

**"PTSD did come up early on through our Web research. So it became something we were aware of and that we thought needed to be incorporated into the character."**

**—Cherien Dabis, *The L Word***

## **ENTERTAINMENT MATTERS**

An Interview with Cherien Dabis  
by David Conner

**Cherien Dabis** may be used to hearing creative new versions of her name pronounced by people who don't speak Arabic, but here's one word she'll never answer to: Typical. You will find no wasted space in the introduction to this remarkable young woman, as listing her many and varied achievements requires more than a little space.

Born to Palestinian/Jordanian immigrant parents, award-winning filmmaker and television writer/co-producer Cherien Dabis has been recognized by the industry's top organizations and trade publications, including the **Sundance Institute**, **IFP and Filmmaker Magazine**. A 2004 graduate of Columbia University's Masters of Fine Arts Film program, Dabis' short films have screened at some of the world's top film festivals. Her latest, *Itmanna (Make A Wish)*, premiered at the 2006 Palm



**Springs International Festival of Short Films** and **Dubai International Film Festival** where it won the **Gold Muhr Award for Best Short Film**. An official selection of the 2007 **Sundance Film Festival**, **Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin** as well as **Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival**, Dabis received several generous grants in support of the film, including the **National Geographic's All Roads Film Project Seed Grant**, the **Jerome Foundation's New York City Media Arts Grant** as well as the **New York State Council on the Art's Electronic Media and Film Distribution Grant**.

Currently in development on *Amreeka*, her feature film writing and directing debut slated to begin production in late Winter 2007, Dabis was invited to participate in the Sundance Institute's first ever **Middle East Screenwriter's Lab** and the 2006 **Cannes Film Festival's inaugural Mediterranean Films Crossing Borders** program. An alumni of **Film**

**Independent's 2005 Director's Lab, Project: Involve Mentorship Program and Los Angeles Film Festival's Fast Track Program**, Dabis also received a **2006 Artist Fellowship in Playwriting & Screenwriting from the New York Foundation for the Arts** in support of the screenplay. Most recently, *Screen International* listed the project as one of the "Ten Arab Films to Watch" in 2007.

Dabis' short film credits include festival favorites *Little Black Boot* (2003) and *Memoirs of an Evil Stepmother* (2004).

A Staff Writer on season three of **Showtime's** critically acclaimed television series *The L Word*, Dabis returned to season four as a Story Editor and—as she discusses in the interview that follows—will be back for the fifth season to delve more deeply into the lives of its characters, including Tasha Williams (**Rose Rollins**), an Iraq War veteran who has difficulty adjusting to civilian life.

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I met Dabis at an exclusive meeting in Washington, D.C. The meeting, called *Picture This! Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*, asked Dabis and her colleagues to participate in two-way dialogue with experts in mental health about the creative challenges and opportunities of depicting PTSD and related issues in television and feature film.

I asked Dabis to talk a little about **Tasha Williams**, the *L Word* character who suffers from PTSD. Where did Tasha come from?

**Cherien Dabis:** *The L Word* is sort of fearless when it comes to tackling issues, in a great way. That’s one of the daring things that we do. Talking about gays in the military seemed the next natural progression for us. We thought the best way to talk about it was to introduce a character who had served over there, and who is a bit more conservative in nature than the characters that we usually write, so that we could create some room for political commentary and conversation.

One of our challenges, specifically, was that we didn’t want a character who was super Republican because we have [to create] someone who is uniquely different from our other characters, but someone who our audience will still like. And so we met a number of different soldiers, and one of them came in with some very interesting politics. It’s tricky, you know, you ask, *how can you be gay and Republican?* I know there are plenty of gay Republicans out there but it wasn’t exactly what we wanted to portray; we wanted Tasha to be with the other characters and we didn’t think that would happen if [she were too conservative]. We did explore the options of how political her character would be and we decided that she would be patriotic in this very kind of noble way, saying that, *‘if I don’t risk my life for my country, someone else is going to have to.’*

*DC: It's interesting that you're showing this alternate point of view. You're not afraid to broach new topics, but it sounds like you're also not afraid to challenge yourselves as writers.*

**CD:** It was actually quite a challenge. We had two characters we had to write about whose voices we didn't know much about, to be perfectly honest. We had one character—Papi, a sort of boisterous Latina character who grew up in East L.A. around gangs. None of us really knew anything about it. She speaks this sort of street lingo, and that was something that we wanted to portray because we had met some people in L.A. who were from that community and thought that that would make an interesting character. And Tasha came in as her best friend. We really didn't know who either of those two characters were, but we were up for the challenge.

