



## Teacher/Viewing Guide

### Arab American Stories – Episode 113

Alia Shawkat

Actor

**Grade Level** 9-12

#### **Episode Overview:**

In this episode, students meet 23 year old actor Alia Shawkat. Alia shares what it is like to be part of the new generation of Arab Americans and her desire to be more connected to the culture of her Iraqi father. Perhaps best known for her role on the television show *Arrested Development*, she has also had roles in many independent films, including *Whip It*, *The Oranges*, and *The Runaways*. She also played the role of Salma, an Arab American teenager, in *Amreeka*, the story of an Arab American family living in a small town in Illinois.

In the episode, we visit Alia at her home in Palm Springs, California where she cooks with her grandmother. She grew up in Palm Springs with her Iraqi father (who has also worked as an actor) and her Irish/Norwegian mother. She speaks of her love for both cultures and tells us what it is like to belong to two different ethnic groups. She describes her attempt to find a variety of good roles in an industry that has often judged her as “too ethnic.”

#### **Previewing Questions:**

1. What does it mean to be bi-cultural or multi-ethnic?
2. Do you have more than one culture or ethnic group in your family? Are you more aware of or connected to one culture than the other?
3. People in the US often categorize others by group or culture. Is that a good or bad thing?
4. How do actors transcend their personal backgrounds to play different roles?

#### **Vocabulary:**

1. Bi-cultural: Having or combining the cultural attitudes and customs of two nations, peoples, or ethnic groups.
2. Ethnic: Characteristic of or belonging to a non-Western cultural tradition.
3. Humanize: To portray or endow with human characteristics or attributes; make human: humanized the puppets with great skill. To imbue with humaneness or human kindness.
4. Culture: the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of an ethnic, religious, or social groups
5. Typecasting: Assign an actor or actress repeatedly to the same type of role, as a result of their appearance or previous success in such roles.

**Lesson Overview/Review:** After viewing the segment on Alia Shawkat, students should be prepared to discuss the idea of retaining cultural identity in American society and dealing with cultural stereotypes. They should also discuss Western societal standards and how they conflict with ethnic identity.

#### **Post-viewing Class discussion:**

After viewing the segment, consider the following questions:

1. Alia starts the segment off by stating, “I am a person.” Why do you think she chooses to identify herself in this way at the outset?
2. What does it mean to be bi-cultural? Is your heritage made up of more than one culture?
3. Alia states that she was considered “too ethnic” for many roles she auditioned for. What does that mean? Is ethnic a good or derogatory term? Does it depend on context?

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4. Alia states that she has lost many roles to blonde-haired actresses. Is there still a Western standard of beauty in Hollywood? Is that changing? Do you think actors are often judged more by their looks than by their acting ability? Are there enough roles for ethnic actors in television and film to represent the makeup of our society?
5. Alia states that she wants to be more connected to her culture. Do you think it is difficult for new generations to remain connected to the culture of their parents? Have you experienced this in your own life?

**Journal option:** Ask students to respond to the following writing prompt:  
There are many things I appreciate about my cultural identity.

**Activity: Typecasting:** In this activity, students will play the role of a Hollywood agent or producer casting roles for an upcoming show called, "Law and Crimes." You will need to assemble a group of pictures of people of various ages, genders, and ethnic/racial backgrounds. Try to ensure that the people in the photos are similarly dressed so that students are selecting based solely on gender and background, not attire.

Break students up into groups of four to six. Students should be given a cast list and copies of the pictures as actors auditioning for the roles. You may want to include surnames of various nationalities (Western/Anglo names, Hispanic, Arabic, etc.) on the back of each photo.

The roles that need to be cast can include:

- The Police Officer
- The Detective
- The Judge
- A Parent of a Troubled Teen
- The Troubled Teen
- A Long-Time Criminal and Gang Leader
- An Innocent Bystander
- A Wealthy Victim
- A Teen Babysitter in the Victim's Home
- A Caring Social Worker

From that list, they will select a picture of an actor to play each role. After their show has been cast, they will present their cast selection to the class. They should be prepared to explain why each person was selected for their chosen role. After each group has completed their presentation, hold a class discussion about any stereotypes that appear to be present.

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

1. <http://arabstereotypes.org/who-are-arab-americans/arab-american-culture>
2. <http://tvmultiversity.blogspot.com/2012/04/ethnic-typecasting-in-american-cinema.html>
3. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/nyregion/26names.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

**Interdisciplinary Options** Theater, Art, English



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### Common Core Alignment

- SL 1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL 1D Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding; make new connections in light of the evidence and presented.