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WARP FILMS

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# SERIES SYNOPSIS

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## SERIES SYNOPSIS

*Little Birds* springboards from the erotic vignettes of Anais Nin into the Tangier International zone of the 1950s. We arrive there with New York heiress Lucy Savage (Juno Temple) fresh off the transatlantic steamer and ready for love and marriage in exotic climes. But when her husband Hugo (Hugh Skinner) does not receive her in the way she expected, she spins off into the surprising, diverse and degenerate world of Tangier in 1955. Period drama about an ingénue abroad this is not. Instead, *Little Birds* is very modern tale of a woman losing and then finding herself down a mesmerising rabbit hole. What Lucy discovers is a world in flux, a country quivering on the cusp of independence, populated by a myriad of characters including a provocative dominatrix, Cherifa Lamor (Yumna Marwan) who particularly captures Lucy's imagination. A bold and subversive re-invention of melodrama for our times, *Little Birds* takes the audience and all our characters on a witty, moving and provocative journey towards freedom and independence.

**A BOLD AND SUBVERSIVE  
RE-INVENTION OF MELODRAMA  
FOR OUR TIMES**

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# CHARACTER BIOGRAPHIES

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## LUCY SAVAGE

JUNO TEMPLE



Troubled American heiress to an arms manufacturing company, Lucy Savage struggles with the expectations her family (and the 1950s) have on a young woman. When she is packed off to marry an English lord she does not get quite the life she was expecting. Destiny has other plans for Lucy and she finds herself in Morocco, a country on the verge of claiming its independence, where she goes on an exciting and at times painful journey to discovering the joys and challenges of personal freedom.

## CHERIFA LAMOUR

YUMNA MARWAN



An infamous fixture of the Tangier demi-monde, the dominatrix Cherifa is known by everyone in Tangier. Although she initially declares herself as someone who has 'no time for politics' she can't help be affected by the colonial injustices that take place every day in Morocco. When her paths cross with what she initially takes for a spoiled rich westerner (Lucy Savage) the two women go on a strange parallel journey towards liberty.

## HUGO CAVENDISH SMYTHE

HUGH SKINNER



A minor English aristocrat whose family have fallen on hard times, Hugo has been set up to marry a rich American (Lucy Savage). Although he does his best to go along with what everyone is telling him is the right thing, Hugo's denial can't last forever. Fond as he is of Lucy, Hugo is in love with someone else (Adham Abaza) but can he admit that to himself and lead the life he so dearly wants to lead?

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## ADHAM ABAZA

RAPHAEL ACLOQUE



Wayward by his family standards Egyptian prince Adham Abaza starts the series drifting in Tangier, where he leads a surface life of partying and a love affair with Hugo. But Adham wants something deeper and can no longer live with looking away from what is happening across North Africa. Initially devastated by the break with Hugo, he grows into a serious and committed young man in the course of the series.

## THE SECRETARY

JEAN-MARC BARR



In charge of the French protectorate in Morocco, The Secretary is feared and respected. But he has his own worries about the imminent independence of Morocco and wonders where he will belong when that happens, being neither French nor Moroccan. He becomes obsessed with Cherifa and in her sees a twisted way of securing his future as a colonial overseer.

## CONTESSA MANDRAX

ROSSY DE PALMA



Louche and amoral, the Contessa is a well known Tangier socialite. Her mansion is a hub of erotic parties. Together with her wild daughters, the Spanish Contessa leads a hedonistic, ex-pat life in Tangier but the Mandrax family can't ignore the undercurrents of resentment from Moroccans for much longer.

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## LEO

KAMEL LABROUDI



Cherifa's closest friend. Leo is a small time thief that grew up with Cherifa on the streets of Tangier. He is a great supporter of the King's return and has high hopes that ordinary people like him will be able to build dignified lives in their own country then.

## GRANT SAVAGE

DAVID COSTABILE



Patriarch and businessman Grant Savage is a successful arms manufacturer and the owner of Tomahawk Arms. He rules his family quite strictly and has manipulated both his wife and daughter for many years. Boorish and frequently exasperated by what he views as everyone else's incompetence Grant has no time for weakness or difference or any worldview outside his own.

## VANESSA SAVAGE

AMY LANDECKER



Lucy's bitter, alcoholic mother, so worn down by Grant's controlling ways that she has given up and taken refuge in drink and tranquilizers. She loves Lucy somewhere inside but damned if she is actually capable of showing it...

# EPISODE SYNOPSES

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# EPISODE 1

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It is 1955. We meet troubled New York debutante Lucy Savage as she prepares to leave the institution where she has been treated for psychological ailments. Lucy is the daughter of an arms manufacturer, Grant Savage, with whom she has a strange relationship. Lucy is on the eve of relocating to Tangier, where her husband-to-be Lord Hugo Cavendish Smythe is waiting for her. At a bon voyage dinner, Grant presents Lucy with a new edition pistol that is made especially for ladies and inspired by her. Arriving in Tangier after an eye-opening journey, Lucy is disappointed in how her husband receives her, having hoped for a more passionate reunion. Hugo is in fact involved in a passionate relationship with an Egyptian prince called Ahmed Abaza about which Lucy knows nothing. Lucy and Hugo go out on the town on their wedding night where an encounter with Cherifa, a well known prostitute, introduces Lucy to the world of the Interzone – a place of personal secrets, sexual possibility and political strife. At the end of episode one, Cherifa comes to the attention of The Secretary, who is in charge of the French colonial administration there. She has no love for the French and makes that publically clear. But the Secretary is more intrigued than threatened.

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# EPISODE 2

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Lucy and Hugo visit the set of an experimental film directed by Lili Von X – an unorthodox, blacklisted movie star with whom Lucy made friends on the journey to Tangier. Lucy jumps at the invitation to take part in the film, but Hugo is less pleased when his new wife takes part in what he thinks is an unseemly spectacle in front of the camera. Secrets mount between the newly-weds. Lucy gets herself an invitation to the exclusive wrap party then asks Adham to take her as Hugo has refused and she doesn't know anyone else in Tangier. Adham is reluctant at first – having fallen out with Hugo – but warms to Lucy who is not what he expected. The Secretary can't get Cherifa out of his mind and has her brought to the same party at the luxurious home of Contessa Mandrax. As Lucy, Hugo and Ahmed negotiate the awkwardness of a night out together, Cherifa finds herself in front of the Secretary for a second time, but on his terms. At the end of episode 2 Lucy is also sucked into the orbit of the Secretary with an invitation to lunch without her husband.



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# EPISODE 3

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Lunch with the Secretary takes an unexpected turn and Lucy responds to the Secretary's provocations with provocations of her own. Hugo and Adham continue to be angry and hurt with one another and Hugo confronts Adham who has consoled himself with Aziz, a man he picked up on the beach. Hugo is further upset by his inability to conclude a piece of business that Lucy's father Grant asked him to take care of in Tangier. Having insisted she is only a whore with no time for politics, Cherifa's life takes a messy turn when a session with a French client gets out of hand and she is forced to flee from Tangier. Hugo and Ahmed re-unite but are discovered in the midst of passion by Lucy. In the distressed aftermath of her walking in on them Lucy discovers the true extent of her father's involvement in her life. Having gone on a drinking bender because of his upset about Hugo, Adham finds that his royal bearing is of little help to him in the underworld of the Interzone.

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Lucy decamps to the home of the Contessa Mandrax where she is consoled by the Contessa and Lili. Hugo attempts to talk her into coming home but she refuses. Adham wakes up in the home of some poor Tangier women who tell him they found him in the street, having been set upon and beaten unconscious by western tourist who thought that Adham would sell himself to him. He is sick and dizzy from a knock to the head and has to stay with them for a while. The Secretary knows that Cherifa is on the run (the dead French client worked for him) and insists that her boyfriend Leo is arrested in order to bait her to come to him. Leo is arrested at the Mandrax mansion where he works. Hugo is unraveling, having failed spectacularly to do what the bullying Grant asked of him. As a guest at the Mandrax mansion, Lucy is invited to the screening of Lili's film and the accompanying orgy that night. However, she is not used to the local habits and consumes far too much of the Mahjoun on offer, and begins tripping out. Meanwhile Cherifa has returned to Tangier and found out about Leo's arrest. She rushes to the Contessa's house to ask her to plead for Leo and what she finds there pushes her onto a whole other path.

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## EPISODE 5

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Adham returns to Tangier, having been consoled and comforted by his stay with the two women in whom he found himself confiding about his reasons for staying away from Egypt. He has much to consider and seeks out Aziz again, but this time for different reasons – the combination of his recent experiences has opened his eyes to some harsh truths about his life choices. Hugo hits rock bottom and Grant's horrible bullying pushes him over the edge. Lucy is thrown out of the Mandrax mansion after her drug-crazed behavior the night before and winds up in a tryst with Bill, the El Sirocco barman, who also claims to be an artist. But there is more to Bill than that, as Lucy will find out. Bill has altogether more sinister reasons for being in Tangier: he is an agent for the CIA and has been monitoring the activities of Lucy's father. Desperate to find out what has happened to Leo, Cherifa falls into the Secretary's trap and goes to him to appeal for Leo's release. However, in the fracas of the previous night at the Contessa's party, Cherifa managed to steal Lucy's gun, so she is not going completely empty handed. She talks her way into the commandeered palace where the Secretary stays and waits for him to see her. When she finally gets to see Leo, he is in such a bad state that she pulls the gun on The Secretary but he is too quick and too ruthless. He kills Leo in front of her, leaving her to grieve on the bloodied stone floor of the cells.



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## EPISODE 6

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Lucy has decided to collaborate with the CIA in entrapping her father, though in truth she had little choice. Bill has made it clear that dealing arms to the French – which Grant was trying to do via Hugo – goes against American interests in the region and that Lucy can aid them or she can be imprisoned for treason alongside Grant. Lucy is given a mission to get the Secretary and Grant together and capture evidence of their dealings. The Secretary has become desperate for arms as his own plans for consolidating his power in Morocco are going off the rails because the King is about to return from exile and he knows that if the King lands, the Moroccan people will unite behind him and France's days as a colonial power will be numbered. He is delighted by Lucy's approach to broker a meeting between him and her father to conclude the deal and invites Lucy and Grant to a discreet meal at a farmhouse outside Tangier. Then he mishandles Cherifa along with them. Finding herself a prisoner in the cellar of the Secretary's house, Cherifa is surprised when he shows a new side of himself to her. He reveals something of his plans – he can rule Morocco, but he needs a Moroccan wife if the people are to accept him. Biding her time to escape, Cherifa indulges a surreal act of domesticity, allowing the Secretary to dress her and even cooking for him and his guests. Lucy and Cherifa are as surprised as each other when the guests arrive but go along with the strange evening as it quickly becomes clear to both women they are both there under duress. When tension and pressure mount to breaking point, Lucy and Cherifa help each other to free themselves and take revenge on all those who sought to oppress them.

