.

I ask: "Who is this woman?"

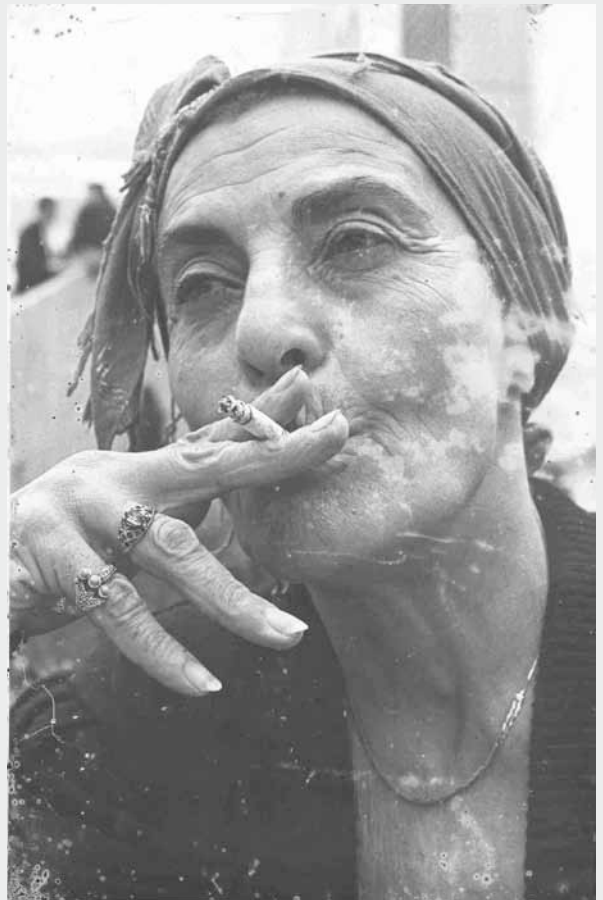
Someone replies: "Renée Deek. She poses for the drawing classes".

I heard about her. She had a remarkable performance in Jawad el-Assadi's revival of *The Maids* by Jean Genet. I am fascinated by the woman, a real character.

Very quickly, Renée and I become friends. This rarely happens with me.

## The Rebel

Renée is still a schoolgirl when she talks to her parents about her desire to become an actress. They both disapprove categorically. She leaves home, quits school, and seeks shelter at a family friend. She joins an art class given by the painter Michel el-Mirr. Soon, he asks her to pose nude for him. She does not understand the concept of modelling for a painter. She is shocked. She cries her heart out. Patiently, he explains to her the importance of a model to a painter. He lends her his books. But Renée is appalled by el-Mirr's proposition and she cries persistently.



Renée Deek

## A Tragedy in the Byblos Ruins

Around that time, circa summer 1962, Renée discovers *Macbeth* directed by Mounir Abu Debs in the Byblos ruins. She talks to Michel el-Mirr and shares her dreams with him: she would love to act. "I know Mounir, I will introduce you to him and in return, will you become my model?" Renée hesitates.



Renée Deek the actress.

The meeting with the director takes place at the painter's house. Renée is so terrified by Abu Debs' presence that, when el-Mirr disappears in the kitchen to prepare the coffee, she runs away.

### Back to School

Abu Debs invites Renée to join his theater group. The first step is acting school: the director believes that an actor should be trained first and only then s/he can perform. All the members of Abu Debs' troupe must take classes in voice, corporal expression, singing, and text analysis. The Baalbeck Festival organization has been seduced by Abu Debs' proposition and made available for him an old Lebanese house on Bliss Street for rehearsals.

### She is Twenty Years Old

Renée poses, in the nude, for el-Mirr. The first sessions are painful for the model, but the painter is patient. Quickly, she becomes known in the world of Lebanese painters and is able to earn her living

by posing for Juliana Saroufim, Rachid Wehbe, Jean Khalife, and others. In the fifties, the Lebanese painters get on the bandwagon of drawing nudes. Renée draws my attention that today this trend has been totally neglected.

"Is it a matter of trend or is it a social issue?" wonders the model.

Later, in the mid-seventies, she poses for students at the Lebanese University and Beirut University College (BUC currently Lebanese American University, LAU).

In winter, it is so cold in the art studio classrooms that Renée keeps her clothes on, and in summer she poses in her bathing suit.

In the late seventies, fundamentalist militias permanently ban posing in bathing suits in various universities across the country. "The model must be dressed decently!" comments Renée.

### First Death

Renée tells it to me like one tells an adolescent's secret. She is now part of the Abu Debs group. She starts rehearsing for a role but a few days later the director decides to give the part to another actress. Disgusted and hurt, Renée decides to quit the acting workshop. But Abu Debs calls her back and promises her the role.

She resumes rehearsals.

A few days later, Abu Debs changes his mind again and snatches the role away from her. Renée is terribly disappointed. She runs away from the rehearsal room. Her decision is irrevocable: she is going to kill herself. Abu Debs realizes what he has done; he knows the passion that animates Renée. He runs after her and is able to save her. He rushes her to the hospital for treatment.

### Like in a Book

Renée recalls the names of the different plays she acted in. The history of the burgeoning Lebanese theater unfolds: Renée seems to be reciting the first chapters of Khalida Said's book *The Theatrical Movement of Lebanon from 1969 to 1975*.

