

◆ PEOPLE

The passion of Nazanin Boniadi

By Sasha Borissenko

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Cool people

Activism

Nature

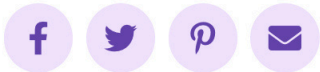
The Beach

Film

Profile

Interviews

Featured



[Camilla & Marc dress](#), \$900. [Alighieri earrings](#), \$850, from Muse Boutique (worn throughout). Prada [shoes](#), \$1450, and socks, \$150. Photography and styling / Karen Inderbitzen-Waller & Delphine Avril Planqueel

Nazanin Boniadi was born in Iran at the height of the Islamic revolution. Opposed to the new theocracy, which could result in execution, her parents sought political asylum in London. As a five-year-old she remembers watching the news of what was happening in Iran and crying her eyes out.

“My parents were baffled. How could a five-year-old have any connection to her homeland when she was taken away from it just 20 days after her birth?”

Her empathetic disposition bode well for the actress and activist, who has been living in New Zealand for over a year filming the highly anticipated *Lord of the Rings* series.

“Acting allows me to convey the human condition, which can create a dialogue, but it’s my activism that allows me to change that condition,” says Nazanin. “I am fortunate enough to have a platform that allows me to get into the right rooms and to amplify the voices of the voiceless.”

Acting wasn’t always on the cards but helping people has been a constant. Growing up in a state-owned flat, Nazanin was raised with a real emphasis on academia.

She managed to secure a scholarship to attend a private school in the UK, but the juxtaposition of rich and poor was jarring for her, she says. “It was the first time in my life that I felt a real socio-economic divide, but it fuelled me. Some of these kids would have a chauffeur in a Range Rover or a Rolls Royce to take them to and from school – a stark contrast to my father’s very humble car.

“Although my parents were relatively well-to-do in Iran, they left with some but not all of their money, which meant they had to accept menial jobs at first, just to put food on the table. I had a very modest, working-class upbringing, as is the case with many migrant families.”

She graduated at the top of her high school and decided to move to the US to pursue a career in medicine. Having graduated with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences with honours from the University of California, Irvine, Nazanin was at a crossroads; she had a clear trajectory to become a doctor, but she had always dreamt of becoming a performing artist.

“I have an intrinsic passion for helping people. But I couldn’t repress the artistic side of me any longer so I thought, it’s now or never – it may be late in the piece but why not give it a go. I started taking acting classes and being well-aware that I’m a Middle Eastern woman in a post 9/11 climate,

part of me thought I was insane to be doing something I had no experience in, and alongside people who had been acting since childhood and trying to make ends meet while waiting for their big break.”



Having been in the business for 16 years now, Nazanin has had to deal with her fair share of issues relating to tokenism and sexism.

“It’s a balancing act. I am an Iranian woman and I’ve had to have several difficult conversations behind the scenes with creatives, about how to portray that authentically onscreen without resorting to tropes and stereotypes.

“It’s hard because you want to work and you want to pay your bills but you also want to have integrity. If you read these roles often enough you start to believe the narrative that’s fed to you. You internalise it. I was made to believe that I would never land a role portraying a girl like Nora [Neil Patrick Harris’ love interest on *How I Met Your Mother*] or a series regular role on *Lord of the Rings*.”

On the show *Homeland*, for example, Nazanin wore a hijab as a sign of the protagonist character’s faith and had an Iranian accent. Optically, there were clear signs and cues of being a Muslim woman to a Western audience. At the time, it was groundbreaking to be a series regular Middle Eastern woman among an all-caucasian cast, but it’s also important to understand that not all Iranian or even Muslim women wear a veil. In fact, most Iranian women expats shed the compulsory hijab when they move overseas, she says.



[Wynn Hamlyn dress](#), \$350. Photography and styling / Karen Inderbitzen-Waller & Delphine Avril Planqueel

The show was celebrated for its stance on diversity and inclusion, yet two years later, playing Clare on *Counterpart*, the reception was vastly different.

Nazanin remembers participating in a panel discussion and a member of the media asked why there were no women of colour in the cast despite her sitting there. The character had a British accent and in spite of being a villain, because there were no visual cues identifying her as “other”, it was somewhat more palatable and less threatening to audiences, she says.

“Because I played a character with no emphasis on ethnicity or religion, I was no longer part of that conversation. A very odd phenomenon. The role was open to all ethnicities and I distinctly remember asking the show creator not to change the name of the character just because I had been cast. My inclusion in the diversity conversation should exist regardless of the name of my character.