# INTERVIEWS

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# RUTH MCCANCE & PETER CARLTON

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS



## How would you describe *Little Birds*?

Ruth McCance: It's a six-part melodrama inspired by the works of Anaïs Nin, set in Tangier in 1955 on the eve of Moroccan independence.

## What do you mean by 'melodrama'?

It's true that a lot of UK viewers, aren't necessarily used to the form of melodrama. This is melodrama in that it's very much about the world of emotions. It's heightened. It's sincere. It's authentic. There's a little bit of tongue in cheek and it's unashamedly attempting to entertain. Its inspirations come from the melodramas of the 50s, from Douglas Sirk and then Rainer Fassbinder coming through and redeveloping melodrama in the 1970s. We felt we were building on Sirk and Fassbinder to create our own Stacie Passon version of melodrama for today.

Peter Carlton: Melodrama is always about excess. It's about when things

are held down and they can't be held down any longer and they're going to burst out. Weirdly, I think *This Is England* is in some ways a melodrama, because quite often the most dramatic things in *This Is England* are when someone hasn't been able to say something, or there's a dark secret. In that sense, it's a very familiar thing: it's just something that perhaps a lot of British mainstream drama doesn't really deal with.

## How did the project start and how was it developed?

Peter: We started off - 'we' being Warp - having a conversation with Sky about doing a series of short pieces about sex. They were almost like modern fairytales, with the idea that they would be places where the imagination could run riot. We were looking for a source of inspiration and thought of Anaïs Nin's short stories. These were commissioned, obviously by a rich man, to be straight erotica. But what's very striking about them is how free-ranging they are, how open they are, how non-judgmental about sex they are. It felt as though having a conversation with those stories now was an interesting place to start.

A colleague of ours, who's since left Warp, Mary Burke, introduced us to Sophia Al-Maria. Sophia is a visual artist, a memoirist, a novelist and a screenwriter. Sophia is Qatari-American and she is very interested in identity, cultural identity, sexual identity and the fluidity of all those things. So we started talking to Sophia about what to do with this.

I think all of us started to get frustrated by the idea of a short-form and felt that if you really wanted to let the imagination go, we needed to find a way of somehow grouping some of the ideas Nin was talking about in to something that could really take flight as a story. Sophia suggested 1950s Tangier because in 1955 Morocco was on the verge of independence. Tangier itself was very particular, a bit like Casablanca in the Second World War: it was an international zone. There was a French part, but there was a free international part which wasn't totally part of the French protectorate. So it was a place where you got a mixture of politicians, bohemians, military and criminals all crammed together, where Western identity and Arabic identity melted. You got as many runaways and non-conformists from various Arabic

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regimes as you did from Western regimes. That felt like a really great place to set the story because it was a place on the verge of liberation where lots of different people in different ways were thinking about their own liberations from the various systems that entangled them.

It was around this time that Ruth joined Warp and it was then largely Ruth and Sophia who worked on finding the key characters that would make sense of this place.

### *How does the series relate to the book?*

Ruth: It's very much based on/inspired by some of the incidents and sexual transactions in Little Birds, but it was also inspired by the philosophy and thinking of Nin in general. There's a notion both in the stories of Little Birds and then Nin's wider thinking and writing about identity – about people finding the courage to become themselves or not. A big question that Nin poses (and a seminal quote for us in developing this) was this idea that Nin had, "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." That was the sentiment that we were really adapting.

Once Sophia came up with the characters then we charted the storylines almost through that prism of what Ninian pressures and desires are working on these people and trying to look at every decision they made in every scene. We had this phrase in the writing room, "What is the Nin of it?" That's what we were constantly searching for.

### *What tone were you aiming for in the look and feel of the show?*

Ruth: Stacie Passon the Director has had the unenviable task of creating what we call 'The Tangier of the Imagination.' We spoke about that right from the very beginning and we said to all the heads of departments that we were not trying to do English Patient levels of beautifully realised verisimilitude. We are trying to do something much more singular and create something that is bright, that is colourful, that is a little bit stylised but not overly so. They all bought into that.

Peter: I think it's also worth saying that because it's a sort of wish-fulfillment fairytale, we're not necessarily saying that the events that happen in this show could or should happen in real life. There is a heightenedness to it and although it becomes more free-form as our two heroines move towards a liberation, it is heightened from the get-go in the same way that their repression is heightened. Their aspirations are heightened. The whole world is more vivid. Within that, the actors aren't madly hamming around; it's not camp. They're playing it for real because the emotions are real, the issues are real, but the register of the storytelling is all slightly elevated.

### *How did you find your cast?*

Peter: There were two things in parallel. It was important that there was an authenticity of representation; that we had queer characters as well as straight characters, that Arabic characters were played by Arabic actors; that we had Spanish actors and French actors and so on. There was a real importance that people playing these roles brought an understanding and a knowledge of the culture, even though the whole thing was being played in English and was in this slightly heightened fairytale mode.

But equally important was that each person had personal qualities as an actor that worked in terms of their character. Juno Temple who plays Lucy was the first piece of casting we put in place. What we needed was somebody who could believably make this journey from someone who's life had been very trammelled and repressed and held in, to someone who can become almost like an avenging angel by the end of it. We didn't want a Downton Abbey-type of English or American rose and we equally didn't want someone very knowing. You have to have someone where you can utterly believe the openness of the emotional journey and yet they bring with it a complexity and a sophistication and a fearlessness. There is an absolute radiant fearlessness to Juno which is so compelling and makes her the centre of the screen.

What's extraordinary is you almost go the other way with Cherifa and with Yumna Marwan – the first thing you notice is this extraordinary strength. There's something imposing about her; there's something you absolutely

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have to watch. Yet she also finds vulnerability, she also finds openness, she also finds uncertainty and an ability to develop.

I think that then worked its way out through the other characters. Weirdly, for the enormity of their journey, they're the most grounded characters. I think that's probably also true of Hugh Skinner's character Hugo and Raphael Acloque's character of Adham because they are, in a sense, more realistic.

Then around them, you have characters such as Jean-Marc Barr the Secretary, and Rossy De Palma, who are not pantomime characters but they are larger than life. For them, you needed actors who again were able to find emotional truth and inner authenticity, even if on the outside they are playing with something very artificial.

### *Where and how did you recreate Tangier in the 50s?*

Ruth: Normally you start with your exteriors and you build something in studio to match that. Here we did it the other way round because even as we were out doing the location scout, we'd already mentally committed to a certain look in a studio that wasn't yet built! It was a bit of a Rubik's cube and all the heads of department had to commit early on to a vision.

Peter: When we came to locations we shot in Tarifa which is a town in southern Spain of very Moorish influence and architecture. It resembles Tangier of the 50s more than Tangier does now. We did an awful lot of work with it. Anna [Pritchard, Production Designer] supplemented and changed and adorned buildings and streets and Ed [Rutherford, DOP] actually ended up pumping in an awful lot of coloured lights into the exteriors so that there is a heightened design quality. As Ruth said, the look of the show was originally designed with studio in mind and then we explicitly and unnaturally imposed that on the outside world so that everything became part of the Little Birds universe – rather than us trying to set Little Birds in the real world.

### *What was your approach to portraying sex and sexuality?*

Ruth: The show is quite prim in some ways when you compare it to the likes

of nudity and graphic violence and sexual behaviors that people watch on Game of Thrones and stuff like that. We haven't approached sexual scenes in that way. One of the very important things for us was that this was erotica and not anything gratuitous or pornographic. It's very much about desire which we all felt, as a team, was more interesting to see played out on the screen.

## **IT WOULD BE MORE SEXY TO WATCH PEOPLE WITH DESIRE THAN ACTUALLY HAVING SEX, SO IT'S NOT AN EXPLICITLY SEXUAL SHOW IN TERMS OF GRAPHIC CONTENT.**

Where it is explicit, and where it is actually I think subversive is that it looks at all the things, the patriarchal structures, the colonial structures, the power structures that inform all those decisions that people make about sex. So it's about sex and power and it's quite provocative about that, and says some quite provocative things that are quite uncomfortable about where we're at in terms of power relations and any kind of sexual transaction between people. That I think is what's really contemporary about it: it's not about the amount of flesh that's on-screen.

Peter: Right at the beginning what we all talked about was wanting to do something that was about desire rather than sex. Anyone can say anything about sex these days but it's almost like the language of pornography has become the language of the mainstream. That's a very, very long way away from actually understanding sexuality or making something sexy. Pornography tells it all and shows it all but erotica talks about desire. That's really what this show is about. By that, I don't mean in any way that it's prudish; actually the opposite – if anything it runs with desire into some very uncomfortable places of what desire is, where does sexual pleasure end and coercion of another individual start? Where does sexual pleasure begin and masochism end? All of those things are all areas that you go to if you go with desire rather than actually becoming obsessed by whether you're showing naked breasts or erect penises. That was the starting point and that's what I would say was erotica.



# STACIE PASSON

DIRECTOR



## *How did you come to direct Little Birds?*

Well, I was sent the first script and I just loved the world, so I asked to come and meet Ruth [McCance, Producer] in London. I felt that it needed a person who knew Anaïs Nin and could bring some of her ideas to life. They had seen my film *Concussion*, they really liked it and felt they wanted to meet me.

## *What was the gist of those preliminary discussions?*

I think we really just connected because a lot of people feel Anaïs Nin isn't necessarily a feminist author and that *Little Birds* is a problematic text. Whereas we had the idea that she was actually subverting the male gaze and we wanted to attack it from that point of view. Ruth was extremely funny and I knew that I was going to have a great time. I also love Warp's sensibilities: I've always wanted to work with them since Sean Durkin did *Southcliffe*.