### The Phone Call

Renée calls me often to break the silence of her home. This time, she is calling because she has the sudden regret of never having pursued a more



Renée Deek in *al-Khadimatan* directed by Jawad al-Assadi

simple and banal occupation, “like working in a beauty parlour or as a secretary”, she adds on the verge of sobbing. I explain to her that thanks to actresses like her, or like Nidal Achqar, Madona Ghazi, Theodora Rassi, and last but not least, Rida Khury, many women like myself chose to be actresses or stage directors!

I hear her sobbing fading away and I can only hope that tonight she will be able to sleep!

### The Museum

Renée lives far from Beirut. To some, her apartment resembles Ali Baba’s cavern: coats, hats, little sculptures and scripts lying everywhere. Some canes also, including medical ones ... but I would like to imagine that they are stage props. On the wall, nude sketches, paintings, photographs, and framed magazine covers that represent Renée’s life. How peculiar all this is or feels. Renée’s life has bounced between two extremes: extravagantly dressed and made up for the theater or buck naked for modelling.

I ask Renée to comment on the art works and the pictures. She talks, but never about herself: these are the traces and the testimonies of the work of the painters and directors Renée has posed for or worked with.

Renée has offered to all artists and students she worked with a wall of fame in her apartment.

Renée lives far from Beirut, in an apartment which she considers to be a museum dedicated to all those who directed or sketched her.

### Like the Unknown Soldier

Renée falls from the first floor of her home while running after one of her numerous cats. Since then, she has been seriously ill. She is now in her sixties but the consequences of the accident are visible: her voice is distorted and her walk unsure. She is hopeless. She calls me: “why live?” For some, it is retirement age, but Renée feels the same passion as if she were 20. She has longings for texts to read and memorize, and longings for characters to inhabit. Once again I realize how precious theater is to Renée; it is life itself. She just wants to do her job, not for the limelight, not for the glory, the accolades, or the flowers. She wants to be an actress like others are bakers, astronauts, or soldiers.

### The Memory and the Sea

Our conversation is long today.

Renée is tired.

She hesitates.

She is unable to recall some of the titles of the plays she has acted in.

She is bewildered by her memory lapses.

I do not insist.

I ask her to show me some pictures.

She opens a little cabinet stuffed with newspapers and photo albums. We browse through them. Renée is bewildered: many of these photos are destroyed, ravaged. "It is the sea!" whispers Renée. In fact, it is the humidity. Not only has it wreaked havoc on the facade of the apartment, it has crept in everywhere and damaged photos and newspapers. Perplexed, I watch a tragedy playing out to the rhythm of broken waves. Unwillingly, Renée is the protagonist of a play in which her memory is pillaged by the sea.

### The Next Day

On the heels of our meeting, Renée catches up with me in the hallway of the Fine Arts Building at LAU. She remembers the titles of plays she had forgotten the night before. Without waiting for me to grab something to write on, she lists titles of films and plays.

What moves me deeply in Renée's effort to recall what she failed to remember yesterday is that, for her, there are no minor or major plays. All her artistic experiences were intense moments in her life. All of them deserve to be mentioned equally.

### First Meeting Revisited

Today, after ten years of friendship, ten years punctuated by many rendezvous and hundred of late phone calls, crowned by a play in which we acted together, and a play I directed and Renée acted in, I can explain what caught my attention when I first laid my eyes on this unique woman. That day, this woman was not walking alone. She was leading a procession.

Closing this procession were the directors who chose her to act in their plays, and the painters and students who extensively watched her pose naked and sketched her.

Despite an apparent loneliness that begins as soon as her modelling sessions end and continues into the night, Renée is never alone.

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Translated from French by Ahmad Oueini.

### Bio Data

Renee Dik is a Lebanese actress and model. She was born in Beirut in 1943. Renee posed for many renowned painters and university students and acted in many stage, TV, and film productions in Lebanon and abroad.

### Modelling:

1963 – 2008: Posing as a model for Lebanese professional painters, Lebanese University, and LAU Fine Arts students.

### Acting:

1963 – Baalbeck Festival, *Al-Zubab* (The Flies), by Jean Paul Sartre, director Mounir Abu Debs.

1964 – *Al-Izmit*, by Antoine Maalouf, director Mounir Abu Debs, the American University of Beirut (AUB).

1965 – *Al-Malik Yamout*, by Ionesco, director Mounir Abu Debs, toured in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt.

1966 – *Al-Fizya'i* (The Physicist), by Durrenmatt, director Mounir Abu Debs, toured in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.

1967 – *Romulus al-Kabir* (Ramulus the Great), by Durrenmatt, director Shakib Khoury, the American University of Beirut (AUB).

1968 – *Al-Malik Lear* (King Lear) by Shakespeare, director Mohammad Al Azir, Tunisia.

1970 – Studied Performance Arts in France.

1971 – *Al-Khadimatan* (The Maids), by Jean Genet, director Abdel Razzak Zaazaa, toured in Tunisia and Morocco.

1978 – *The Life of Mikhael Naimi*, director Yakoub Chidrawi, the Lebanese American University (LAU).

1981 – 1983 *Film Ameriki Tawil*, director Ziad Rahbani, Orly Theater, Beirut.

1994 – *Al-Khadimatan* (The Maids), by Jean Genet, director Jawad al-Assadi, Masrah Beirut.

1998 – *Munamnamat Jazairiya*, director Lina Abyad at the Lebanese American University (LAU).

2000 – *Ta'a Kuol Mjadara Ya Sabi*, director Elie Karam, Monnot Theater, Beirut.

# Renée Deek by Greta Naufal



Renée Deek sketched by artist Greta Naufal in 2007