“It seems we either have to be exoticised to fit that diversity quota, or our cultural identity has to be erased to be palatable. What about the woman who identifies as Muslim but doesn’t ‘cover’ and drinks alcohol? Or lesbian Muslims, for example? And how about the fact that there are Middle Eastern atheists and non-Muslims?”

Has the situation changed as a result of the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements? Human rights violations and discrimination don’t miraculously disappear overnight, she says.



There's a disconnect with feminism in the West and in the Middle East, she says. While here we have been dealing with workplace rights, anti-harassment, and pay equity, women in Saudi Arabia have been fighting for the right to drive and their basic human rights. And in Iran, women's rights have regressed several decades since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

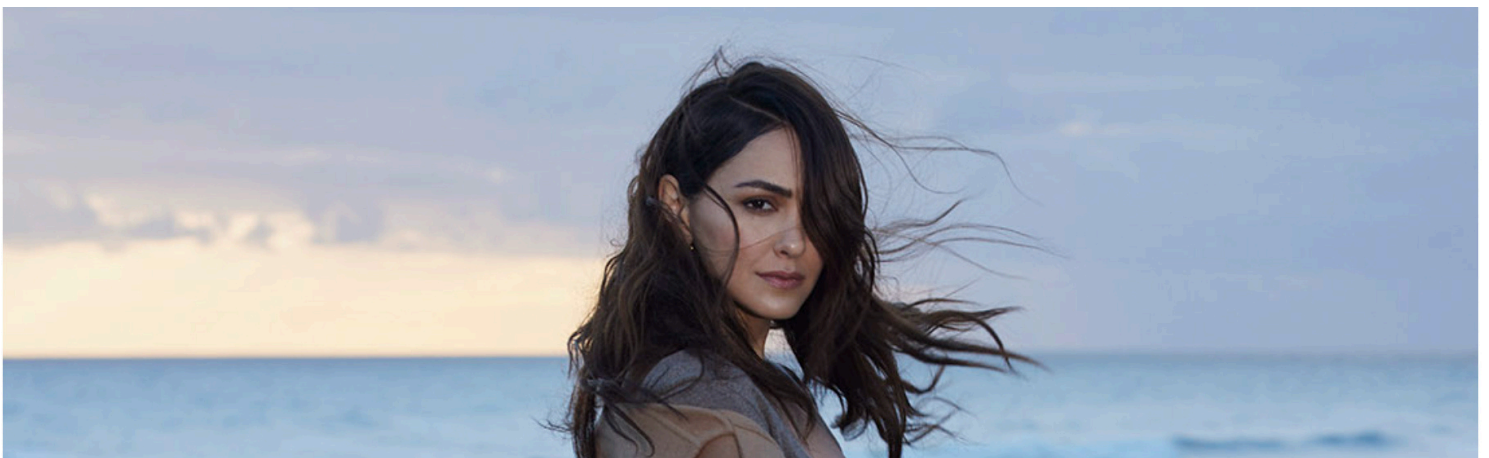
In post-revolution Iran, women are forbidden from singing solo, dancing and are forced to veil in public. They can no longer attend sporting events or become judges, for example. To suggest the contrast comes down to cultural differences or "cultural sensitivities" is offensive as it suggests that Iranian and Saudi women are happy to be second class citizens, she says.

"In some areas women may face lashings, imprisonment or the the death penalty and there are far greater risks to joining in the fight for justice and equality. Even as I did the photo shoot for this feature, I was hyper aware of the privilege I had in being surrounded by an all-women crew, wearing whatever I wanted.

"I never take these basic freedoms for granted. The freedom of expression is such an inherent part of any artist's work, and I cherish every moment I get to put it into action. The freedom for us women to express ourselves exactly as we choose, without taboos, limitations or stigma is particularly important to me.

"To see injustice at the hands of an individual, organisation, or world leaders makes my blood boil. We have a responsibility to come together, irrespective of where we are, and stand together in solidarity. It needs to be more than lip service."

It's for these reasons that Nazanin's worked with Amnesty International since 2008. She's campaigned for the International Violence Against Women Act to ensure the US raises the issue of women's rights in its diplomatic work; spearheaded an open letter urging FIFA to demand that Iran end its discriminatory ban on women in stadiums, for example.





Where her acting takes her, her advocacy follows. She's spent her time in New Zealand pursuing these goals, including heading the launch of Amnesty International's 'Writes for Rights' campaign in Auckland last year, and rallying her colleagues to join Team Amnesty for the 'Round the Bays' run in support of 'Refugees as Survivors'.