## *How would you describe Little Birds?*

Initially, I go in with the logline, "It's 1955, Lucy's an heiress and she goes to Morocco to meet her husband who turns out to be gay." I describe it as a melodrama. I describe it as an exploration of liberation and freedom from two protagonists' points of view. I also talk about this dominatrix/sex worker in Morocco – Cherifa – and her studying the concept of what her control and what her freedom looks like. We also define it as a Sirkian melodrama, and a colourful one that feels very liberating and queer.

## *What does 'melodrama' mean in this context?*

Melodrama is a way of working that feels stylized. I feel like when people think about melodrama, and particularly melodrama in the '50s, they think of a visual feast. They think of exploring themes that could feel overdramatised, but in this case that helps to make a very subversive and transgressive point. We all embraced melodrama as a narrative tool in order to make that point. It's also extremely fun as a form. You could talk about somebody who's melodramatic in a pejorative way, but I think the concept of melodrama is actually very sumptuous and lush for people who seek melodrama, like Sirkian melodramas and melodramas by Fassbinder.

## *What tone did you set out to achieve?*

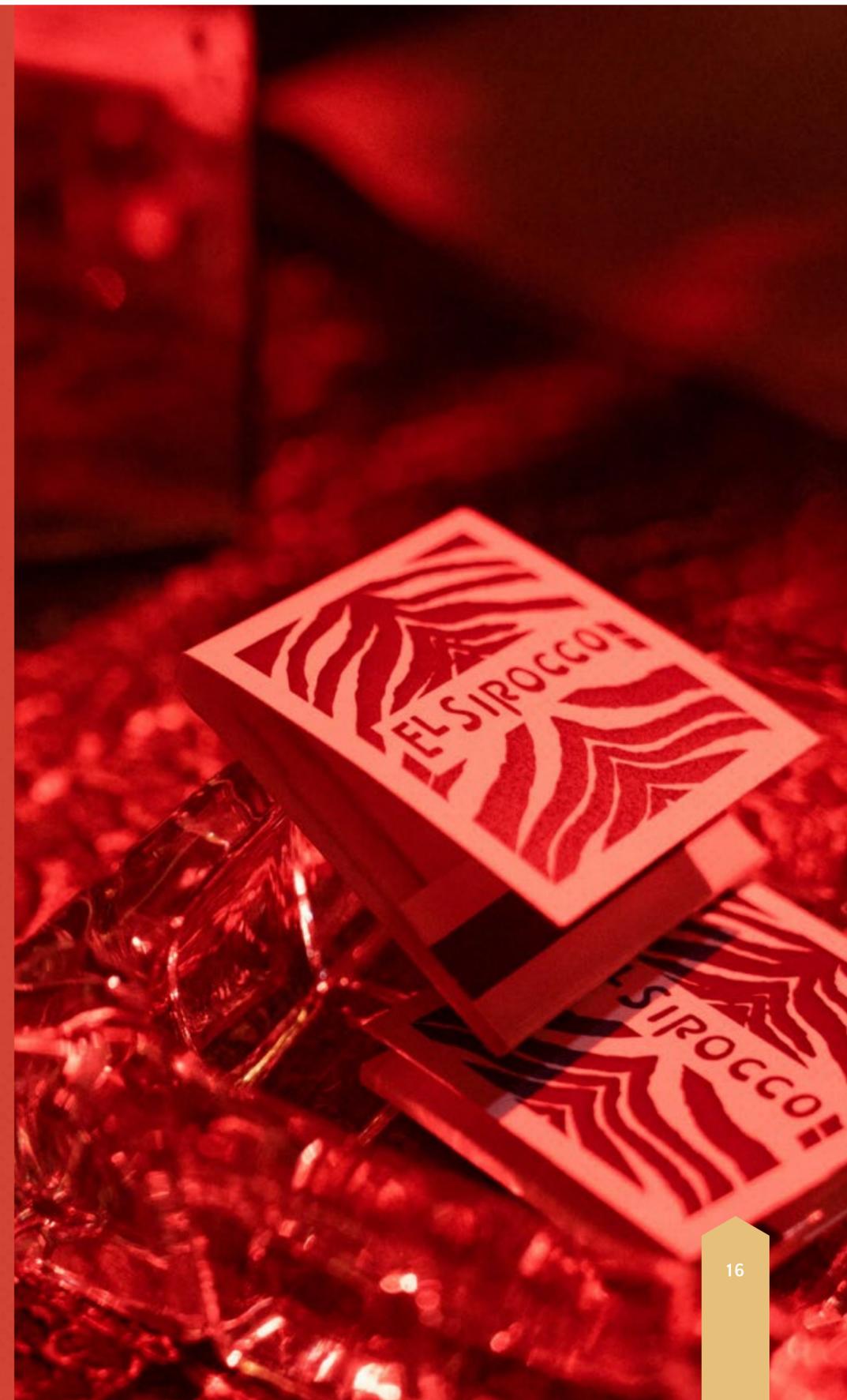
Well, just bonkers, really. The tone is really just bonkers. I insisted on simplicity in this process and we didn't want to do anything in a subtle way at all. We felt that we needed to reach for deeply dramatic moments, embrace colour and embrace concepts that people sometimes subtly try to invoke but don't.

## *Given the source book you were always going to have to film intimate scenes. How did you prepare for that? What was your process?*

It always depends on whose point of view it is. Most of the time it was Cherifa's point of view or Lucy's point of view. For me, filming it always

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involves an intellectual point of view as well. I think that's what makes it sexy, when there's an intellectual idea behind a scene; when there's a point, a fixation, and a point of erotic fixation. There are a few rules that I use, like I don't film people without heads very often because I think from a woman's point of view sex is always very much in the head. I don't move along body parts or do any of that kind of stuff. I generally just observe. The observing of it and not moving around too much helps us train on something sexual and we're able to focus on it better.

***What discussions did you have with the actors to get these intimate scenes right?***

Well, it depends on the actor really, and then it depends on the degree of fear that the actor has in performing a sex act on camera. Juno and Yumna, for instance, had absolutely no fear, and so we didn't necessarily need to talk as much. I think the best directing in that case was casting, because these were very sensual individuals: they understood the reasons for their desire as characters. Very often we would do a little talk at the beginning and then I try to be hands-off as much as possible unless the actors need me. At that point, we'll do some choreography.

***What did you learn filming Concussion that you could apply in Little Birds?***

Concussion was wild. The reason why is because a lot of the people that I used for Concussion, and particularly in the very sexual parts, they wanted to go further than what I wanted to do. Again, the best directing is casting. What I would say is Yumna and Juno are very similar spirits because they are both people – and particularly Juno because she's done several of these types of roles – who trust their directors.

**YOU JUST KNEW THAT WHATEVER THEY WERE GOING TO CREATE WAS GOING TO FEEL VERY TRUTHFUL AND SATISFYING AS A VIEWER.**

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***What does it bring for you to be able to direct every episode of the series?***

In America, we don't really have the opportunity to direct the whole thing. The reason why is because we usually create 60 by 8 or 60 by 10 episodes. There's no possible tangible way that a director can do all that. I think I've heard of somebody doing it twice, three times. It is so arduous. The toll that it takes is impossible. But 60 by 4 or 60 by 6 is much more reasonable. One of the reasons why I thought this was such an incredible opportunity is because we had an opportunity to actually have an authored piece of work. I couldn't have imagined handing this off to anybody else. We wouldn't have known how to protect those actors or how to try and protect the writer's vision or the producer's ideas of what we needed to be doing. I'm glad I got the opportunity to do it all. I felt like there was a collective vision that I could help to facilitate.

***What does a story set in a foreign country in 1955 have to say to a viewer in 2020?***

2020 is actually a really good starting point because I think what this show does is it doesn't just say women need to have rights or they are oppressed. It actually creates this really cool, Gordian knot of ideas. It encapsulates all of these ideas of freedom and liberation and living for yourself, and living in yourself, and living your truth and all of that stuff. It goes beyond the idea of revenge, or retribution, or claiming control... it actually goes into the realm of the surreal, the liberating, the funny-comic. It's not super serious, it makes fun of itself. That is the thing that is great about it – there's nothing earnest about it.

***You mentioned earlier that you've long been a reader of Anaïs Nin. What has she meant to you as an author?***

The thing that's interesting about Anaïs Nin is that she wrote for men initially. In the case of Little Birds, she created this for money. She was very adept at understanding what people wanted. That's why she was so exciting for her readers. In the '80s, what I found so special is that for many years she didn't want to put out Little Birds because it was problematic. There were stories

of paedophilia. Others were lurid and socially problematic. What she did is she also made them interesting for people to read from a female point of view. Therefore, she felt that she was subverting the male gaze. For that reason, that level of thinking and level of thought, I just adore her because it just gives you another layer. She was always giving you something more to think about on everything that she did. And she was crazy. She couldn't keep track of all of her lies. She had a lie box. She was a bigamist. She lived in all of these different countries. She was an intellectual, she was a tastemaker, a bon vivant. She was one of a kind. That kind of singularity about Anaïs Nin is something that we really reached for and tried to emulate in Little Birds.

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# SOPHIA AL-MARIA

WRITER



## *How did you come to be involved in this project?*

Many years ago! Mary Burke used to be at Warp, she was a producer there and she had Little Birds floating around and was looking for a writer to adopt it. I went in for a meet-and-greet and we just got really excited about the possibilities. I remember I walked out of the Warp office and got to Soho and had to sit down and write a bunch of ideas down because they just were firing like crazy. The first question was where to set it because the book doesn't have much of a plot; it's just a series of erotic vignettes really. I knew that I wanted to do something that would give casting the opportunity to do really diverse casting, and then also a location that maybe we hadn't seen on TV before. I had been reading this book *Tangier: City of the Dream* and I've always been really interested in Western writers like Bowles and Theroux, but also the politics of the time was so wild - all over the world, but especially in places that were coming out from underneath colonial rule. Tangier seemed like an exciting and perfect locale for it. That was, I guess, the genesis of it, and then, very happily when I brought that pitch back, Mary was like, "Let's do it."

