

TONY

Words: Jackie Oweis Sawiris

America's favourite Arab, Tony Shalhoub has managed to avoid negative stereotypes or one-dimensional roles – although he admits he'll never play a Swedish tennis player

Silences stretch between Tony Shalhoub's words that speak louder than the New York City Saturday afternoon that surrounds us. His animated hands fracture the homogenised ambience of the 8th Avenue coffee shop where we meet. And his chocolate-drop eyes capture moments of his memories, relishing them before he sets them free. There's really not much to say about Arab-America's-favourite-claim-to-ethnic-fame that he doesn't say himself when we meet 45 minutes before the Saturday matinee of *The Scene*, the off-Broadway black comedy in which Tony stars as a waning actor who has an affair with the type of woman he seemingly loathes.

NOX met with Tony in mid-February, with New York's winter chill still in the air, and talked in his own words about the play, his latest projects and being a high-profile Arab in America.

"You spend the whole day doing things that make you feel shitty about yourself. Why don't you do something you want to do?" Clea, *The Scene*
The Scene is great, it's a nice piece, it's relevant, bitter, funny, angry. The playwright [Theresa Rebeck] really captured what people are feeling inside but afraid to express. It's about how we've lost our way, how our priorities have become so skewed... There's a line that I have in the play



“My parents spoke Arabic, my grandparents spoke Arabic, but we also grew up in the Midwest – grape leaves and hot dogs!”

– my character is in a sort of major decline – and at one point he says: “It’s like we don’t even know how to have a real desire anymore.” He’s talking about how we have to suck up to assholes because they have something we must want even though we don’t want it – we just think we want it. I don’t want to tell you too much, I want you to see the play and discover its core of infectious narcissism.

“What we want, what we desire, isn’t love, passion, sex, money – it’s meaninglessness...” Charlie, *The Scene*

I believe our culture has lost sight of some kind of spiritual centre, probably due to the way politics is going, the way corporate America is moving, the way technology and the media overwhelms and overtakes everything... and this sort of surge in materialism and consumerism comes with a deep-seated loss of hope – hope for anything long term, anything of real, absolute value. I think “emptiness” is a good word, and yet it is emptiness in the guise of abundance. The abundance isn’t a spiritual fullness or a cultural fullness, it’s really just an abundance of noise and stuff, which is ultimately a huge distraction from any kind of existential exploration or examination... in our society, there were certain institutions that formed things and shaped things... whether it was part of a religious community or part of your ethnic background... whatever it was, it’s all driven now by the media – and the media is driven by corporate America. When a culture loses touch with what it really desires, everything is up for grabs.

“I’m just starting to see what’s wrong with all this... narcissism... how lonely it all is.” Charlie, *The Scene*

America is supposed to be the place where people concentrate on their similarities not their differences. It’s all fine and good to celebrate your heritage – I don’t have a problem with that. But if it crosses the line and starts to become divisive, then what are we doing? It frustrates me that we have to keep talking about Arab-Americans, Native-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Black-Americans. Aren’t we over this yet? How many f**king years are we going to focus on our differences?

I’ll tell you, part of the problem with people talking about their ethnicity [is that it] almost inevitably segues into a discussion about victimhood. It’s almost like society has started to skew back towards separation. The whole notion that this was a melting pot... maybe that just looked good on paper and never really worked. But people should be concentrating their energies on banding together to solve problems, not separating themselves. Jews, Muslims and Christians

should be forming coalitions to fight poverty, to fight homelessness, to fight AIDS – as a combined effort, not ‘look what our synagogue did, look what our mosque did’. The power is in the collective. How many freaking differences do we have to go for – and to what end? I’m always reminded of high school; not just the cliques but ‘our high school’s great, your high school sucks’. Are we all in competition now to be the world’s favourite downtrodden minority? What the hell are we doing?

