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February 1, 2022 - Alia Shawkat is an American actor, singer, artist, and producer. She starred as Maeby Fünke in the television series *Arrested Development*, and as Gertie Michaels in the 2015 film *The Final Girls*. She currently plays Dory Stewart in the series *Search Party*.

As told to Charlie Sextro, 2894 words.

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On expressing yourself as honestly as possible

Actor, artist, and producer Alia Shawkat (*Arrested Development*, *Search Party*) discusses what it means to be a creative jack-of-all-trades, the emotional differences between acting, singing, and drawing, and why young girls should always feel free to make whatever kind of art they want. Growing up was your family particularly into the arts? Were you raised to care about creating it?

I wasn't necessarily... I started acting when I was pretty young. I was nine, and I was put in an environment for adults. Instead of necessarily being exposed to art, I was more just put in an environment where my opinion mattered all of a sudden. When you're a kid, you usually feel like no matter what you say no one is listening to you. Because I was given a certain gift or whatever—just like dealing with adults—I got really confident at least with acting when I was younger. I lost it, but got it back again.

Was acting the main art you pursued when you were younger?

I used to draw a lot as a kid. Me and my friend had a best friend journal. We would write and add stuff to it. I was always into drawing, but it kind of faded away until I was in high school. So, yeah, it was mainly acting. I really wanted to do it. I didn't question it. My parents were a little hesitant at first, but then were supportive as long as I kept school going.

I didn't live in L.A. until I was 22, so even though I worked in L.A. all the time, the lifestyle part never affected me. I would go back to Palm Springs, this small desert town, so if anything I was actually less exposed to arts or cultural things happening around me. I was isolated in the desert, but I think there's something to be said about suburb towns and that small town "gotta-get-out-of-here" feeling. You create your own things.

When I turned 18 and moved to New York, I met someone. We were dating, and he encouraged me to start painting. I would always doodle, but I wasn't thinking about it, my hand would just start drawing. He said, "You should use my parents' basement... Here's a big canvas and there's a bunch of scraps of paper already on the floor. Just go wild." He would work on music upstairs and I would draw. We had a nice routine. I wasn't acting as much. I was not getting work and kind of bitter about it, but happy I had this other world—sex for the first time and art, so it was a very different side of me. It started coming out then, and it hasn't really slowed down since, when it comes to the visual arts stuff.

You've also started singing more recently...

That came off of a trip to New Orleans. My first time I went there. A lot of my family on my mom's side is from New Orleans. My great-grandparents, they owned a nightclub there, so I've had all this history I'd always known about but never been. Then I did a job there for this movie, *The Final Girls*, like four years ago. I fell in love with that place. I've always sang jazz but never really... I tried in New York a couple times. I would hire bands, pay them to play at a venue with me. I knew all these standards from my grandfather, so I was like, "I'll pay you 100 bucks to come and play these 10 standards that I've practiced." They would already know the song backwards and forwards, so I did that a couple times and invited people, but it was not really moving anywhere because I was just doing it for myself.

When I got to New Orleans I met this band, we became good friends, and then I started touring with them. We played at Jazz Fest this year. I only sing jazz standards. Maybe one day I'll venture into something else, but that style of music is where my voice fits. I enjoy singing that the most. It's always been circumstantial things, you know? I've always loved singing, I love dancing, art, filmmaking, all that kind of stuff. It takes a moment, someone introducing you to it, and then being able to get the time to expand on it.

Do they all feel like totally different creative outlets? Are you getting something very unique from each of them?

Yeah, I don't feel different in the way that, like, I crave it the same way I crave all of them. I enjoy it the same way, but it's a different side of myself for sure. Acting is a very social outlet. I have to have a lot of energy every day and physically be in good shape and be positive and go to sleep, don't drink that much, work out. It's a very ritual linear line. Everything is externalized. My emotions are at the tip top, but I'm not an actual emotional mess. It's like practicing having emotions at hand and it takes so much time. Sometimes I'll work 15 hour days, and I don't want to see anybody. It's very dramatic... I love it, but it feels more like training than when I'm singing.

How does it feel like training?