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## *To what extent is this an adaptation of Anais Nin's collection of stories?*

One of the reasons why I went really bulldogging into that meeting and really wanting it was because Anais Nin had been really important for me as a teenager, but then rereading it as an adult I was like, "This is really dicey. I don't know how I feel about a lot of this stuff." It was like a lot of her writing is for people who haven't had sex yet or something. The big problem with it, however, was that there wasn't a plot. There were some interesting characters which some of our characters are based on. For example, the genesis of the Cherifa character is really out of a story in a book called *The Queen* which is why one of the episodes is called Malika because that's 'queen' in Arabic. In the book, there's this scene of this 'queen of the whores' and so that was the seed of the character, but then we built out from that in order to create a really compelling character. The Lucy Savage character is also an amalgamation of a lot of the different characters that are in the book. She's made up of little background stories about someone who's just coming out from underneath the wing of her family and goes away to marry a banker in China, for example.

## *What story is your Little Birds telling?*

The first task in television to identify POV characters and we had room for four. We've got Lucy, Cherifa, Adham and Hugo who are our four lovers in their own various ways. These are the people who we follow the closest, and who we stay with over the course of the plot. Lucy has been essentially programmed to think that she is damaged goods by her wealthy family. She is essentially escaping an abusive situation in the United States. She's the heiress to an arms fortune and in order to escape her family, she marries the first person who comes along - but little does she know he is actually after her money. Hugo Cavendish-Smythee is an impoverished lord and living in Tangier as a diplomat. He's slightly useless and also a gay man like many ex-pats who were living in Tangier at the time. It was a place which was a lot freer. Hugo is in love with an Egyptian prince, Adham Abaza. Although they are both incredibly posh and come from a similar educational background and class situation, Adham does come from money and does actually have money, so it's like a switch up of the colonial

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Western overlord and Arab subject which is the way that it's usually been portrayed in a lot of television.

Then we have Cherifa the queen who for me has always been the crux and the soul of what, underneath, the show is about. If Lucy is the voice Cherifa is like this beating heart that runs through the whole show and keeps things running. That's both in terms of bringing the heightened sexuality into the picture but also the underlying politics of the plot. Cherifa is essentially the bottom rung, but also she is completely able to reach the top rung which is The Secretary. He is the French representative in Morocco and quite a tyrant himself. And I have to say I think that he's probably remains my favorite character. He and Cherifa have this really intense, very profound dance that happens throughout the plot of the story, and then everybody comes together in a really explosive and strange way towards the end of the show. That allows both Cherifa and Lucy to essentially join forces and blow up the patriarchy and the French colonial club. It was always meant to have this almost punk feeling at the end of these two women joining forces to just say 'fuck you' to everyone.

### *What tone were you looking to take?*

Outrageous! Fun. I think again it's that punk spirit. I wanted it to pay homage to things like Fassbinder but there's also a lot of queer history that's been erased that I really wanted to be forefronted: I was always amazed in the research at how there are so many things that are just asides in a lot of books but are actually representations of relationships and people that are really interesting. For example, Jane Bowles: Cherifa is named after Jane Bowles's lover and Jane Bowles was in love with this Moroccan witch for much of her life, and actually people even thought that maybe Cherifa killed Jane in the end or made her sick. I think tonally, it was really just trying to access this place that would be quite psychedelic, colourful, profound and sexy, and fucked up and exciting all at the same time.

### *What was your approach to eroticism and sex in the drama?*

The key is an emotional undercurrent in each of them. For example, the

Madrax sisters are over the top to the point where it ceases to be sexy. They're horny but they're not sexy, I guess is the thing. But they underline the pain of the Leo character for example, and the power dynamics I think is what I was interested in, in terms of the Madrax situation. Even though there's lots of sex in that house, it's all related to who has the power, why they have the power and the injustices of that. I actually think the hottest moment so far is between Adham and Hugo because there is an emotional link: there's love there. I think if I could try to simplify what I feel is sexy in the show, I would say for example, it's about the frisson, the feeling between Lucy and Cherifa in the bathroom in the first episode, when they don't even kiss. Yet it's full of desire. I think that that's sexier than actually showing the sex.

### *What do you think you bring as a writer to this, given your background as an artist?*

It's a very personal project because of the perspective. Living in Egypt, growing up there as a student during University and studying literature is what I think I bring in terms of building this world. It's almost as if a lot of these interests found a place finally. For example, early on I shared this book with Ruth [producer], Beer in the Snooker Club, which in a lot of ways is what the Adham character is born from.

To get an audience to believe that someone like that existed when we haven't really seen that type very frequently or perhaps at all - this wealthy Arab gay man in the 1950s - you have to go back to literature. Then you can say look here, right here in plain black and white is this example. His sisters wear Chanel, and he went to school in England and speaks perfect English, and is suave as hell. I think a lot of that stuff is what I hope I was able to put to good use - the perspective of someone who has really been immersed in that history.

### *What has a show set in a foreign country in 1955 have to say to the world today, do you think?*

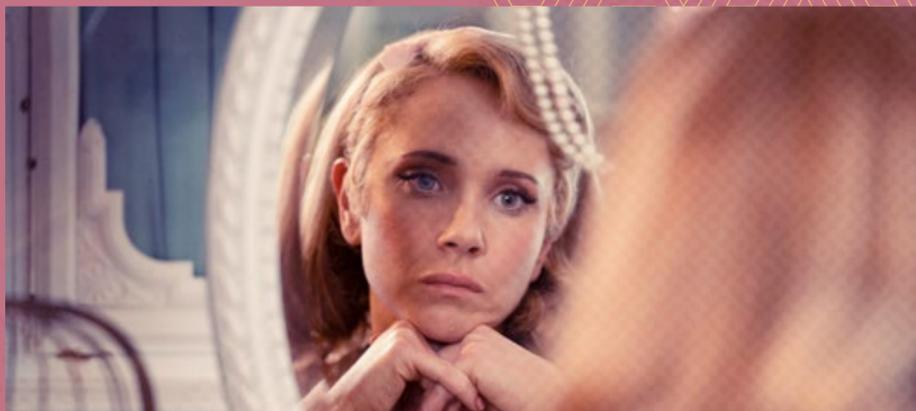
In a lot of ways we all live in an international zone now, and the internet is a place full of sex and psychedelics too. Nothing feels 'exotic' to me anymore in a lot of ways, so I think that that word is hard to quantify in terms of

what it even means because it feels like we've all seen everything and I'm not surprised by anything anymore. I think the thing that is exciting about Tangier of 1955 for me has always been how contemporary the people who are living there were. When I was reading again Tangier: City of the Dream I felt like these are conversations that I have had, or ...

**THESE ARE OUTRAGEOUS CHARACTERS THAT I'VE MET AND WEIRD PARTIES THAT I'VE BEEN TO. BEING ABLE TO SHARE THAT WITH A TONE OF REALITY HAS BEEN WONDERFUL.**

# JUNO TEMPLE

LUCY SAVAGE



## *Introduce us to your character...*

I play Lucy Savage. In the grand scheme of the world of Little Birds she is kind of the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue. Most of the series is set in Tangier, Morocco in 1955. Lucy comes fresh off the boat from New York in episode one and she arrives in Tangier to marry a young, handsome, English Lord and hopefully start to begin her own story. That means that she is like the audience - the only young person in this story that has not been in Tangier. It's this incredible mystery land for Lucy: everything's new to her; everything is exciting for her. She's never been anywhere like it in her life. Especially given how women were supposed to be in 1955 in America... when Lucy arrives in a land like Tangier, it feels like falling down the rabbit hole for her.

At the same time, we've also seen that she has battled with some behavioral issues and had been in some kind of institution and seeing a to help keep her on the right track. So she's also trying to be contained - contained in a world in which it could be very easy to explode.

LITTLE BIRDS

## *What do we know of her past?*

I think she's somebody who overstepped a few lines in her coming of age moments in America. Because women were supposed to be seen and not heard in that time, I think her parents immediately sent her somewhere so that she could be put back in line. Which does mean also that for a chunk of time and throughout the show too, she's quite heavily medicated. It's been interesting talking to Stacie [Passon, director] about what that medication probably would have been. Mainly, at that time, women would be on a form of diet pill so you would never eat but then also a form of Valium - so a cocktail of speed and Valium pretty much.

## *Why did these scripts and this part appeal to you?*

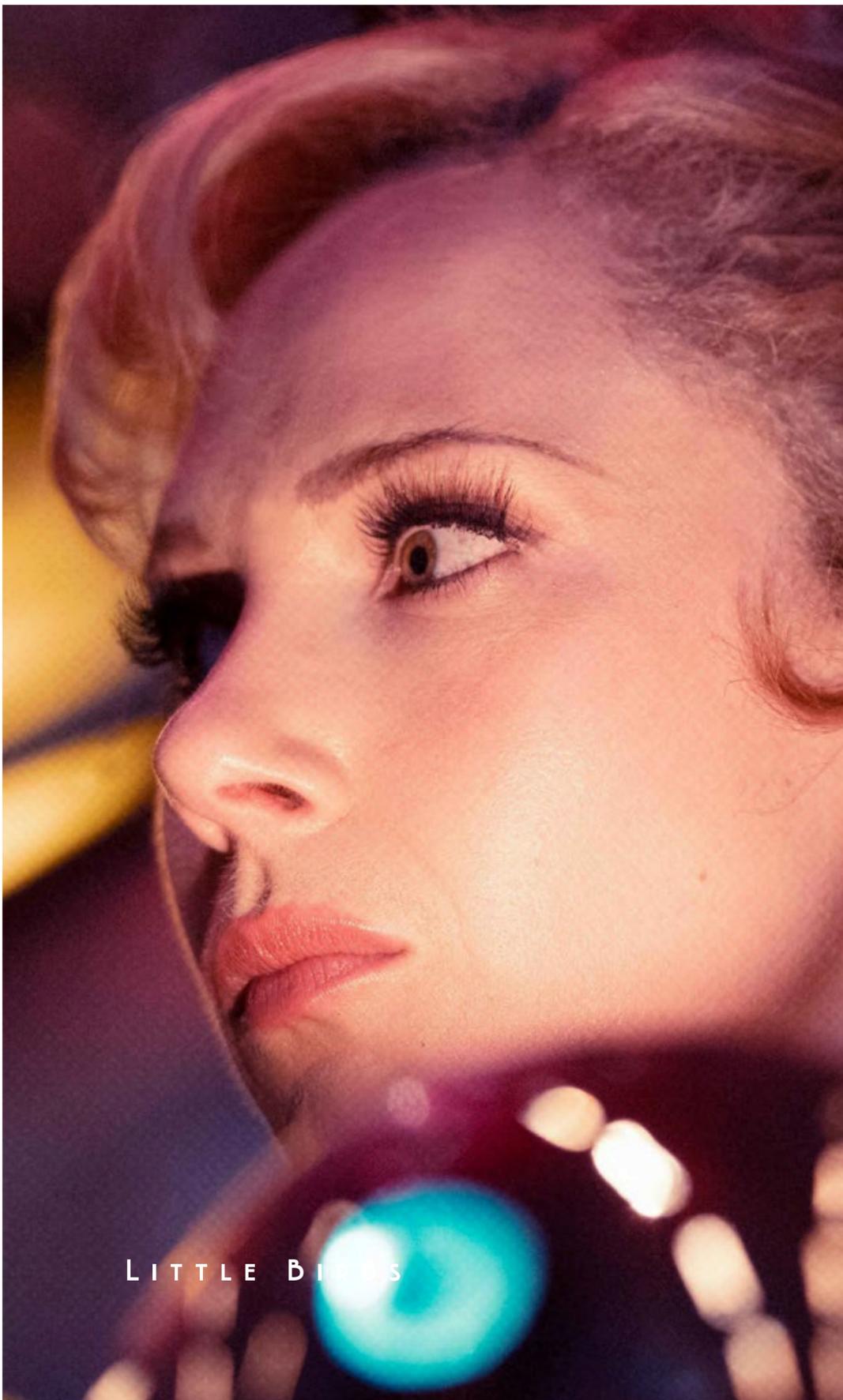
I mean what an extraordinary role. At this point in my life and my career, I feel like I'm somewhat in between: I'm not in my early 20s but I don't really play in my 30s yet. So I get excited when there's a role that fills that space of kind of late 20s; that has a real journey, a real beginning, middle, and an end and a real micro life that you can sink your teeth into. What's so extraordinary about Little Birds is it's not just a great role for me: there are so many great female roles; there's also so many great male roles. And each character has so many layers upon layers upon layers. People are really onions, for lack of a better expression.