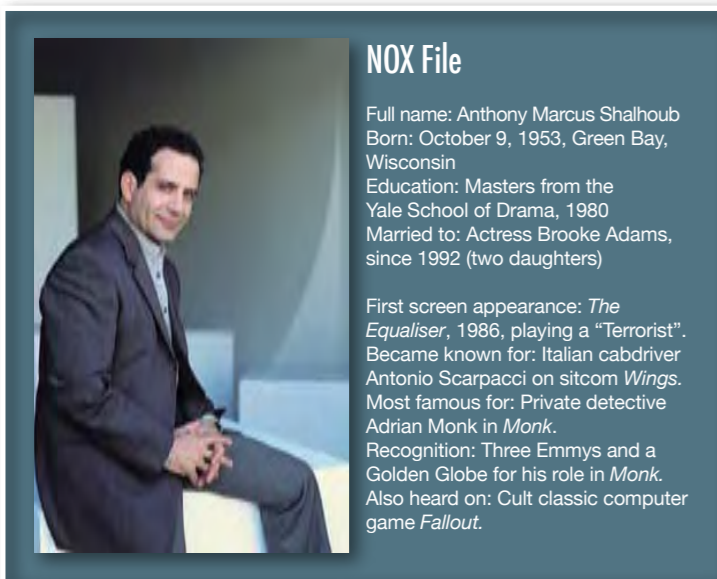
“Have you been out of the house lately...? All these fake people are having a more real life than we are.” Charlie, *The Scene*

[My father] came over here from Lebanon after his parents died there. He did the whole Ellis Island thing, he was forced to learn English quickly, lose his accent. You know that was the 1920s, the super assimilation period. My mother lived here with her parents. The Midwest, where they settled, is an area that’s full of Poles, Germans, Belgians, Scandinavians. They were sort of the most ethnic, other than the Native-Americans. I’m first generation; my parents spoke Arabic, my grandparents spoke Arabic, but we also grew up in the Midwest – grape leaves and hot dogs! It was a real clash, but it wasn’t like we were embarrassed to be Arab. I grew up speaking a few words of Arabic but my parents spoke it more, my maternal grandfather wrote it and read it.

I was from a big family. My dad was an independent businessman and well liked in the community, we had a lot of relatives and my [nine] older brothers and sisters had lots of friends, so there were always people over at our house and they were always fascinated by the food. A lot of people gravitated to our big, warm, crazy, chaotic family. Out of necessity we were less uptight – or less normal, literally less normal – than everybody else. My best friend growing up when I was in kindergarten was Jewish. I’d go to the synagogue with him, he’d go to church with me. It just seemed *very* healthy... more open and easier. Kids joked around in high school, people would call me a camel jockey, but it wasn’t like a slur. It was just joking and stupid stuff. It wasn’t like I was an outcast or maligned.

My mother was very supportive [of acting]... my father was a little hesitant until I got into the Yale Drama School, then I started to work a little, then was able to support myself, then he started to think “maybe this could work”. And then my first job when I came to New York, I did a pre-Broadway tour, and then worked on Broadway, in Neil Simon’s female version of *The Odd Couple*. One of the places we toured was Florida and my dad was there at the time. Sally Struthers was in it and my dad was a big fan of *All in the Family*, so he came to see it. He got to have dinner with Sally Struthers and I was kind of legitimate at that point!





NOX File

Full name: Anthony Marcus Shalhoub
 Born: October 9, 1953, Green Bay, Wisconsin
 Education: Masters from the Yale School of Drama, 1980
 Married to: Actress Brooke Adams, since 1992 (two daughters)

First screen appearance: *The Equaliser*, 1986, playing a "Terrorist".
 Became known for: Italian cabdriver Antonio Scarpacci on sitcom *Wings*.
 Most famous for: Private detective Adrian Monk in *Monk*.
 Recognition: Three Emmys and a Golden Globe for his role in *Monk*.
 Also heard on: Cult classic computer game *Fallout*.

"The director Hesham Issawi created a café which is exactly like this place in Cairo... The air conditioning isn't working, pipes are dripping, nothing is quite working right"



"Everybody keeps telling you what you aren't. Why don't you be what you are." Clea, *The Scene*

I'll never stop acting, it's sort of a disease. There are worse things people could do with their lives... It's got its frustrations, but I've been doing it for 26 years and it can be very challenging and creative. I've done a million kinds of ethnic roles. Some people feel that having this kind of ethnic look could be a liability – I never saw it as a liability. It afforded me the opportunity to play Hispanic parts, Jewish parts, Greek parts, Arab parts, or non-ethnic parts. I seem to have a facility with accents, so I focused on that and it's become an asset really. I'm never going to play a Swedish tennis player, but I try not to stereotype things. I try not to do that in any ethnic role; if I play an Italian, I try not to play the stereotypical Italian, I try to find what's universal about that particular character – what's more unique.

