

# THE LILT OF HOPE



By BLESSY THOMAS

It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings', is taken as a literal description for most opera singers. But, you meet Monica Yunus and you know that stereotypes are definitely meant to be broken, and how. The young, dynamic and effervescent Monica Yunus was in Doha recently, at the Doha 21st Century Leaders Awards, where she was honoured for her humanitarian achievements.

**Blessy Thomas** met up the spirited and animated Soprano who is the Co-founder and Co-director of a non-profit organisation Sing for Hope and also the daughter of Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed Yunus.

Monica has a bachelor's and a master's degree from the eminent Juilliard School in New York City. Apart from her humanitarian services Monica is, undeniably, establishing herself as one of America's most promising young sopranos. Since making her professional debut with the Palm Beach Opera in 1999, she has sung lead roles with well-known opera companies and has performed all the way from US to Europe and also the Middle East.

#### MAKE WAY FOR THE SOPRANO

Monica moved to USA from Bangladesh when she was just four months old, after her parents Muhammad Yunus and Vera Yunus separated. She was brought up at her maternal grandparents' house in New Jersey in a household having strong Russian orthodox roots. Even as a child Monica was as energetic and determined as she is now. "Well as a kid, I did Ballet, Jazz and Tap along with my voice training. Then, on Saturdays I went to Russian school, because you know part of my heritage is Russian. My grandmother had a beautiful voice, and I grew up singing at the Orthodox Church choir with her, on Sundays. So it was a



**Friends know her as: 'Switched on', or needing to be connected.**

**I'm so switched on. I'm constantly on my computer. I will have my iPhone in one hand, computer on my lap and watch TV. So even if I'm relaxing, I will be returning emails, because that's the only way I can keep up with Sing for Hope. And when I don't have access, I get very upset.**

very busy childhood and a lot of options. But it mostly revolved around music", says Monica.

Being blessed with a talent, like having a fine voice doesn't necessarily translate into future success unless one works hard to refine and cultivate it. Monica's mother Vera realised that her daughter had the voice that could be developed and enrolled her for her voice training when she was 11 years old, and it didn't take Monica too long to realise that she wanted to be a part of the opera. "I was lucky enough to go on and audition for the Metropolitan Opera Children's course. That was how I was introduced to Opera specifically, and I loved it. I just fell in love with it. I loved being on stage and listening to the orchestra and the costumes - there was just so much going on, it was a feast for the senses.

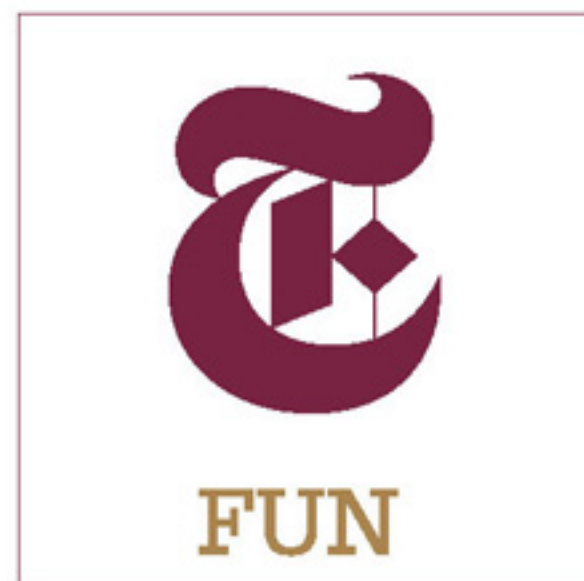
"Also being on stage at the Met was so overwhelming. It is interesting to have something you love and coming to that mo-

ment where you sort of know that 'this is it' I just remember being on stage and going like this (snapping fingers), this is what I like and I want to do this. I talk to a lot of people and they never have that moment, of saying 'this is what I love; this is what I want to pursue.' I feel lucky to have had that experience so early on in my life. And from that moment on it has been nothing but music and programmes that helped me craft that talent."