*DC: You said you met with a lot of different people, people in the service, to inform yourself. Was that a large part of your research process?*

**CD:** Yes. We began the discussion in the writers' room and right away we had a writer's assistant circulate research, articles, information, lots of general information on gays in the military and that sort of thing. Personal stories that she could pull from the Web. Afterward, we started bringing experts and real people to the writers' room to talk to us about what their lives were like and what the challenges were. Again, no one in the writer's room has ever been in the military so we needed someone to speak to that. We didn't understand the politics of a person like that. People talked to us about their personal lives, why they joined, what they did, what they saw, what it was like to be gay—and so we took avid notes, and Tasha emerged as a sort of hybrid of the people we talked to and the stories we read.

*DC: As far as her PTSD, did that emerge from this composite character, or did you plan on incorporating something like that?*

**CD:** We didn't actually plan on it. We didn't know enough. I don't think we were aware enough about it. PTSD did come up early on through



our Web research. So it became something we were aware of and that we thought needed to be incorporated into the character. You know, the first question that came up was, how do we introduce a new character in season four? Why haven't we seen this person before? So we decided that she had been on a tour of duty in Iraq and was just returning, and PTSD definitely would be something that she'd experience, as she'd be trying to get back to civilian life. It's also something that we talked to our research consultants about. One in particular—I don't think she had been diagnosed with PTSD—but she had PTSD-like symptoms for weeks, when she returned from Iraq. She fell into a depression, because suddenly there's no adrenaline rush. She said she'd rather be back in war worrying about life and death, nothing else, than be in civilian life worrying about simple things like bills and everyday things that cause stress. To her, they were really boring compared to the adrenaline rush of being on the battlefield.

*DC: At the Picture This meeting in Washington, you brought up the question of violence as it relates to PTSD and you said that the writers had considered showing Tasha as violent but it just didn't feel right. Were you surprised at all to hear experts say that violence is not a big part of PTSD?*

**CD: We didn't know that it wasn't a big part of PTSD. We didn't know the statistics, we didn't realize [at that time] that only a small percentage of people with PTSD have violent reactions. That's what we learned later on.**

I think that the challenge of writing something like PTSD is that it's very internal. I wouldn't even say we considered violence. It was discussed, and I think we quickly rejected it in the writers' room. It was brought up because of the fact that we were discussing how do we externalize so many of these internal symptoms? How do we externalize someone feeling anxious? It's so psychological.

***"We really didn't know who either of those two characters were, but we were up for the challenge."***

Eventually I think we came up with more subtle ways to do it. The first time we meet Tasha is in a bar. She gets all freaked out by the lights and the noise, it's the first time she's been out with her friends since she's been back. And her friend Papi has convinced her to go out, she didn't really want to go out, but she goes, and she's freaked out because she's so claustrophobic. People are standing too close to her and they're bumping into her. The question was, how far do we go with it? Does she turn around and hit someone? Does she shove someone or is she just really jumpy? We decided on a more subtle reaction in the character. We cast someone who was strong enough to play those reactions quite clearly. We understand [through her acting] that she is feeling anxious, she is jumpy, she is angry.

*DC: Obviously Papi and the other women around Tasha would be affected by Tasha's internal issues. As a writer, how do you dramatize that?*

**CD:** In that first scene where we meet Tasha, our characters quickly dub her as ‘Papi’s angry friend.’ We kind of brought it out in somewhat of a funny way. Their reactions show that they don’t know where she’s been or what she’s seen. They don’t even know that she’s been in the Army. They just know her as ‘the angry one.’ And an episode later, they find out that she was in the Army and they treat her in a pretty judgmental way.

And again, this is just a way of dealing with the stigma—they’re reacting more to her being in the Army and making assumptions of her politics than thinking about the PTSD. But regardless, with the PTSD, I think the only person that really gets to see it is Alice, who gets involved with the Tasha

character. Alice has come across as a more frivolous, fun character who isn’t that

serious. With Tasha it’s sort of an ‘opposites attract’ relationship that we set up. I think it’s very illuminating for her as a character to have to face what Tasha’s been through and hear about Tasha’s experience.

A lot of it comes out in dialogue. But there’s also an instance in which Tasha and Alice are crossing the street to go to The Planet, the café where all the characters hang out, and there’s traffic on the street, people are honking, there’s loud noise, screeching cars, and suddenly Tasha has a sort of reliving moment and we flash back to a sequence of war and when we come back Tasha is

crouching with Alice—she’s grabbed her and pulled her down next to a car where they’re crouching and she’s sweating, and of course Alice is going, ‘What’s going on, are you okay?’ So I think for the other characters, it’s more that they’re concerned about her. I don’t think they recognize what it is that she has. Or at least they haven’t yet, they didn’t in season four.

*DC: It sounds like you’re dealing with it in a very real way. Now that Tasha is involved in an intimate relationship, can you tell us where she might be going in the upcoming season?*

**CD:** We have all of season five mapped out and we’re in production right now—but I don’t think we can talk about it. You know, that would be revealing our storylines—

***"Tasha can actually deal with this, and maybe we can deal with the stigma a little bit more."***

*DC: You can’t just give us a...people want to know!*

**CD:** [Laughs] Nice try, but no.

*DC: [Laughs] Okay, I tried. Do you think anything that you heard from the mental health experts at the meeting might influence any of Tasha’s behaviors?*

**CD:** I don’t think it will influence her behavior, but it got me thinking about the fact that we don’t really talk about PTSD in a direct manner. It raised that issue for me—that it’s something that we can talk about again as writers. Being at the meeting in D.C. has made me realize that Tasha can

actually deal with this, and maybe we can deal with the stigma a little bit more.