**PEOPLE ARE REALLY ONIONS IN LITTLE BIRDS AND YOU'RE PEELING AWAY EACH LAYER. SOME OF THEM GET PUTRID AND SOME OF THEM GET MORE DELICIOUS!**

I also am a big fan of Little Birds, the book. I read it when I was 17 on a flight from London to Los Angeles and I remember being quite overwhelmed by how turned on I was by this book, but in a way that I didn't expect to be. It completely turned me on my heels. It was definitely a piece of literature

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LITTLE BIRDS

that really opened my eyes to a new way of writing and what real eroticism is. In a funny way I think Lucy is on that same journey of discovery in this show.

### *What sort of show is Little Birds?*

It's very much inspired by Little Birds the book and there are snippets of the actual writings throughout the show, so if you're a fan of the book, there will be moments where you'll go, "Oh, I know that story. I know what that person is talking about. I've heard that before."

But in general, a big part of it is about people getting to be okay with their truth. Not one single character that you meet at the beginning of the show is the same at the end. We had this great Anaïs Nin quote on the opening page of our scripts that I'm sure the others have mentioned but it think really works for every character in the show: "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." Each character does blossom but it's not an easy journey and none of them blossoms the colour that you think they might. The show is really about people getting to know themselves and be okay with it even if it's not who they necessarily thought they were or who they wanted to be. It's about learning how to exist with who they are and free themselves of whatever kind of entrapment society has put them in. It's also about how women were supposed to be in 1955, and it's also about how men kind of ran the world in 1955; it's about relationships between lovers, it's about relationships between my character and family, and it's about forgiveness.

### *What has been yours and the show's approach to portraying sex and sexuality in this series?*

I think it's been honest. Stacie made a really, really cool choice of the two lead female characters in the show, Lucy and Cherifa, two women from polar opposite worlds, one who is an American debutante and one that is the highest paid whore in Tangier. They couldn't be from more different worlds and both of them are sexually awakened or trying to be. Yet both of them throughout the entire series never get sexually satisfied. That I think was such an interesting choice: they come really close to it but none of

them actually reached orgasm. Real erotica consists of the stuff that people don't necessarily want to talk about. Sometimes it's scary, sometimes it's dangerous but it's something that isn't just about the beautiful side of sexuality, it's a more perilous side of sexuality, you know? Which I think can also help you get to know yourself: it's not about just fucking and getting off, it's about getting to know your insides and how your blood pumps, you know?

### *How was the shoot for you?*

So we shot for six, maybe eight weeks in Tarifa in Spain which still has a lot of the original Moorish texture that would have been very prominent in 1955 Tangier. When it was lit it was absolutely beautiful and then you had the care and the detail added to it that just transported you there. I love that about being on the movie set.

I'm still such a sucker for the amazing layers that the artists and designers bring. Like when you walk into a cafe and it's 1955 in Tangier, you'll look down at the table and your art department have made their own napkins – you notice that the napkins are slightly different; they're just a little more beautiful and they don't look like they belong in today's era. The attention to detail is astonishing: even the trash on the floor won't be today's trash. We just had the most incredible team that built the universe for all of us on Little Birds. The lighting, directing, producing, the hair and makeup, the costumes... the people that were in it even with very small parts – they would come in with such pizzazz and completely flourish in this past world. I think it was because it is an amazing world with an erotic side and it made everybody quite excited to be part of it. Each day there was an interesting thing to shoot, there was a challenging thing to shoot. There was something that kept me or Lucy out of her comfort zone. I had the most amazing time shooting it. It was exhausting, it was tiring. I had to work pretty much every day. But I feel truly lucky to have done this job.

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# YUMNA MARWAN

CHERIFA LAMOR



## *Introduce us to Cherifa*

Cherifa is a woman who left her family very early on as a teenager. She's a Berber, so she was from the suburbs of Tangier, kind of where the tribes lived outside the city. She came into the city and was living on the street for a while. That's where she met Leo [her betrothed]. From the streets, she eventually went into sex work with Mama Zorba and made her way up to become the most expensive sex worker in Tangier because she caters to very specific fetishes, mostly for the ex-pats that were in the city at the time.

## *What is her journey through the series?*

For Cherifa, because her sex work is what makes her so powerful and what brings her money, she is kind of lost between the two worlds of her people in Morocco and also the colonisers – the French and the English people. Her journey is twofold. One is her coming back to her roots and being okay with letting go of needing those colonisers. But through

meeting Lucy, I think her anger and hate towards them also dissipates because she finds somebody that initially is extremely different, that comes from a different place as well, has a different cultural background, but I think she sees in Lucy something that is very familiar in herself. That allows her to let go of all this anger that she has.

## *What was it about this role that appealed to you?*

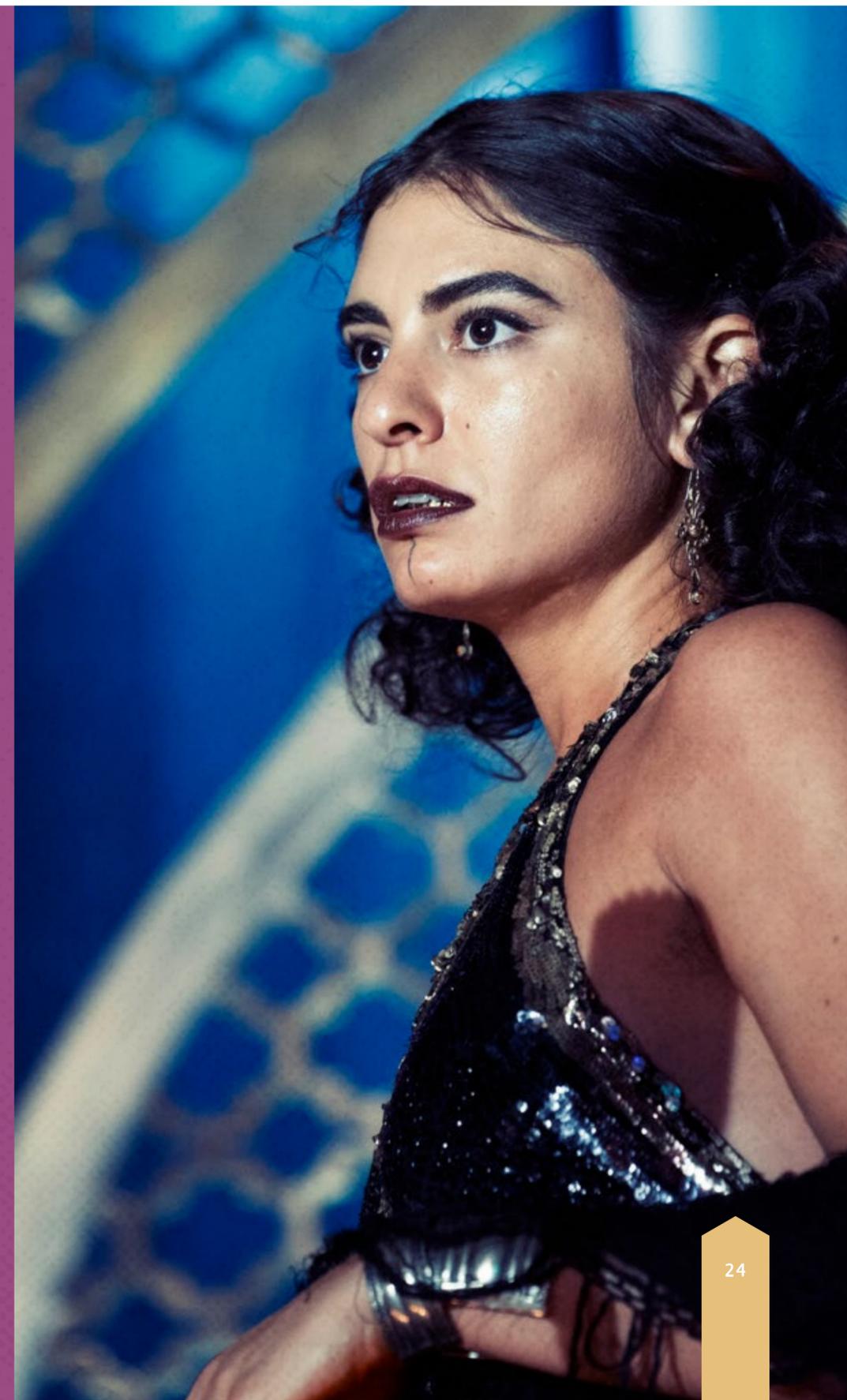
This is my first project in the English-speaking industry. I had always been cautious about even trying to make it into that industry because I was afraid of how Arabs or Muslims get portrayed. So when I read the script, I thought it was a great step for showing our stories in a way that felt real. That's what initially got me very excited to cast for this. How I got the role is so crazy and coincidental: I just did a casting tape and everybody loved the tape. And just from this one casting tape that I did when I was in Lebanon, I was eventually offered the role.

