



Teacher/Viewing Guide

Najla Said – Episode 111

Actor, Playwright, Author

Grade Level: 9-12

Episode Overview:

Najla Said wrote and performs her one-woman play “Palestine,” not only as a way to entertain audiences, but as a continuance of her exploration of her own identity. Her father, famous Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, had a strong influence over her, which she began to explore more deeply after his death in 2003. Raised in New York, Ms. Said spent her most of her youth as a typical affluent Manhattan teen, wanting to fit in, worrying more about boys and her appearance than the political issues that the rest of her family focused on. She describes her teenage self as completely disinterested in her cultural roots, and completely apolitical. This was highlighted when she first traveled to war-torn Palestine in 1992 as an eighteen-year old battling anorexia. It was then that she witnessed and felt the tension of the region and the suffering of its people for the first time. The trip opened her eyes to a political and cultural reality that she had been previously been ignoring. Upon her return, Ms. Said continued to struggle with the ultimate question: Who am I? Her exposure to her Palestinian and Lebanese roots only complicated the issue for her. Mostly, she just wanted to be “normal,” whatever that was! She wanted to be like her friends and her Palestinian-Lebanese-Christian – Manhattan background more complex. But then she began to pay more attention to her roots. Her Lebanese side is from her mother, who was a quiet figure in her life until, as an adult, she really began to listen to her and spent more time with her extended family in Lebanon. Her mother told her stories of their hardships during the Lebanese Civil War, living with constant violence, but she always remained optimistic for the future. Ms. Said’s realizations caused her emotional turmoil but, as she matured, she was able to reconcile her American and Arab origins and become proud of her multi-faceted identity. In her writing and acting she continues to work through her own feelings and help others deal with similar issues of feeling different and figuring out who you are. She works to help people understand how to gain a sense of belonging in society and recognize that we all have questions about who we are.

Previewing Questions:

1. Is it more important to preserve one’s native culture or be accepted in mainstream America?
2. Why is it so important as a teenager to “fit in”?
3. How are different cultures expressed within the fabric of America?

Vocabulary:

1. Apartheid: A policy or system of segregation or discrimination on grounds of race.
2. Advocate: A person who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy.
3. Affluent: Having a great deal of money (wealthy.)
4. Intellectual: A person who primarily uses intelligence in a professional capacity.

Lesson Overview/Review:

After viewing the segment on Najla Said, students should be prepared to brainstorm the ingredients that make up one’s identity. This can be done as a group activity, having students or the teacher record ideas on a board. Leave these words on the board.

Journal Option: Have students take a moment to write about elements of their own identity which they hide or alter in order to better fit in at school. (Remind students these will not be shared.)

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Post Viewing Class Discussion: Conduct a short discussion to synthesize the information they gained from viewing the video segment. Some possible topics:

1. What purpose does the play have for Ms. Said?
2. Do you think Ms. Said's attitude as a teenage is typical? Explain.
3. Who do you think was the strongest role model in Ms. Said's life? Defend your choice.
4. What are the characteristics of Ms. Said's identity?

Activity: Have students individually write a list of the characteristics which they feel make up their identity. Then allow students to circulate around the room, speaking to classmates to come up with a list of characteristics they share with others. Once this is complete, the teacher will list on the board the characteristics that the class shares and those that are unique to only one student in the class (that they could not find in common with anyone else.)

Ask students to comment on the lists: Are there any surprises in what characteristics are shared? The point of this is to illustrate that the identity of the class is reliant not only on what we share but also on what makes us different. They have characteristics in common as high school students, but they also are all individuals. Final discussion question: Why is it important to get to know someone before you make a judgment about them?

Extension Activity: Have students research the life of a typical teenager found in a different country and create a Venn diagram or write a profile of that experience. The teacher will assign the country—it is their choice to keep this specific to Arab countries or extend it globally. The goal is for students to find commonalities between themselves and the foreign teen. This will help students understand that while someone may appear completely different, we can always find things in common to connect us.

Assessment Ideas: Students will be graded on:

1. Participation in class discussion and activity.
2. Extension activity.

Explore Online: Use the following resources to allow your students to further explore the topic and the Arab American community.

1. Arab Cultural Center: <http://arabculturalcenter.org/>
2. Arab American Museum: <http://arabamericanmuseum.org/>
3. Arab American Antidiscrimination Committee: <http://adc.org/>

Interdisciplinary Options: Fine Arts; Psychology; Sociology

In this episode, students will learn about one woman's complex journey to discover her personal identity.

Common Core Alignment:

- RI6: Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.
- RI7: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account
- W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.



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- W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- W8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.