I gotta stay in this rhythm because you're in one character and working with a certain crew in a city—you just get used to the pattern. With singing, it feels like a party to me. I have a drink on stage with me. The whole time me and the band are hanging out. Even if we're practicing, it's more about loosening up myself. Not being self-conscious of my body, letting myself feel the song and the band I play with. They're so comfortable. They've played every day of their lives since they were kids on the streets. A lot of times James Williams, the other singer, will encourage me by saying, "You know you have it. You just have to let it out." In acting I never get nervous and if I do, it works. I use it sometimes, because I get in my head and then with singing I don't. The more relaxed I am the more fun I have. My voice sounds better cause I feel like I'm just singing at home.

And then drawing, which is kind of like the state I'm in now, is much more introverted. Getting a routine; wake up, have coffee, sit down. Writing and drawing, it's the same thing. Just getting myself to sit down every day even if nothing comes out. If all of a sudden I get in a zone where I'm drawing a lot, it feels great. I think it's like I'm a jack-of-all-trades... I'm not amazing at any of them but I think I'm pretty good. They feed each other. If I didn't have the other ones, I don't think I could just act. I already go crazy if I work too much in a year. You just get in your head a lot.

You alluded to this but do you feel all the introverted arts you pursue is a response or an antidote to your time working on big productions and the chaotic scene they bring?

I think that's why I crave it so much. It's definitely more calming. It's hard to transition back to... like I've just been back for almost three weeks, and the first week I'm home, I finally get to draw and write. I've been missing it, but it took me a while to finally sit down because I was distracted—wanting to go out, wanting to see people, wanting to be titillated and have things to do where you're like literally just dressing up and talking a lot. And I'm not on fucking set any more. I don't need to perform for anybody. It was kind of hard. I got kind of depressed. When you're on set someone is tracking when you go to the bathroom. It's unnatural. People are like, "She's going to the bathroom. She's out of the bathroom. She's washing her hands. She's stopping to get a snack." You feel like this wild kid whose like, "I can do whatever the fuck I want." And then I get home and I'm the only one feeding myself and I'm like, "What am I doing?" It takes a second to calm down, but it's like the biggest gift, I'm so happy. Even if the art doesn't, you know, whatever, it's just makes me feel better.

I assume both of these are within you but do you feel like you are driven more by a desire to be "better" at each art form or a need to get an idea out of your subconscious?

I think it's a mix of that. Sometimes it really feels like with the drawing stuff that I don't realize how much of a therapeutic thing it is. For awhile I was going out a lot and was drawing and all my drawings were crowded parties. Every drawing was like a room where the walls were coming in, there's lots of people in there. I didn't even notice when I was drawing them. It took me time after to see that I was expressing how I felt at those parties. But again it takes me awhile. I just don't sit down and my favorite drawing comes out. It takes me awhile to get back into it. In that way it feels like it has to get out of me and feels very therapeutic.

I feel like I'm disciplined but I have a harder time with focus because of the acting stuff. I feel lucky. I've been doing well this year. I do love it, but it's also how I afford my lifestyle. You get a phone call and I drop everything and go for it. I'm always trying to get better at acting. Certain sets I'm really comfortable and feel confident... like on Search Party. I'm so tight with everybody that we block it together and it feels great. Then other stuff I walk on set and I feel like just a girl who got dressed up and I don't know what to say. I don't feel as confident, so I always want to work on that. So if you hire me to, I can do all these things, you know. So in that way, yeah, *doing it* is what makes people better at stuff, so it's definitely a kind of a mix of the two.

Do you ever get into the mindset that acting is just a paycheck? And the other arts you practice are more pure pursuits?

Sadly yes, sometimes. I feel lucky that more recently, it's been so fun. It's an adventure. I've met some

of my best friends—so the majority of the time no, but there are definitely moments, kind of right now. [laughs] I gotta say, not to be pompous, you've got to get your money. I've been so lucky. I haven't had to do a job that I hate in so long, so that part is great. My mom told me this quote that I thought was great that some famous actor said, "I act for free, they pay me to wait." And that's really the truth, so when stuff starts to feel draining, it's usually because of the waiting part, when it sucks too much and the schedule gets crazy and you don't get to feel like you're actively doing stuff. That's why things that are low budget are fun because you don't have time, so it's like everything is go, go, go and you really feel like you're making something.