Monica is in awe of Placido Domingo and considers sharing the stage with him as one of the highlights of her career. "Very recently, I was invited to sing with Placido Domingo at the Jordan festival in the Middle East. So that was nice to be in the region, and to sing obviously with an absolute legend in my field. And not only as an opera singer, but a humanitarian, someone who gives back so much to young singers, his a mentor, he runs opera companies and it was a dream come true to share the stage with him."

#### OPERA'S FOR ALL

Opera has always been looked upon as the arts practised and pursued in the West. Very







**Advice for future musicians:**  
 Right now there is such a wealth of information available. You can find any recording online and mostly for free. YouTube – anything! You know there are so many fantastic clips of older singers that we didn't have access to before. So I would tell aspiring musicians and singers to study those. Try to learn the Piano if you can, if you have access to that. And give yourself the opportunity to get a broad and large liberal arts education.

few Asians have made their presence felt on such a worldwide platform. For Monica who is Euro-Asian by lineage it wasn't much of a problem breaking into the scene. She considers the love and affection bestowed upon by Bangladeshis overwhelming and strives to live up to their expectations. "I was so touched when I went back to Bangladesh; they are so honoured by the fact that I've carved a path as a Bangladeshi in Opera. I am the first Bangladeshi to sing at the Metropolitan Opera and I carry that badge very proudly. There are so many nationalities performing at the Met now. It meant more to me that my own people recognised me and are proud of me." She also made the effort and learnt a few Bangla folk songs on her last visit.

"I learnt a few traditional Bangla songs - it always makes me nervous because there is this sense of responsibility and it is not the dominant culture I grew up with. I work especially hard to see that it comes across well and the language is clear."

Whilst talking to Monica, it is but difficult not to associate her with her illustrious father, Muhammad Yunus. Talking about the relationship they share she says, "Well, I have travelled extensively with my dad on various trips and I know the various programmes and things that are very close

to his heart. Especially now, which is his social business initiative. He also deeply respects the fact that I have my own voice that I found and it is a wonderful and mutual admiration I would say. He is also on the board for Sing for Hope and definitely gives us his inputs as a board member should."

#### THE HOPEFUL CAUSE

Monica isn't just a pretty face who can sing

beautifully. She is amongst those musicians who want to give back to society and help create opportunities for others. Sing for Hope was established with such intentions. "I was watching the news about the hurricane Katrina in the States. As you know Bangladesh is a country hit by monsoons and devastations constantly. To see that in the United States, where I was living in and grew up, really hit me hard. I felt a need to do something and I didn't know what I could do as an artist. So I started this concert and called up my friends and it was so easy. They were also all feeling the same way. They wanted to do something, they couldn't go to Louisiana to go and help physically. So they decided to help with this concert. So we raised some funds and then a serious conversation happened and my dear friend Camille Zamora and I started talking about how this was a model that could be replicated by artists who wanted to do it, and it shouldn't just be once a year or in response to a devastating event. This should be a formalised, structured organisation, so that's how we created it." With no knowledge on how to run a non-profit organisation or any business know-how, two opera singers with big hearts have come a long way now. Sing for Hope is four years old and is growing tremendously. A fitting recognition for Sing for Hope was the award bestowed upon Monica in Doha.

"I feel honoured and humbled. I feel extremely humbled to be able to share the experience with other awardees. I was laughing whilst giving my thank you speech ...when I got the notice, I thought they had got the wrong Yunus in the family. My dad's the person who gets all the awards, maybe this went to the wrong person. Or do they want me to pass the letter along or something? But then it said Monica Yunus, and I was like... Well ok, that's nice." ■

#### Stereotypes she wants to shake off:

**Opera singers don't listen to other forms of music:** "We listen to all kinds of music.

When I get ready for an audition or for an opera, I'm listening to 'not-opera'.

I usually listen to pop music. I also listen to classical music and I always listen to the *Moulin Rouge* soundtrack, it pumps you up. I also like listening to Jay-Z."

**Opera is not for everybody:** "It is not something meant to be a luxury for certain people. Anyone can enjoy an opera."

**Opera singers are fat!** "It is the worst stereotype and needs to be done away with, quickly."