I've had a lot of great experiences. I worked in the theatre for ten years after I got out of grad school. Before I did a lot of television and film, I did play after play after play, first in Boston then in New York. I did plays that I thought were really fantastic and they were great learning, broadening experiences: in *Conversations With My Father* I played the son of a Jewish immigrant, *The Heidi Chronicles* was a play I did on Broadway which is where I met my wife [Brooke Adams] so that was a really great time.

Big Night was a film that was a milestone for me. *The Siege* I was very proud of, *Monk* I'm proud of. I did a movie a few years ago that came out this past year. It didn't really do that well commercially but I think it's a fantastic film. It's called the *Great New Wonderful*, a very low budget movie directed by Danny Leiner with Maggie Gyllenhaal, Edie Falco and Olympia Dukakis. It's sort of five different New York stories post 9/11 – although 9/11 isn't referred to specifically, but you get the sense that something large has occurred. Some people said 'I didn't really get it'. It's just a really delicate movie that I'm just really proud of."

I directed a film that I also acted in. It was sort of a family project. My wife's sister [Lynne Adams] wrote it. My wife and her sister star in it. And I play a part. It's called *Made Up*. It's full-length, sort of a mock documentary. It was so hard. We shot it very quickly, in like three and half weeks. I got to the last day and I thought 'if I could just start now – knowing what I know now after all these things'. But I will direct again... I love it.

"Why is it that real art makes real people feel phony?" Charlie, *The Scene*

AmericanEast is a little bit of a peek into the Middle East. There's a lot of support behind it. It's going to be controversial. Right now, we're looking for distributors, trying to put it into festivals. There are some lovely

performances. It's got comedic elements but it's really a slice of life in an Arab-American community in Los Angeles, present day post-9/11... I play a Jewish-American character and Sayed's [Badreya] character runs a falafel restaurant/market/hair salon. The characters that people that little restaurant are Coptic, Christian, Jordanian, Iraqi, and one of those new kind of Arab that's adopted the rap look. A lot of them are in conflict with each other, which is very realistic.

I think there's a problem with the typical American view of Arabs and Arab-Americans – it sort of becomes one thing. This movie shines a very bright light on the fact that they're all so different, and they all have things that they're struggling to agree on, or not agree on. But at the core of the movie, my character, Sam, is trying to partner up with Mostapha, Sayed's character who is an Egyptian Muslim. They want to go into business together. They're both getting a lot of resistance from their factions, whether it's their relatives or their friends. And they're in conflict too, in a way, with each other. But they have this kind of shared vision: if we can't do it here, where are we ever going to be able to do it?

The director, Hesham Issawi, created this place – Habibi – which is the café. We shot it in the summer in LA. It was really hot. That's what the director wanted, he wanted you to feel the heat, which he equated to the heat of the Middle East. So this café, where people are smoking sheesha, he said it looks exactly like this place in Cairo. It has hot, gold, red colours and everyone is slightly perspiring. The air conditioning isn't working, pipes are dripping, some guy is trying to fix the pipe, nothing is quite working right.

And I liked producing it. Producing has been a real education. I've been acting for so long and after years and years of acting, I would be working and I would have an instinctual sense – whether I was doing a movie or a play, of when things were feeling wrong. But when you're just an actor you have to really tread carefully. You can't always voice your opinion. You don't want to step on the director's toes or the writer's or anybody's. But being a producer on *Monk*, I don't have the last say or final word on anything, but I have a vote... I can say 'something smells funny'. I can say 'what if we did this, this feels like this would work better here'. I'm not right 100 per cent of the time, but all those things I've been thinking for years and years and years... damn it, it works! Everybody on *Monk* encourages people to voice their opinions. We're not going to take everybody's, but if somebody comes up with a good idea, who cares whose idea it was? If it solves the problem... thank you!

So it's expanded my horizons a little bit after being just an actor for so long. It does make me a stronger actor. You start to see your own performance in a larger picture.