## *How does this role break the Arab or Muslim stereotype in modern TV drama?*

There were so many steps for that to come out or to happen. Initially, the script, the way it was written... I felt like the characters were very humanised. I felt like I could identify with Cherifa in many ways. Also then in the process of filming and in the process of working with Stacie [Passon] and with Ruth [McCance], they really gave me so much freedom. I didn't want Cherifa just to be this kind of very sexy and mysterious brown woman. I wanted her to be human. Because it's very easy, especially if she's a sex worker, for her to just be like, 'Oh yeah, this is the sexy character.' Stacie and Ruth, even when we were shooting and something was being rewritten, we would have meetings and they would really listen to my opinion and my suggestions. They allowed me to move away from just the circumstances of her being a brown sex worker in this time, and move more into her own personal emotional journey. That included how she deals with herself when she's in spaces that are not Arab at all. Where all the other characters are white and she was like the only Arab person there; it was very sensitively handled. Like, 'Okay, so how does she hold herself in the spaces?' They gave me a lot of freedom

LITTLE BIRDS

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to say my opinion, tell them what I thought was authentic or not, and they really listened to me. That process, I hope, it will have created a Cherifa that people can identify with – not just Arabs, but anybody that watches the show.

***What part does the Greek Club, the brothel, have to play in Little Birds?***

I think Cherifa initially wants to be out of it as a completely independent woman who doesn't need anyone. But I think we see that the Greek club is kind of a safe haven and even somebody like Mama Zorba who she always kind of rebels against, because she has such high stature in the Greek club, I think she feels like she can do that. Eventually, we find out that this is really the closest thing she has to home and the closest thing she has to a mother is in this place.

***What were your highlights from the shoot?***

Wow! The dresses and the places and all the beautiful people! The shooting was – I felt like every day was very intense and dramatic. I've only watched the first two episodes but you really see that this whole world is so chaotic and dramatic and sexy. Every time I went to set, there was just something crazy that was happening!

**YOU REALLY SEE THIS WHOLE  
WORLD IS SO CHAOTIC AND  
DRAMATIC AND SEXY**

***Have you read Anaïs Nin's book and if so what did you make of it?***

Yeah, I did actually read the book. My mother had bought it for me, which is extremely unusual! It just showed me that it was okay to delve into this extremely erotic and sexual world because that was something that I was pretty reluctant and afraid to do because of my family and my society and where I come from. The book brought out all the weird fantasies that

I think everybody has in every part of the world, and made me be okay with what I was about to be a part of.

***What struck you most about life in Tangier in 1955?***

Oh man, I try not to romanticise this but it just seems so much nicer than now. I don't know if I feel this way because we're in quarantine but it was nice not to have any of the technologies that we have. When we would shoot, it felt like everything would happen just exactly where you were. Everything was set in the now. If you were in El Sirocco you were just in El Sirocco. Everything is happening there, there's nothing outside of that.

***Where did you travel to film Tangier?***

We were in Tarifa, Spain, which is the closest point in Andalucia to Morocco. It actually looks very similar. I went to Tangier for a week before I went to Spain just to spend some time there because I felt like a weight that I had to represent a Moroccan Berber woman, and I had never been there and never met anyone of that sort. It was amazing. I'm so glad I went. And when I arrived in Spain, the very southern tip of Spain, a lot of the architecture was very, very similar.

***What do you think will be the relevance of a show set in a foreign country in 1955 for a modern audience?***

One of the strengths of this show is there are so many characters and every character has been written in a way that whoever watches the show is going to identify with. Even characters that initially seem kind of evil or something. Even someone like Lucy's mother; I think you can eventually feel for her and understand her. With all the drama happening around these characters, the strength of the show is that each character really has their own personal journey that they go through – and come out of completely changed.

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# HUGH SKINNER

HUGO CAVENDISH-SMYTHE



## *Introduce us to you character Hugo*

Hugo is a British Lord living in Tangier in the 50s. He's in a relationship with Adham, who's a man, but as the series starts we discover he is also engaged to a wealthy American heiress, Lucy Savage. Which, as a gay man, is perhaps not the best idea – but then that's only the beginning of a series of increasingly bad decisions he makes.

## *How come he's engaged to Lucy in the first place?*

He comes from a very wealthy family. He's about to inherit this massive, crumbling estate from his parents, but actually his family don't have any cash at all. So he needs money – and Lucy has a lot of it. That's one of the reasons their engagement has come about but they are also kindred spirits, I think. He does love her in his own way.

## *In what sense are Hugo and Lucy kindred spirits?*

I think most of the lead characters in the series are outsiders in some way. The story of the series, particularly for Cherifa and Lucy, is one of outsiders who've all been dealt very different lives. We watch as everyone transcends their situation by taking ownership of their otherness. Lucy and Hugo are kindred spirits in that sense – they are both outsiders; both of them have never felt they'll find love. And they're friends. Someone says of them early on in the show, 'Apparently they danced well together on a boat at some point,' which I've realised is slim pickings as a foundation for a marriage. But they do click and I think they help each other... although Hugo does do some pretty dreadful things.

## *What's Hugo doing in Tangier?*

Sort of living the high life. He moved there having grown tired of a life of pretending in London. He's there in this relationship with Adham as the series opens, but I think also he can live a more decadent lifestyle out there on a budget. The 50s was a horrendous time to be gay. Tangier in the 50s was this incredibly bohemian place – you could live a better life there as a gay person than you could in London I think. From what I've read about it, so many particularly brilliant gay westerners were there around that time like Joe Orton, Tennessee Williams and William Burroughs.

## *What sort of person is Hugo?*

He's very entitled, but when we meet him in the series his main characteristic is that he's in such deep denial about his real feelings and how he feels for Adham that he's basically shut down emotionally. He's not really very present with anyone; he's a bit of a ghost. Morally, he wants to do the right thing. He really wants to do the right thing, but obviously there is this real problem for the period that he's gay, which then leads to him making a series of terrible decisions. He tries to do all these things but Lucy father's very involved in all of that – which isn't ideal. Basically, he's ill-equipped for the situation he finds himself in.



LITTLE BIRDS

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LITTLE BIRDS

*How did you come to be cast and what was it that appealed to you about this role?*

Well, I met Stacie [Passon] the director and she was fantastic. She's worked on such brilliant TV shows before and is a very inspiring person, so that was exciting and definitely a draw. The script felt really original given that it's based on *Little Birds* by Anaïs Nin. It's not a literal translation of that book by any means. It almost feels like a dream you might have after reading a book. I think Sophia's [Al Maria, writer] background in visual art meant she approached it in a very different way to how people might normally approach writing a TV drama, and that felt very fresh and exciting.

*You've played some upper class characters for comic effect before. How is Hugo different?*

I want to say the '-go' in Hu-go became very important because that seemed to differentiate him from the posh, gay man called Hugh! No, he was really different from characters I've played before and I didn't have any misgivings.

*How would you describe the tone of the show and the way it's presented?*

It's a trippy, dreamlike fantasy and very, very queer. The period's so specific, and obviously the political situation in Tangier at the time is vital. When I read the script I read it as a kitchen sink, slice of life type thing but Stacie's approach was completely original. It's almost like a musical. It feels very bold and colourful and funny in places as well.

*How does the series deal with sex and sexuality; what should viewers be expecting?*

**IT'S QUITE OUT THERE SEXUALLY.  
BUT IT'S ABOUT THESE REPRESSED**

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**CHARACTERS TAKING OWNERSHIP OF  
THEIR SITUATION, AND A LOT OF THAT  
IS THROUGH SEX, AS IN THE BOOK. SO  
IT IS IMPORTANT TO THE STORY.**

*Little Birds is not a direct adaptation of Anaïs Nin's book; what is it?*

Is 'Ninian' a word? Probably not. But it's taken the spirit of the book, and the stories do appear. They don't really come into play with the character of Hugo all that much but the whole thing is very 'Ninian.'

*Where did you go to film Tangier in 1955?*

It was on the southern coast of Spain in Tarifa. It's one of the windsurfing capitals of the world and it's so windy. You walk down the street at a 45-degree angle most of the time, like a Dali painting. It's great but it was hard for the sound department with all that wind. Then again the local food more than made up for it. As for the interiors, and in particular the El Sirocco club where Hugo often hangs out, people will be flabbergasted to learn that that was, in fact, in Manchester. It's amazing. They did such an incredible job on the production design, building this fantastic set.

*Why is this show - set in 1955 in a foreign country, a different locale and culture - relevant to the world today?*

Its take on equality is so important. One of the reasons that people could have sex with people they couldn't in other parts of the world and bohemianism rose in Tangier at that time was the political unrest that was going on. The fact that Tangier was in the international zone, and as it moves towards independence, created a lack of stability that created space for many different kinds of people to co-exist. You could be yourself, and that's as important now as it was then.

# RAPHAEL ACLOQUE

ADHAM ABAZA



## *Introduce us to your character...*

Adham is... very complex. When the show opens he's just this Egyptian aristocrat who only wants to enjoy life. He's in love - or at least thinks that he's in love - with a young English man. Just goes out, drinks, has sex, and doesn't really think about the future. But then we understand that for so many years, he's been a horse trying to look like a zebra. He's in the middle of all these people who mainly come from European countries. I think subconsciously he knows that he's still 'that brown man.' Because they're in Morocco, and it's a protectorate, and there's all those rich European people, and he's an Arab... he doesn't make it a problem at all, but what's going to happen is eventually people around him are going to make it a problem. That's what's going to make him realise that he's been lying to himself for so long. When we talked about the character with the director, Stacie [Passon], I used to say that this guy was a bit like in *The Truman Show*. He didn't realise that everything around him is a set and that it was not real life - everything he's known is a lie.