CD: That's interesting. To be honest, I think this is the only way in which we could have depicted this particular



*DC: As a writer, in The L Word and in other areas of your professional world, you've said that you don't feel that you address "issues" as much as you do things that are socially conscious. I liked that terminology a lot, but also you've talked about the subtle depiction of PTSD rather than doing a "special episode" of the week or something along those lines. Rather than putting in a guest character who might come in for an episode or two, who might come in and talk about the issue, give out statistics and so on, you've brought in a new character who is actually living through all of this stuff as a part of her being. As far as people understanding what Tasha is going through, besides entertaining viewers, do you think this might help in informing them and educating them?*

**issue on *The L Word*. The tone of the show has gotten to be quite light; there's a lot of comedy now. It's a blend of drama and comedy. Because of the nature of the comedy, we needed to do this storyline in a very organic way. It wouldn't have worked any other way. As for it being more long lasting? I think that unfortunately on television people tire of seeing the same thing. The kind of script notes that you get from networks or executives and sometimes even other writers is, *we've done this before, we've seen this before*. So rather than doing things again and again like you do in real life, in television you quickly have to move on to something else. I think that's a big challenge because, while you want to stay real to that character, you also have to find new and different ways to do it, and that's difficult. We can't use**

the same old tricks. And there's only so many ways you can dramatize a psychological battle.

*DC: But you've said that it is a part of her character, so you don't necessarily have to deal with "the issue" constantly and overtly for it to be there.*

***"I've been working on this script for four years, during a time when these really heavy dramas about the politics of the Middle East were coming out, I always knew I wanted to deal with the topic in a lighter manner because I just don't want to alienate people and I want to make something that is accessible to a wider audience and that has the potential to cross over."***

**CD: Yes, it is a part of her character, and now I am thinking about ways in which we can portray this character dealing with PTSD. And that's something that I will bring into the writers' room next week when we meet again. We're getting back together to discuss the second half of the next season.**

*DC: When does the next season start?*

**CD: I believe it's going to begin at the end of January 2008.**

*DC: I'll be looking out for it! Now I'm going to switch gears and I'd like to point out that you were named one of the top 25 young independent filmmakers to watch by Filmmaker magazine. So what are you currently working on that we should be watching for?*

**CD: I am currently working on my**

first feature film, a Palestinian-American immigrant story called *Amreeka*, which is the phonetic spelling of the way Arabs say America. It's actually a very personal story, based on my family, and I'm supposed to shoot it late fall, early winter 2008. It's quite typical of my socially conscious filmmaking. Basically, it's a family dramedy about a Palestinian-American family searching for that ever-elusive sense of belonging in a country that is not so readily willing to accept them.

*DC: It seems like on television especially there's a lot of dramedy out there now, and they're dealing with socially conscious storylines. It seems like comedy really helps a lot when dealing with important issues.*

**CD: Absolutely. Especially in times of war, when people start making more political work. I feel like when the market becomes oversaturated with heavy drama, people start looking for more comedy. There's been a progression in the climate of filmmaking within the past couple of years. We're now starting to see important subject matter dealt with in a lighter way. And it's funny, I've been working on this script for four years, during a time when these really heavy dramas about the politics of the Middle East were coming out, I always knew I wanted to deal with the topic in a lighter manner because I just don't want to alienate people and I want to make something that is accessible to a wider audience and that has the potential to cross over. And for me, speaking from within the community, I think that there was a**

fear that the material could quickly become didactic. My personal way of dealing with it is having a sense of humor about it. Because I think that there's a lot of absurdity in the way that Arabs are treated in the U.S. At least that's my experience of it. I grew up in a really small town in Ohio, so I decided to deal with my experiences in that type of setting in a funny way instead of a serious manner.

*DC: It sounds like a really intelligent and thoughtful approach to the material.*

**CD: Yeah, well, you know, Arab stories are dealt with so seriously in this country. People don't think that we have a sense of humor, but we do! [Laughs.]**

*DC: Well, it's evident in your work. And looking at it, it's easy to see why you're one of the people to watch in the entertainment business.*

**Catch up with *The L Word* on Showtime's official *L Word* Web site at <http://www.sho.com/site/lword>.**

**Cherien Dabis's official Web site is [www.cherierendabis.com](http://www.cherierendabis.com).**

**For more information on PTSD and more Entertainment Matters, visit [www.eiconline.org](http://www.eiconline.org).**



**THE L WORD will return for its fifth season on Showtime in January 2008.**