

HOMeward BOUND

Two young Canadian artists of Arabic origin journey back to the Middle East and North Africa, promoting their adopted country and rediscovering their roots.

In December 2004, Julie Nesrallah, a Canadian mezzo-soprano with Lebanese origins, performed for the first time in the Middle East. A few months later, Lynda Thalie, a Canadian pop singer born in Algeria, returned to her home country for the first time in 11 years to perform three groundbreaking concerts, including one on Canada Day. On and off stage, the two singers wowed audiences, delivering powerful messages about Canada's cultural mosaic and the ability of young women everywhere to pursue their dreams.

Nesrallah, a 37-year-old Ottawa native, last visited Lebanon with her mother and grandmother at the age of five. Her desire to return to the region began in Montreal with a concert at McGill University's Evening for Peace in March 2000 with Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan in

the audience. For the next four years, while performing with North America's leading opera companies, orchestras and ensembles, Nesrallah worked to organize a tour of the Middle East.

It seemed that logistics and security concerns would keep her dream at bay until the Canadian embassy in Amman invited Nesrallah to perform last December in a benefit concert dedicated to disadvantaged young women who want to study music in Canada. Fresh from her role of Suzuki in Vancouver Opera's production of *Madame Butterfly*, Nesrallah flew 18 hours to Jordan for a four-day experience that was unforgettable—both for her and the young people she met.

"There were 650 people in the room for the gala, and you could have heard a pin drop," she says. "It was one of the most incredible performing experiences of my life. There was so much generous attention and applause." After the concert, it took 45 minutes for her to reach the Jordanian royal family, which was in attendance, Nesrallah says. "So many people wanted to connect with me."

The concert, hosted by the Canadian embassy, raised \$80,000 through ticket sales, a raffle and a live auction. The money will go to the Princess Haya Endowment Fund, which will provide young women with

music scholarships to Canadian universities as well as training in English, public speaking and leadership.

In addition to performing in the concert, Nesrallah visited two music conservatories to speak with young men and women about her career. "I could see kids looking at me. Their eyes said, 'you're a musician. You're actually doing it!'"

Through the gala performance and her encounters with students, Nesrallah became a role model for aspiring young musicians—especially women—and gained something in return. "Everyone looked like me. I felt I was with 'my people.'"

Lynda Thalie, who left Algeria at 16 in 1994 to settle in Montreal, Quebec, was equally moved by her connection with her homeland. "There is a lot of nostalgia for Algeria in my songs," says Thalie, whose music has been described as joyous, sensual and mysterious. "Algeria is part of my heart."

In her triumphant return, Thalie brought this unique fusion to enthusiastic audiences, mixing what she calls the "honey" of Algeria with the "maple syrup" of Canada. The tour, coinciding with both Canada Day and the anniversary of Algeria's independence on July 5, celebrated 40 years of relations between the two countries. Says Robert Peck, Canada's Ambassador to Algeria, it also marked a new era for Algerians, who are emerging from a period often referred to as "*les années noires*," during which terrorism shook the very foundations of the country.

photo: Robert Etcheverry



Canadian opera singer Julie Nesrallah as role model: "I could see kids looking at me. Their eyes said, 'you're a musician. You're actually doing it!'"