## *What's Adham's background?*

He's from the royal family. He was born and raised in Egypt, but when he was a teenager he went to boarding school in England. That's what we decided about the character. Initially, the character was based more on a book called *Beer in the Snooker Club* than on Anais Nin's novel. Basically, Ruth [McCance] read this book along with Sophia [Al-Maria], and it's about two guys who are from Egypt. It's set during the revolution, so more or less at the same time as *Little Birds*. These two Egyptian guys are in London, and they just want to be far from the revolution. That was the main influence for the character. Then they just decided that he would be this aristocrat who always had a lot of money, spent so many years in England and then decided to go to Morocco because it was the big thing at the time - he didn't really question why he wanted to go there

## *From your research, what sort of place was Tangier in 1955?*

Okay. First of all, before we talk about that, you might be aware that I am half Algerian, which was a French colony. I've always been super interested in North Africa during the '50s and the '60s simply because the Algerian revolution started in 1954. The thing is, Algeria was a colony, and Morocco was a protectorate, which was quite different. Tangier at the time, as they say beautifully in the show, was a place that wasn't really a place. It was a French protectorate and the English and the Dutch and so many people also had an interest in it, but it was still an African town. So it was sort of this hybrid place. There was a lot of thinking back then about identity, what it meant to be Moroccan, what it meant to be an Arab, and because it was a kingdom before, that only made things more complex.

## *What would life have been like for Adham in Tangier?*

Here is the thing: you couldn't really find much out about being an Arab gay man in the '50s in Morocco, simply because that's not something people talked about. Then again if I'm being fair even nowadays in North Africa it's very difficult to be a gay man and to be open about it. I can't





LITTLE BIRDS

imagine that it was any different at the time and even an English guy wouldn't just acknowledge that he was gay at the time. I think that's why Adham just went to Morocco because he could have the life he wanted to have without having to face his friends or his parents or anything.

### *What was it that appealed to you about this role?*

What I liked about this character is that despite the fact that a lot of tricky stuff happened to him, and I was adamant that we should keep it during the shoot, that he was never a victim. The thing is when you're an Arab and play an Arab you're so often a terrorist or a crazy guy. It's getting better and better, but it's taken us so long to get out of that stereotype and I just didn't want to get into something that was just, "Oh, this guy is suffering so much because he can't be open about who he is." That isn't the case because the problem that Adham has is not that he's gay. He's perfectly fine with it. It's never an issue in the show. His issue has more to do with his complexion and the fact that he doesn't realise how people see him.

### *What sort of show is Little Birds?*

It is a drama, obviously, but there is a lot of blackness about it. It's funny because I was talking to my agent after I watched the first two episodes and I said, "It's just a bit bizarre. There's an oddity about it." And that's a good thing! If it was a painting, it would probably be a Salvador Dali.

**IT IS A DRAMA, OBVIOUSLY,  
BUT THERE IS A LOT OF  
BLACKNESS ABOUT IT.**

### *Why do you think this show, which is set in a foreign country and in a different time, will talk to a modern audience?*

With confinement and people going crazy and needing the sun, and needing to dance, and needing some fun, I really believe that Little Birds is coming at the right time. It is so free from all conventions. The fact that that we're talking about sexual freedom, the fact that a man should be able to be in love with a man or a woman should be able to be in love with a woman without having to fear anything – all those issues are at the center of our concerns at the moment because it's so important.

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# NINA SOSANYA

LILI VON X



## *Introduce us to your character*

Her name's Lili von X or at least whatever her actual name is, that is her stage name. What is she? In real terms she's an entertainer, a sort of film star that has had her day when we meet her. She has become notorious for various controversial reasons. She's quite a free spirit. She's a singer. She's one of those American entertainers that had a talent for just about everything - because she had to. She is trying to find her creative spirit, which she can no longer do, she feels, in America. She's been blacklisted - it was that time in America - and she is travelling to Tangier when we meet her to start making her own experimental films as a director. We meet her on the boat, which is where she bumps into Miss Lucy Savage.

## *Is Lili based on a real person or persons?*

As I understand it she's a kind of amalgamation of Eartha Kitt and Rita Hayworth. Eartha Kitt was very much like Sammy Davis - someone who both came from nothing and found themselves in the middle of two

cultures, being of mixed race. Rita Hayworth was one of the screen sirens of that era. Lili's a sort of amalgamation of all of those types who were trying to find some self-expression. She's also part of one of the stories in the Little Birds book.

## *How did you come to the project?*

The very normal way of auditioning: I got the email from my agent and I read the first episode, I think. I also auditioned to sing a little song to prove that I could do that style, I suppose. It was out of my comfort zone and I completely relished it. It was such a huge challenge. What was fantastic about the opportunity was that it was like nothing I'd ever been allowed to play on television or film before. She was just such a larger-than-life character. There was so much to get your teeth into. It was kind of thrilling.

## *She's quite outrageous. Were there any moments in the script that made you uneasy?*

No, because by that time I'd read the short story. If you had managed to get past those then really nothing was going to faze you! No, it was all just rather thrilling.

**IT DOES WALK A LINE - IT REALLY WALKS A LINE. BUT I DON'T THINK IT EVER CROSSES OVER ONTO THE WRONG SIDE.**

## *In terms of the plot, how do Lili and Lucy's journeys intertwine?*

Like I said, they meet on a boat going to Tangier. They're both going to try and find themselves although they don't really know that at the time. Lucy is going to meet and marry her fiancé and Lili is going to stay with another rather larger than life character, the Contessa, who she has

known throughout her dark and mysterious life. Lili and Lucy meet on the boat. There's a moment where Lili is slightly bored at the captain's table. There are many sycophants and boring talk, and so she decides to shock everybody with a particularly interesting story of her own, which intrigues the sort of sponge that Lucy is. Lili is a great observer of humans and she sees her, and Lucy feels seen, I think. After that meeting, they strike up a relationship of sorts and Lili asks Lucy to be in her experimental film, which she is. So, Lucy and Lili both find themselves at the Mandrax Mansion, which is the home of the Contessa, which is the place that draws all of human life, really, that is in Tangier at that time.

## *To what extent is this series an adaptation of the book?*

It can't be because the book is a series of vignettes really - they're not even what you would call fully-fledged stories. Some of them even seem to end half way through. As I see it, the point of them is a contextualization of a sexual encounter. I think that's also what makes it particularly a feminine kind of erotica, as it's been called, because that often relies on context, on the situation, whether that's taboo, or uncomfortable, or joyous, or whatever it is. That's why it's not pornography. It's not sex for the sake of it, it's situational. Some of the characters in our series have been morphed from several characters in the book, some have been split from a single character; some stories have been lifted directly and others have been inspired by the book - and then they've been put into this intertwining story of cultures and relationships and sexuality and gender. Most of all, the whole television series that they've created out of these stories shares the same theme, which is about control and power, or lack of it.

## *Why is Little Birds - set in Tangier in 1955 - pertinent now?*

Stories of agency and whether you have it or don't over your own personal life, over your country, your culture, are always, and always will be relevant to absolutely every individual. Because what Little Birds is doing is telling stories in a moment to moment, human to human relationship, and on a much, much larger scale as well. I think it does that

really successfully, and so there's nothing that is not of interest in every single frame. Every time it gets uncomfortable or it gets maybe a bit too vivid for one's taste, you're always brought back to the fact that there's a reason for every single encounter, every single twist. In terms of the plot, yes, it's multi-stranded and it requires some application, which I think is not underestimating it's audience.

*How does the series deal with sex and sexuality?*

Well, it depends on what you describe as sex, I suppose. Is it gratuitous? No. That's the furthest from what it is. Explicit in terms of raw emotion? Yes, but is it explicit in terms of flesh? No, not particularly. People can expect to be made uncomfortable, they can expect to be compelled to keep watching, and they can expect to have to ask questions about the way they feel about what they're watching at any given moment.

LITTLE BIRDS



Apple TV original

# ROSSY DE PALMA

THE CONTESSA



## *Tell us about Little Birds*

I was so happy when they called me because, this era, this time, the way it's filmed, the way women dress, everything is so lovely. Also to know that a lot of women were involved in this project, writing, directing, it was stimulating. Anais Nin was one of my first reads when I was young, it was a pleasure to refresh all that.

**TO KNOW THAT A LOT OF WOMEN WERE INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT, WRITING, DIRECTING, IT WAS STIMULATING.**

## *Tell us about your character, The Contessa*

The Contessa's perspective is very selfish, darling, she has a lot of power that she uses and she is a little bit perverse, she is the woman who likes to manipulate people and also this power that she has, she

owns the house, she invites people to parties, she's like the Queen of Tangier. I'm wondering if she escaped from her first husband perhaps or whatever and she finds this great place because Tangier at that time was so cosmopolitan and a lot of people were very glamorous. I don't know where she came from with all these marriages of three husbands or four. I guess she was escaping and she has a lot of things to hide in her past.

## *Can you tell us a bit about The Contessa's role in society?*

She's a money lender, the rates are huge, you have to give her back the money with a lot of interest. She's a business woman, perverse business woman. I have to say that all the team are amazing, we have so much fun working together and we feel like we are doing something special, it's a joy, because it's not always like that to feel something different. I love this family and being part of this project.

## *Tell us a bit more about The Contessa's parties?*

There are so many parties. There are regular parties, where people get drunk or are having fun, music, dancing and there are other parties that go a little bit far away where people get naked and make love to each other and orgies are going on. They are so liberated and so open, exploring life and sex and I allow all the people in my house to do that. It was part of that time too, for this kind of decadence. People who have a lot of money are always partying and being in another country, they don't care about the morality of the other country, they only take care of what they want or need, they want to experiment, they are so selfish.

## *How is the relationship between The Contessa and Lucy?*

She knows that Lucy is very fragile, she sees Lucy as someone that is going to come by very quickly. She doesn't give her much attention at all, she's not interested too much in Lucy. She's so selfish, she's only taking care of things that are going to give her an advantage.

## *And how about The Contessa and Lily Von X?*

Lily is a very good friend of the Contessa but Lily has conscience, a capacity of judgement and The Contessa when somebody tells her something that she doesn't want to hear, it makes her cross. She came to mistreat her as she was feeding her and staying in her place, she has the power to say I don't like you, you can go now.