Nazanin's advocacy work assists her to deal with the pressures of being a woman in Hollywood, too. There's a marketing business aspect of being an actress where women are commodified and objectified, she says. "It's no secret that the industry breeds insecurity and I'm very aware that it's difficult not to internalise those forces at play."

Yet it's the opposite in advocacy - you have to diminish your sexuality to be taken seriously by political leaders - which so often are men, she says.

"There's a preconceived idea about women in entertainment that I'm constantly struggling to debunk. What's strange to me is that those two things can't coexist. Why can't a woman be both sexy and intelligent? It's hugely hypocritical that a woman can't be many things to be taken seriously."

While there's still much to be done, Nazanin feels genuinely lucky and grateful to be doing something that she loves and in a country that's been a safe haven for her during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I have no regrets. The right doors have opened and closed, and I feel privileged to have the ability to raise public awareness about things that matter to me. The common thread with my acting and advocacy is empathy. As long as I base everything I do in understanding, feeling, and trying to improve our collective human experience, I'll continue to be fulfilled."



NAZ RECOMMENDS...

Some quick fire questions with Nazanin (because Ensemble is all about intelligence and whimsy)

What places have you been going to and enjoying while living in Auckland?

There are too many great places to list here! I haven't had my mother's homemade Persian food in a year, so I'm very happy to have found [Rumi](#) restaurant in Parnell. Pasture was a truly extraordinary culinary experience. I also love Cassia, Onslow, Cazador, Cafe Hanoi, Culprit and the new eatery Ghost Street. I'm a fan of the music, food and European charm at Bar Celeste and Annabel's. I love [The Women's Bookshop](#) and Muse boutique in Ponsonby. I've also discovered great [vintage shopping](#), including [Sinda](#) on K'Road, [Waves Vintage](#), and [Tango](#) in Parnell.

How do you find time to relax...and what do you like to do?

I've been doing pilates, yoga and meditation with the wonderful [Kylie Harris](#) who has transformed me mentally and physically.

I love nature therapy and there's no place for it like New Zealand. I've been lucky enough to have hiked on the Great Barrier Island, retreated at [Aro Ha](#) in Glenorchy, biked from Arrowtown to Gibbston Valley, witnessed the majesty of Milford Sound and driven across Canterbury. All of this nature has inspired me to take up acrylic painting. After visiting [Angus Watson's gallery](#) in Queenstown I become enthralled by abstract art, which I find very therapeutic.

I also love great music and dancing, which is why I [threw myself an '80s themed dance party](#) for my birthday this year.

You travel a lot for work. How do you get to know a city?

The secret is always to ask locals. Don't rely on search engines alone. I've had the best recommendations for where to go while chatting to locals at restaurants and cafes and from the many wonderful friends I've made while living abroad.

How might you describe your beauty routine? And what are your favourite products?

I keep my beauty products toxin-free and organic whenever possible. I just got introduced to the natural, New Zealand brand Trilogy skincare and I particularly love their Rosehip oil roll-on, Triple-Action Jelly Exfoliator and Rosapene Night Cream.

I use Hylunia Facial Cleansing Gel, Colloidal Silver Mist toner and Calming Face Oil. And Coola's Classic SPF 50 Face Sunscreen.

I love a good hydrafacial every six weeks to unclog pores. And I highly recommend the rejuvenating and transformative buccal facial massage with Kate at [Skinography](#) in Ponsonby. Sundree's anti-inflammatory Cooling Facial Globe and ultra hydrating Pept Eyes eye mask have become staples in my pre-filming skincare regimen. Hydration and sleep are a must.

Are you a sweet or savoury person? What's your favourite go-to meal or treat? And how do you take your coffee?

I love sweets, particularly dark chocolate anything. I've been a regular at [Crumb](#) cafe in Grey Lynn lately, where I love a single shot, decaf macadamia milk latte. And their almond croissants are divine. I can't go a week without good sushi.

Who are your favourite international designers?

Too many to list here. I love the cross-cultural appeal of [Osman Yousefzada](#) and the fact that giving-back is the central ethos of his brand; the iconic timelessness of houses like Prada and Valentino, the minimalist elegance of Nanushka, Co, and Camilla & Marc; the wonderful use of colour and movement by Prabal Gurung; Iranian-American designer Amir Taghi for drawing inspiration from our heritage; and Stella McCartney and Victoria Beckham for bringing us such chic and modern sustainability.

Do you have any favourite New Zealand-based designers?

I'm a big fan of Paris Georgia, Wynn Hamlyn and Maggie Marilyn. Helen Cherry's suiting is stunning. Jasmin Sparrow jewellery is my new go-to.