

WEST OF MIDDLE EAST

A podcast by Neda Nobari Foundation

Interview transcript

Alia Shawkat

TITLE: Arab-American Hollywood Actress Alia Shawkat Wants To Be A Role Model For Millennials

SUMMARY: Iraqi-American actress [Alia Shawkat](#) became famous for her roles as Maeby Fünke in the award-winning T.V. show [Arrested Development](#). Now She's using her platform in Hollywood to show millennials a different side of women and Arabs on television.

Alia Shawkat played the character Maeby Fünke in the television show Arrested Development. The series won six Emmys. Alia starred in Arrested Development when she was 14 years old. Now she's 27 and has been in dozens of t.v. shows and movies.

"I get to represent something I think is important by giving out ideas of positivity and help to young women," Alia says. "Most people who watch my shows or know who I am are younger people.

Alia recently starred in the new TBS show [Search Party](#). Alia plays Dory, a millennial who learns about her own self worth when she starts searching for a missing person at her school.

"Through Dory's own self discovery of this mystery, she starts to gain self assurance again and feel confident again," Alia says. "She makes decisions that are right for her."

Alia says there aren't many movies or T.V. shows looking at female characters on self-discovery.

"It's just important to do honest interpretations about what girls are actually struggling with instead of making it seem all easy if you look a certain way," Alia says. "I'm tired of seeing roles with these women who are perfect looking, because we told you they're perfect looking, and their whole life is fine. There's nothing wrong because they're good looking."

When Alia first tried to make it in Hollywood, she got rejected. Hollywood agents said Alia was too 'ethnic looking.' Alia has short curly black hair and black eyes. She's about

average height, with lighter skin and a lot of freckles. She gets the freckles from her mom -- a California girl of Irish and Norwegian descent. The dark hair and eyes she gets from her dad, an Iraqi immigrant born in Baghdad. And she's beautiful - though not in your typical Hollywood way. Alia wants to show girls there's no such thing as 'too ethnic looking' in America.

"The blind side is that people think the best kind of story to tell is one that's relatable," Alia says. "So they're like, 'Well we just cast the prettiest, white, you know, someone who likes like American.' And the truth is, which we've come to realize a lot more now, is American actually isn't white. There'll be less white people than others soon."

Alia and I are talking at her house in the Hollywood Hills. She gives me a tour and shows me her artist's nook where she does her paintings, some of which have been in galleries across the U.S. and France. She shows a framed photograph of her grandfather on her mother's side, the actor Paul Burke.

Alia's grandfather taught her all about jazz music when she was a kid. That's why she has big grand piano in the middle of her living room. [Alia plays and sings jazz](#), sometimes at clubs in New Orleans, her grandfather's hometown with her friend's band The New Orleans Swamp Donkeys.

When I met with Alia, she was heading back to New Orleans to shoot a film, and maybe play some more music. Earlier in the month Alia was in New York - she travels a lot. But Alia has never been to her father's homeland - Iraq. Her dad doesn't think it's safe for her to visit there after the war. Alia says the closest she ever got to Iraq was when she went to Jordan to film the indie movie [May in the Summer](#).

"Everyone was treated like family right away," Alia says. "It reminds me a lot of my family, how they treat my friends and stuff. There's no pleasantries. They're just like, 'You eat. You're welcomed.' And there's a lot of cultures like that. But Arabs are so much like that. They're such a loving, welcoming people. Like 'my home is your home,' right away."

Alia just go back from a weekend with her Arab family the night before. She says she's been learning to cook from her Iraqi grandmother, 'Beebee.' Alia doesn't speak Arabic, and Beebee doesn't speak English, but through hand gestures her grandmother is teaching her how to cook Iraqi food.

"She makes Mellema, which is like a great breakfast dish," Alia says. "Just like ground turkey and tomatoes and onions with eggs. I can make it, but it still doesn't taste like hers exactly, you know?"

Alia thought about Beebee, her grandmother, on the night of November 8th, 2016, when the result of the 45th U.S. presidential election was announced. Alia isn't religious, but Beebee is Muslim, and an immigrant. Alia was scared that rhetoric would turn into reality.

"I felt lonely in a way I had never felt before," Alia says. "It felt like a friend had died, a good friend or family member. That kind of thing where it was just hit with you and you can do nothing to kind of avoid it. It was upsetting for so many reasons. I called my dad and I was like kinda freakin out, 'Like, what's gonna happen to Beebee? What's gonna happen to Beebee?' And he was like, 'He's not going to do anything. He has no power. I was scared they would take Muslims -- she's an American, she has a passport -- and send them back. My fear is that they would to take Muslim families and return them to a place that's no longer than their home.'"

Alia doesn't look 'Arab.' She has freckles. And this ethnic ambiguity sometimes gives Alia a window into other people's xenophobia about the Middle East - they don't know Alia is first generation Iraqi.

"Being first generation, I kind of see a little bit more of how people view Arabs here," Alia says. "And being younger and not necessarily seen as an Arab right away, I get to live in this protected bubble, you know. I have very liberal, smart friends, and on every account we can agree on, but when it comes to the Muslim religion they're like, 'But all Muslims are terrorists. These are smart people. I was like, 'Well the fact alone that ISIS has killed more Muslims than any other group should be enough of a point for you.' But also, it's also so closed minded because I mean there's always just like a new version that's going to be the bad guys in movies. It was the Chinese, then Russians, now it's just Arabs for days. It's like, for every decade there's going to be Arabs [as bad guys] in movies.

That's why when Alia does take 'Arab' roles, she makes sure she's not feeding into any stereotypes. Like in her indie film 'Amreeka,' about a first generation Palestinian family in the U.S. and their struggles in a new land.

"It's not about necessarily changing their minds, it's about allowing them to see a different perspective," Alia says. "And that's why movies, entertainment, T.V., are going to have value. It's an important role because you are showing an alternative side. A character, somebody else. I think it's such a powerful medium to give people empathy. You have a chance to fall for someone without the judgment. Hopefully you forgot what you were told this person was when you first walked in. Or your instant judgment when you first saw the photo."

Alia she chooses characters that show that women of all shapes, sizes and ethnicities can be beautiful, successful and productive Americans.

“I just want to encourage that focus and self worth are just really important tools, and when people have that they can do anything they want,” Alia says.

Making it big in Hollywood isn't easy. Especially as a woman, even more as an Arab-American woman. But Alia Shawkat has made it. She's doing really well. And she's grateful. Alia believes with gratitude comes responsibility. For Alia that responsibility is to portray girls from all backgrounds as strong and independent. And it's a responsibility to show her audience that American cinema can also be about diversity and diasporas.

Episode Credits:

Host/Reporter/Producer: Shuka Kalantari

Engineer: Seth Samuel

Music: Loga Ramin Torkian and Azam Ali

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