

# Mai Ghoussoub:

## A Passion for Expression

Afaf Shawwa

When I first met Mai Ghoussoub in Beirut in the fall of 2004, I could not have guessed from her down-to-earth demeanor that I was sitting with a successful writer, publisher, and artist who had created a name for herself among friends, colleagues, and strangers alike. Nor that she was a founder of the cutting-edge Saqi bookstore and publishing house; writer and advocate of social, cultural, and political issues; and an internationally-exhibited sculptor and installation artist. Since that first meeting, I had the opportunity to learn all this and much more through our work together on her play *Terminators*. When Mai passed away on February 17, 2007, it was a major shock to me, as it was for many. Her death made me reflect on her life and spurred me to find out how her colleagues and friends saw her. What I have discovered tells of a woman with an infectious passion for creative expression.

Mai had decided to bring *Terminators*, which she wrote, directed, and in which she performed, from London to Beirut. My impression of her during our initial meetings was that she was an interesting woman, modern, and intellectual. She had given me a copy of the play's soundtrack to listen to as I learned my role. Along with a mix of Fairuz, Paul Robeson, and jazz and Indian classical music, I was surprised to hear Kruder & Dorfmeister - electronic DJs whom I assumed were familiar only to the "younger" generations. Her eclectic choice of music reflected what I would later discover to be her open-mindedness and variety of interests.

Anna Sherbany, artist, photographer, and a close friend of Mai's, explains that although Mai was



Mai Ghoussoub on the cover of her latest book titled *Selected Writings*, 2008.

mostly known for her writing and her publishing, it was quite recently that she was being increasingly recognized as an artist. Mai's trademark was the way she combined different creative elements like writing, sculpting, or performing. Sherbany remembers their joint exhibition, *Maianna*, at

the London Biennale in 2004, in which they had recreated posters of 1960s cult films such as *Lolita* and *The Graduate*. At the opening, Mai decided to dress up like the various film characters and walk around silently. She did this to bring them to life, and not necessarily as a performance mechanism. Still, this playful approach is what characterized her plays.

In her show *Divas* (2002) Mai combined sculpture, text, and narration. It was in *Texterminators* (2005) that Mai further ventured into theater, dance, and story-telling along with supporting elements of sculpture, music, and photography. *Texterminators* was shown at the Lyric and Dominion Theaters in London; the Marignan Theater in Beirut; and finally at the Unity Theater in Liverpool.

According to Sherbany, Mai was an “issue-based” artist. This meant that any number of issues would affect her and elicit a creative response: the role of women, sexuality, and the female body, or how people of color are represented, among others. Her interests spanned different cultures. The themes of war, violence, and censorship explored in *Texterminators* were universal; she identifies the war-torn city in which the main character, Bullet, and his fellow fighters have occupied an abandoned home as “Beirut ... or was it Sarajevo?”. By having an all-female cast, with the male gang members being played by three females, Mai was also exploring the role of gender, asking: “Would women turn violent as well, when all normality is lost and the game of power is the key to survival?”

In addition to writing, directing and performing in *Texterminators*, Mai designed the costumes and make-up, selected the music, and organized the recordings along with Roula Ayoubi. Her approach to the work was collaborative. She had a vision of what she wanted as well as a clear idea of the play’s structure, but was able to draw upon each person’s skills and experience to build the play.

In this sense, Mai was not a conventional director (if there is one). She would spell out the overall effect she was looking for and allow us as performers to come up with the result. This was



Poster of the play *Texterminators*

challenging at times, given the time pressure, and compelled us to make rich creative choices. Ana Belen Serrano, who performed in all renditions of *Texterminators* and choreographed the dance pieces, describes Mai as an open-minded director: “If I saw something that should be changed, I just tried it in rehearsals and most of the times she liked it”, explains Serrano. “In this way, Mai was able to introduce new elements to her piece”.

Tania Khoury, who performed in the final run of *Texterminators* in Liverpool, adds that as an established and successful writer and publisher, Mai “had nothing left to prove to the audience. Despite the fact that she was highly intellectual, she had a fun way of looking at performance art”. This didn’t mean her view was shallow or commercial but, rather, “more enjoyable ... unpretentious”. Taking *Texterminators* to different cities, for example, was as much an opportunity for a group of artists to take a trip together and enjoy a new experience, as it was to show her work.

Souheil Sleiman, a sculptor and close friend of Ghoussoub, worked on the play’s lighting and set design and was an integral part of its development. He says, “Mai was a great artist to work with. She had ideas and with them came determination to

develop them". Sleiman explains that Mai's strength was "in getting the work shown, whether it was a performance or visual art, soon after it was made".

Those with whom I spoke also agree that she was a very caring and generous person. Serrano says: "Her support was constant no matter what the need. And she never asked for anything back; just the joy of the experience and the commitment". Khoury describes her care toward the crew in the play as "very maternal". During the show, for example, she would eagerly watch from the wings, offer words of encouragement to us backstage, or help anyone struggling with a costume change. Mai instilled an atmosphere of cooperation and support among the whole cast.

During performance week we used to go out for drinks, joined by Mai's sister Huda and other friends. It struck me how spirited, fun, and young-at-heart the pair were. One night, Huda revealed to me the story of Mai's near-fatal accident during the Lebanese civil war in which she lost her eye. Mai's subsequent determination to live optimistically and her quest for expression and creativity made her family extremely proud. After I heard the story, my admiration for Mai grew. In spite of her debilitating accident – or perhaps because of it – Mai had the fortitude to see ideas through to fruition.

In discovering further this one-of-a kind woman who loved life, people, ideas, and creativity, I have acquired a role model. In her death, Mai has inspired me – as she has done with others – to pursue my passions, to follow ideas and dreams through to fruition, and most of all to enjoy the creative process. And so, through her legacy, Mai continues to live.

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