

Sarah Shahi

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YSL top
Gucci bottom
Loriblu suede boots

by Sylvia Karcz
photography by Chris Fortuna

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If one of the greatest displays of female endurance is giving birth, it's fair to say that Sarah Shahi has earned extra points for some true Southern willpower. While the Texas-bred star of the new USA series, *Fairly Legal*, is not shy about speaking her mind about everything from environmental conservation and child bullying to immigration policies and tax-cuts, what really evokes her emotions is the slightest mention of her nearly two-year old son, William Wolf. And Sarah is proud to note that in an age that bombards people with faster and easier and more comfortable fixes to, well, everything, she decided to go the natural route with her pregnancy: her husband delivered their son right at home, in a guest bedroom tub.

"No drugs, no nothing," Sarah describes. "It was amazing, and just so incredibly empowering as a woman. To know that in a world where we are so quick to give shots and go the hospital and schedule C sections, it was just me and my baby, and Mother Nature took over. After I did that, I was like, 'Oh shit, I can do anything now.'"

But then again, Sarah has never really been the apprehensive type. The 31-year old L.A. native initially came to Hollywood on a whim and has been gaining momentum for nearly a decade now, especially with roles like Carmen, the feisty DJ on Showtime's *The L Word*, and detective Dani Reese on NBC's *Life*. "It's kind of like a paid personality disorder," she says about her profession. "That's my favorite thing about it... the different skins you get to wear." And whether she's playing a recovering addict, a high-school teacher, or a stripper, one thing remains a constant in her acting roster to date. "The things that draw me to a character are their flaws," she says. "I don't like playing people that are perfect. For me, what is interesting is watching a character struggle and fight for something."

So it makes perfect sense that Kate Reed, Sarah's current character, is pretty much a fighter for a living. An ex-lawyer turned San Francisco mediator with an uncanny knack for persuasion, Reed is a strong-minded rebel against the legal system. It's a role that has Sarah commanding every scene. As for whether she agrees with her character's firm stance against the bureaucracy of the law? "[Kate Reed] has a line

in the pilot which I believe in: "Laws were made by people, and people are often wrong," Sarah answers. "On the smallest level to the biggest level, I find myself agreeing with that."

It's not just Sarah's present role that has her in a state of reflection, though. As a castmate of *The L Word*, she is grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of a show with impact, both on a personal and social level. "It really did open my eyes because before then, you know, as a girl from Texas there was very little that I was actually exposed to. At the beginning, I was unaware of what the show meant. It was not until I was off the show that I realized that this was huge for the gay community. It was like a cultural movement, and it's an honor to be a part of something like that." Sarah is also hopeful that bringing GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) issues to the forefront of the media will continue to propel gay rights. "DADT was huge," she says of the recent repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell law. "Look, I'm for human rights. It doesn't matter if you're gay, straight, whatever it is that you're into."

And it's especially as a mother that Sarah is openly vying for a change in the ever-persistent discrimination and bullying that tarnishes our world. "No matter what my son is or turns out to be, I'm going to love him and celebrate the differences. I feel like that message, for me, is the one thing for his world that I would love to see changed... this idea that we have to bully kids and beat them up and see them miserable just because they're different," she says. "I went to an event recently that was a supporter of eradicating that kind of behavior. And it's not a gay issue; it's a human issue. No matter what size, shape, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual preference, whatever the kids are these days, I feel that as parents, it's our responsibility to teach that differences are okay. It's good to be different."

Born to an Iranian father and Spanish mother in the small town of Euless, Texas, and thus the antithesis of the stereotypical blue-eyed, blonde-haired Texan beauty, Sarah definitely knows a thing or two about standing out. While she admits that her home situation was "not great," it was also one that, in retrospect, has played a vital part in teaching her about the importance of independence and perseverance. "My dad was



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an addict, and he left the day my younger sister was born; I was eight at the time," she recalls. "We struggled as a family, but I have a mother who is a saint. She had every reason to be a victim, but to this day she is a fighter. She taught me that you don't need a man to succeed, and that if you want something, to go out to get it yourself, because no one else is going to give it to you. So that's ingrained in me."

That very attitude is what makes Sarah's quick transition from student, to Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, to successful actress not at all surprising. As a child interested in musical theater but mainly focused on academic achievement – "I was basically Lea Michele in Glee, minus the bitch... and instead replaced with nerdy, nerdy, nerdy" – Sarah found herself growing more attached to the idea of becoming an actress, but never quite knew how to go about getting started. Then, while studying at Southern Methodist University, she took a friend's suggestion and tried out for the Dallas Cowboys cheerleading squad, if for no other reason than to be part of their "Showgroup" team and hopefully land a spot on Saturday Night Live. "I figured that was my way in. I had never been a cheerleader before in my life; I was an athlete. But I made the team."

Luckily, a chance run-in with director Robert Altman at the squad's practice studio gave Sarah the push she needed. "He said, 'I think you have something. You need to move out to L.A.' So that was it. I quit cheerleading, I quit SMU, I quit everything I had going, packed up my truck, and I moved to L.A. And by the end of my first week here, I had an agent, I had a manager, and I started auditioning."

So while Sarah's career trajectory to date is a testament that the right risks do indeed come with rewards, it's the balance of her determination to succeed as an actor and her unwavering devotion for her family that is her most impressive attribute. "I would turn my world and my life upside down for my son. I never thought that being married or having a child was something that I wanted to do, but now that I have it, it means more to me than anything else in the world." And how did having a child change her, exactly? "I just feel so much more intensely," she says. "I feel so much more passionate about the things I believe in, whether they're right or they're wrong."

Endowed with a keen awareness of our society's principal issues, Sarah is happy to undertake the role of activist. As an outspoken supporter of the organization Oceana, she's raising awareness by encouraging her fans to educate themselves about key issues like offshore drilling, deforestation, the acidification of the oceans, and the growing pollution of our reefs. "People forget that this water source we have is not going to be around forever," she says. "And I feel like it's our responsibility as inhabitants of the planet to take care of it for the next generation. The vital life source of the ocean is being destroyed and polluted, and this is not good. Not only for the animals of the ocean, but we, in turn, who then consume those animals. It's a chain effect; if one thing goes, something else will go. I feel it's our responsibility to spread as much awareness about it and to try and fix it as much as we can. Or at least to stop it from getting worse."

With brains, beauty, talent, and a worldly sensibility to boot, Sarah Shahi and her fighting spirit are definitely on our radar.

Limonada purple cut out swimsuit
Micha Design silver/copper necklace

photography by Chris Fortuna
stylist Shinko Iura @ the rex agency
hair Roque @ tracey mattingly
makeup Vanessa Scali @ tracey mattingly
location SLS Hotel at Beverly Hills los angeles