## *What is life like in Tangier:*

She's a Contessa, she has a lot of power, she has the authorities that help her to manipulate people and because independence has come in, she knows there is going to be a huge change and all this Tangier that she knows and loves is going to disappear and now she's thinking where am I going to go with my daughters? The way she is raising them isn't good because she's making the daughters like herself and I think she's waiting to find rich guys for her daughters, they can marry rich men and have the lifestyle she has. She knows that this Tangier is going to disappear very soon, it's another era and she's taking care of what they're going to do and where they are going to go to be wealthy like she is.

## *The Contessa's look:*

Jo [Thompson] and the costume designer came to Paris to do all the fittings because I was working there. All the vintage clothes are amazing, real, so beautiful. At the time the women and men were dressed so beautifully, you have some dresses you can't move in because they'll become undone and they are so delicate, it was amazing for me. I am not used to working the forties, fifties, sixties look and I loved it so much.

# DAVID COSTABILE

GRANT SAVAGE



## *Tell us about Little Birds.*

Little Birds is like a strange, thrilling trip. You really will not know what came before it or what comes in the middle of it or what comes at the end of it. It's almost like a drug trip where you're just spinning and swimming in this very particular world that is really disorientating and original.

## *Tell us about your character Grant.*

Grant is the patriarch of his family, he runs this very important arms company and betroths his daughter to Hugo. He betroths his daughter, Lucy, to him in order to have a transaction between a market liaison in Africa for weapons. He's developing a new tomahawk weapon and he wants somebody on the ground there to actually sell the weapon for him. He wants to own every room that he walks in to. I think he is somebody who has made a company for himself and has sort of developed something over time. I think because he works in arms manufacturing, he is strongly connected to being an alpha, being in charge, being listened

to, being loud. I think all of those are aspects that drive his ambition for success in business, which is strong – it goes very deep for him.

## *Tell us more about Grant's interest in Tangier?*

Grant has a large ambition for moving his product, developing his product, creating new markets for himself. I think what's interesting about the story is the world in the early fifties... the idea that you could manufacture arms and sell them as an entrepreneur, as a business person. I think he is deeply seduced by the possibility of expansion and really developing new weapons and not really scrutinising who or why they need the weapons. Or what they're going to do with them.

## *Tell us about Grant and Lucy's relationship.*

I think one of the most interesting things about the dynamic between Grant and Lucy is their relationship and you'll see that unfold throughout all the episodes, it is a very unusual and highly dynamic thing and not something we see every day on TV. Without giving too much of it away, I think that's part of the surprise and the revelation about how their relationship is also propelling the story. That is very important to the plot of the story, let alone what's happening between the two of them and in particular what's happening to her psychologically and emotionally.

## *Tell us about Grant's relationship with Hugo.*

I think Grant is very clear about what Hugo is going to do and what his relationship is going to be to his daughter. I think he is by no means deceived by that person. I think the surprise for him is that, he's not actually that effective even as a tool, so he's misread the situation and I think once he gets to Morocco, he's really angry that this guy has forced him to come all the way there and he doesn't want to do it, he doesn't want to be there. I think once he gets there he's like, alright, I know how to do this, I know how to sell but that's not my job, my job is a much bigger job than that.

## *What's the relationship like between Grant and Vanessa?*

I think sadly for both of them they have passed each other, they no longer are able to function as a married couple. The beauty of their relationship has faded and any kind of connection is marginal at best. I think he's given up hope on her, she on him and they are ships passing in the night.

## *Did you know of Anais Nin's work?*

I HAD, EARLY IN MY TEENAGE YEARS, DISCOVERED ANAIS NIN'S BOOK, 'LITTLE BIRDS' ON MY MOTHER'S BOOK SHELF AND IT WAS A JOY TO DISCOVER. THANKS MOM!

## *What was it like on set?*

I came to the project somewhat late and the immersion process happened quickly. I sort of got dumped into the deep end of the pond. There are some aspects that are good about that and there are some aspects that are quite challenging about it. Putting on the clothes, doing your hair – each is starting to tell you a story. I had worked with Stacie so I had a shorthand with her. I knew what it was like to speak with her and could read her I feel, and she, me.

It's the period, but it's not what you're imaging, it's not a received understanding about what fifties Morocco or New York is going to look like, it should feel like some other strange and colourful aspect, you're like 'colourful?' and when we had a conversation about it I initially was like 'that's so fascinating'. It's such an interesting way of looking at it, it's like cranking up the technicolour part of that period, it was very helpful for me to then listen to that and tune into that and feel like part of the style and the way that we are incorporating Nin or expanding Nin or

blowing up some way of perceiving Nin because maybe it's Nin or maybe it's our extrapolation of it. Maybe it's the period or our interpretation of the period that was helpful to figuring out how to play the scenes. On some level they become quite heightened. The very external aspect, rather than an internal, purely psychological, it sort of comes right at you.

### *What drew you to the role?*

One of the things that intrigues me about this role, about playing roles in this sort of part of the rainbow, is their appetite. It's the size of what they're doing and the way they single-mindedly pursue something. It's very satisfying to play them and as I read it, I was like 'oh that's going to be satisfying'. There's some cruelty that a person gets to dig into which not many of us get to portray or act and sometimes that is deep inside and it's also really attractive to me.

### *Hopes for Little Birds:*

My hope about people who watch this series is that the personal and the erotic and the political are all in this strange soup. Hopefully we are not ignoring anyone over the other, but that's why there is still a hazy drug addled way of telling the story. There is also a very pointed and clear point of view about what each one of those things mean and how they influence the other. You may get a kind of frankness about each one of those separately but when you put them all in this particular pot, I think it's a very unusual, frank way of having a discussion about all of those at the same time. I think that's exciting.

LITTLE BIRDS



a sky original

# JEAN-MARC BARR

THE SECRETARY



## *Tell us about Little Birds.*

The way I would describe Little Birds... it's a very free adaptation of a set of short stories by Anais Nin who was an erotic writer from the 1930s. It must have been very shocking in the thirties, in the forties and fifties, maybe even 2019, it might have a different aspect, but I think the creators of this series tried to adapt it to different situations. Of course, you have Lucy in the series who is trying to recapture her wild youth and is put in a situation where all of a sudden she lets it come out by herself, and you have basically everyone who is a victim of colonisation. Under the occupation of the French, the atmosphere is of a country going through independence and characters who are destabilised. What's really interesting about Little Birds is that eroticism takes all kinds of different forms.

## *Tell us about your character, The Secretary.*

So my character in the story is assigned by the French government to take

care of Tangier. Independence is starting to rise, the king is not around and so my character is there to try and create an order so that France is still considered the boss. When he gets to Tangier, he notices a singing woman who has caught the attention of the public and, knowing that he's sacrificed as well in the independence bid, he has to try and make his sacrifice – finding a way of becoming a dictator and saving himself.

## *Did you know of Anais Nin's work?*

In fact, I didn't know Anais Nin's work. When I went to Paris as a young American in 1979 I discovered Henry Miller. I'm from a conservative, catholic, military family, the eroticism of Henry Miller in that time of the thirties when he was growing up with Anais Nin for me was eye opening. It taught me about how to live now – so I knew who she was, but I had never read her literature. I'm curious to see how in this world today of online pornography how this kind of eroticism works. I think that's why Stacie who's directing this has put it into a different context, either through literal eroticism or through torture, or through all different forms to give it its context but also to give it its power again.

## *Tell us about Tangier in the 1950s.*

Well, like most of what was happening at the end of the British Empire and in India, the French were also going through the end of their empires. We're finding this series taking place in Tangier when the King might be coming back, and there might be a chance Morocco can be restored as a country. There's independence of minded people who want to not have the King. Frantz Fanon is a very big political scientist, he said colonisation is violence in its natural state and I think anyone who gives themselves the right to conquer other people, will get conquered themselves and so we're finding those effects and those consequences in this series, as they're happening.

## *Tell us about sexual attitudes in 1950s Tangier.*

I witnessed the backdrop that they've created for Little Birds when we did the party scene at the Mandrax Mansion. To think that in the 1950's

they were dancing to fifties rock and roll, as well as to French music, to exotic music; that you have transexual, heterosexual, homosexual – that kind of world in the 1950's was unheard of. To see that kind of liberty and freedom is quite inspiring, because it most surely existed, it's just that it wasn't very communicable in a right-wing society.

**I REALISED THAT WE WERE DOING SOMETHING THAT WAS NOT QUITE HISTORICALLY ACCURATE BUT THAT WAS INSPIRED. IT WAS SEARCHING FOR ITSELF AT THE SAME TIME, WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT I THINK HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR THE LAST FIVE, TEN YEARS WITH SEXUALITY IN GENERAL.**

What I really enjoyed about this was that it really links with my idea of sexual freedom. Just before coming here I lived in Belle Ville in Paris and I had one of the most wonderful emotions. I was walking down the street and I saw two girls, fifteen years old, hand in hand, completely confident in their love for each other and one was African and one was Chinese. This is what it's about, there's no way I can judge that, this is what Europe is about, or hopefully North America or Canada for sure, but I mean, I want my kid to see that.

## *What drew you to Little Birds?*

I've been doing a lot of European cinema; I did a Slovakian movie just last year, I did a Turkish movie just before that, a couple of Thai movies, a German movie. I've been working a lot with kind of the east part of the continent and it's been a while since I've been able to work with my British and American colleagues. So for me, I am in my element. So that's why I did it, Stacie's a wonderful director and to be offered the role I was very honoured and I said yes right away because series are kind of

replacing cinema and the adult world is completely ignored in the cinema, so now the series are starting to take up those things.

### *Who is Little Birds made for?*

We're dealing with adult themes and what's great about this is in this story you have a British man who is forced into marriage because of a business deal to try and save his family fortune, but the girl, when she arrives in Morocco, discovers that he's having a love affair with a North African man.

The sexual freedom we experience today is quite exciting because I come from a very patriarchal society that does not accept that kind of world. So we have a director who is in tune with this modern world and to be able to show old people for sure, but also the younger people the normalcy of sexuality so they can define what normal is in sexuality and not the society.

LITTLE BIRDS



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# LITTLE BIRDS



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