Were there any other kind of arts that you started to create but eventually stopped?

Welding.

Welding?

I had this idea for a sculpture. I still want to make it one day or hire someone to make it. It was just a kid with a big head sitting on an edge that's made out of metal. His head is almost like a football size and it's heavy. It's really simple and I drew it out a bunch of times and I had time off in L.A., which can be the best and worst for me, and I was like, "Alright, I'm fucking going to welding class." I found one online. It was super far away in the Valley and it was hot out, so I'm driving like an hour to get to this place. I get there and it's definitely not an art welding class. It's people who want to weld for a living, so it's a bunch of old dudes and they are looking at me kind of like, "What are you doing here?"

Like a trade school or something?

Exactly. Literally there's two scraps of metal and you're trying to learn how to do a straight line, that's it, so we did that for like three weeks. I'm into the whole thing, getting the mask on and all this stuff, so I'm like, "I have this drawing," and I'm showing him this sketch and he's looking at me like I'm crazy. I was like, "I had this idea and I just want to make it. How do I make shapes with the weld?" He was like, "Yeah, you have to take a long time to get to that and we don't even have those machines." You know it's all this stuff, where I was like, "This is so much further away than I thought it would be." Then I stopped going as much and eventually just stopped all together. I thought I was being so proactive and I really wasn't.

Which art form is more mentally draining?

Definitely acting. Because you're dealing with your own emotions... I'm not a crazy method actor by any means, but it is draining because, again, just the energy. Miguel Arteta told me something once, he said, "Energy is the most important thing for an actor. Being able to harness your energy—that's the difference between performances. You can see one that's really good and feels honest, but if it doesn't have energy to it, you're not going to want to watch it on the screen." There have definitely been times when I've done a scene and haven't had energy, and it's just not going to work. It is very draining. It's longer hours.

Something that bothers me the most about acting, but helps me when I'm doing it, is the clothes. Like you're never wearing something that you would wear... even if it's something similar to what you would wear. It doesn't fit the right way. It has to be taped, so you're always uncomfortable, never relaxed, so when you wrap, I usually get a surge of energy and want to smoke a joint or have a drink just to relax and then like five seconds later I pass out so hard.

Do you have a personal goal or mission you carry across all of your art forms?

I think that the goal for any artist is ultimately just to express yourself as honestly as possible. What is my true expression? I'm trying to create exactly what I see from my eyes—whether it's in a film, whether it's a role I'm acting, whether it's a line drawing, whether it's a song, anything. I just want it to be specific to my own voice, because I think the more specific something is, the more other people relate to it. I feel that way when I'm receiving art. I'm always like, "Thank God, you know, Frank Ocean wrote this song," because I would not feel so connected to it. I don't even know the guy. We grew up in completely different neighborhoods. I think when it's honest too, it's very simple. A lot of people can relate to it, so I guess I'd make simple, honest art. It sounds so cheesy, but sometimes stuff gets so over complicated. That's why something clean and refreshing connects to everybody—you and I can be so different but really love the same film, because there's something very clear about it. I want my art to be clear.

Also, I always want young girls to know you can make art of any style. It doesn't have to be girly art or feminist art. Naturally everyone should be feminist, but they can make stuff that's gross or feels masculine or whatever. That's always something I'm trying to do. A lot of my drawings are kind of gruesome and people are like, "That's so cool." You know, they don't say it, but there's something about it that's like...

"I'm surprised you made this kind of art?"

Exactly. Like because there's blood in it. That's another thing I want—that young girls don't have to identify themselves by their gender, as like "a woman."

Alia Shawkat recommends:

Watch Rick and Morty. It's all the philosophy you need.

Listen to Abner Jay - One Man Band record. An isolated artist who thrives without any of the acknowledgment he deserved then or now.

Read Alejandra Pizarnik - Extracting the Stone of Madness. Heavy poems about death, but weirdly make me feel hopeful and positive.

Go to Detroit, Michigan for the second Women's March Convention Oct. 27-29

Look up R.B. Kitaj. My favorite and most inspiring artist.

Name

Alia Shawkat

Vocation


Actor, producer, singer


Fact

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