



**PUTTING MIDDLE EASTERN MUSIC IN THE FRAME**  
**MONA KHASHOGGI**  
**REALISES HER DREAM OF PUTTING ON A WEST END SHOW TO CELEBRATE HER CULTURE**

**S**he is one of the leading lights in the contemporary art world and has a globally famous surname. Now, London-based arts patron Mona Khashoggi, who is a member of one of the most prominent families in Saudi Arabia, is turning her attention to the theatre.

Next month sees the world premiere of *Umm Kulthum & The Golden Era*, which will be performed at the London Palladium for one night only. Conceived and produced by Mona, the show is the fulfilment of her long-held dream to bring to the stage the music and songs of legendary Egyptian artist Umm Kulthum, who was adored throughout the Arab world from the 1920s until her death in 1975.

"She was called the Maria Callas of the Middle East because she used to sing classical songs in an operatic style," explains Mona. "Her voice was amazing. She hypnotised her audience. She never sang the same sentence twice – she improvised."

"I like to promote Middle Eastern culture

and always wondered why no one had done a musical of our Arab icons in English, something like *Mamma Mia!* So around two years ago I thought: 'I'll do it.'"

**PASSION PROJECT**

Using her own money plus donations, Mona has brought together a cast of British/Arabic artists and Syrian opera singer Lubana Al Quntar, who lives in the US. They will perform songs accompanied by a 12-piece orchestra.

"It's like a journey through Arabic music, celebrating the great composers and poets of our time – the Golden Era," says Mona, who hopes the 2,286-seat theatre will be filled with ministers of culture, ambassadors, celebrities and heads of theatres and opera houses around the world.

"Everybody is flying in to see this because I'm the first female Saudi theatre producer and playwright to put on such a big, historic production."



**'I wish my beloved father and his dear brother Adnan were alive to see this show'**

Mona stands in front of her painting of a red Ottoman dress by Turkish artist Ismail Acar. Another prized possession is the antique ivory Ottoman dress above a velvet sofa (above left). The art collector's home is "crammed full" of paintings, photos and objets d'art (left)



Mona has a butterfly work by British artist Damien Hirst above a fireplace (above). A lover of all art forms, Mona will next month showcase her musical tribute to the late Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, whom Mona particularly reveres (below left). Rehearsals are well under way (below right and bottom right)



## 'I'm the first female Saudi theatre producer and playwright to put on such a big, historic production'

Her foray into theatre is a departure for Mona, who is known for being a collector and patron of contemporary art and for her charity work with Save the Children and English National Ballet.

Divorced with three grown-up children, she also has homes in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, Gstaad in Switzerland and Dubai.

Her apartment in London's South Kensington is, she says, like an art gallery, filled with her collection of mainly Middle Eastern paintings, sculptures and photos.

"Everyone who comes in is like: 'Wow, there's art everywhere!' I had to make sure I had high ceilings because of the art. [I have] pictures of my family, of my home, my culture. Every space is crammed full."

One of the pieces taking pride of place is a silk embroidered Ottoman dress that once belonged to a Turkish princess. Thought to be about 200 years old, it was bought at an Islamic and Indian auction at Bonhams and is now mounted in a plexiglass frame.

The item reflects Mona's interest in traditional Saudi costume. She is a co-founder of the Mansoojat Foundation, which she set up 20 years ago with a group of other Saudi women to collect traditional ethnic textiles and costumes of Arabia. They started with 20 pieces and now have 800, which have been shown at exhibitions and in museums including the British Museum and the V&A.

### IN THE FAMILY

Mona's love of art was inspired by her parents, who collected 16th- and 17th-century pieces by European artists. Her father, Muhammad, who was the first private physician to Saudi Arabia's King Abdul Aziz, also loved theatre and music – he was a friend of Umm Kulthum. He instilled his passion in his daughter.

Mona grew up in a large family. One of her half-sisters was Samira, a novelist and the mother of Dodi Fayed, and one of her half-brothers was businessman Adnan, who was "like my father" when her own father died when she was 14.

"He was a good brother who loved his family, a humble and generous man. I wish my beloved father and dear Adnan were alive to see this show. They would have been proud."

Born in Saudi Arabia, Mona has lived in London since she was 12. She attended More House School in London's Pont Street and went on to study for an MA in Middle Eastern studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

She considers herself a Londoner but travels frequently – "my family is everywhere" – including back to Saudi Arabia.

"My mother is there, my brothers and sisters and children and neighbours."

But for the next month Mona will be rooted in the capital as her dream production goes into rehearsals for the start of what she hopes will be an exciting journey.

"I'd love it to tour the world to promote classical Arabic music and [I'd love] to write other plays talking about the rich culture and heritage of the arts."

PHOTOS: RICHARD GOODING PHOTOGRAPHY

**Umm Kulthum & The Golden Era is at the London Palladium on 2 March. Visit [ltotheatres.co.uk](http://ltotheatres.co.uk).**

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS: RICHARD WILDING



As she puts pen to paper, Mona is overlooked by a tall figure in a painting by Egyptian artist Adel El Siwi, plus works by Faiza Butt, Chant Avedissian and Taha Al-Sabban

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