

Comedian Alia Rasul Grapples With Multiple Identities in New Show ‘Moro Girl’

<https://www.shedoesthecity.com/comedian-alia-rasul-grapples-with-multiple-identities-in-new-show-moro-girl/> (She Does the City, July 5, 2022)

Alia Rasul isn't settling for inauthentic representation. The Toronto-based comedian, writer and performer identifies as Moro, a Filipina Muslim, and also attended Sunday School growing up. With *Alia Ceniza Rasul: Moro Girl*, her debut solo comedy act opening this week at Toronto Fringe Festival, she's determined to tell her story and let audiences know that Moro people exist.

Alia is also part of *Tita Collective*, a group of Toronto-based artists telling stories of the Filipinx diaspora. Much of her work in the group is focused on bringing diverse perspectives to the stage—while also cracking people up. The mission with *Moro Girl* is similar, but more personal—the show will share lots of funny childhood and family stories, inform audiences about Moro culture, and also address Alia's struggle with identity into her thirties.

We asked *Alia* about her unique childhood, her comedic inspirations, what you can expect from *Moro Girl*, and more.

I'm sure a lot of thought goes into naming a show, and you've named your solo show MORO GIRL. Can you share with us why that was important to you? Why did you land on that as the title?

My main goal for creating this piece is that people learn who Moro people are, that we exist. I think now that the conversation on representation has progressed, I think it's important to continually push the needle on the intersectionality of the Filipinx identity. During the pandemic, I had a lot of time to reconnect with my parents and ask them about their stories, and our people's stories. It was really eye-opening to me how much stuff there was, and how much it actually mattered to me, I just hadn't thought to ask. This is me building on that and sharing what I've learned over the last two years. Three years ago I created a show called *Tita Jokes* with *the Tita Collective*, when we started no one really knew what *Tita* meant, and we'd get asked all the time. Today, people know what it is. That's what I'm hoping for with the word "Moro", to normalize it.

In your comedy show, you delve into exploring your identity as a thirty-something woman. When you were 10, who did you think you were? What about when you were 20, as compared to now?

When I was 10, I wanted to be a martial artist because I was obsessed with Jackie Chan. When I was 20, I was struggling as an international student living in Montreal and constantly homesick (and way too cold), on a trajectory to working in a corporation with a cubicle (which I did for a few years after graduation). There was NO WAY I could ever imagine that I would end up being a comedian, let alone create a show like this. I think the younger versions of me would think that was pretty cool.

You are half Muslim and half Christian and growing up, you attended Sunday school. What was that like for you? If you had to describe that experience in a few brief sentences, what would you say?

It was weird, it felt a little bit like walking on eggshells all the time. I feel like I became really good at assimilating, and got used to feeling like an outsider looking in. I tried not to stick out too much, and not offer too much information that would open up a can of worms. I didn't want to be judged and I didn't want my family to be judged. It just meant I never got a chance to be my full self anywhere except with my family. I think my family just sort of hung out with each other, our safe little hub. Internally, I was always reconciling both identities, which got exhausting. I escaped through painting, reading books and watching movies.

What comedians or storytellers have inspired you?

Ahhh so many, I love all sorts of comedy and there's a long list of comedians that inspire me, top on the list right now are Jordan Peele and Donald Glover, who are so multi-faceted and such amazing storytellers across different media. For this show, Hanna Gadsby for sure. Eddie Izzard. Storytellers who take really tough truths and make them accessible and funny, without stripping them of their meaning. I can feel that they want to make storytelling that serves, that teaches so that it can be useful to folks. I love that. And Jackie Chan always.

What does the word "representation" mean to you these days?

Authenticity. I am so tired of representation in broad strokes, let's get to the truth and history behind why things are the way they are. Representation has been so shallow for so long. I've started to feel impatient, and I can't wait for people to understand where I come from anymore, so I'll just tell the story myself, hence this show.

Can you share with us a little of what to expect at your show?

The show is like $\frac{2}{3}$ funny stories about my childhood, especially the times when my identities trip over each other and the last $\frac{1}{3}$, which is sort of the point of it all, is a quick TED talk on Moro people.

The childhood stories are prerequisite information where I try to convince you that I am not the best representation of a Moro person, but I'm often the only one in the room, especially in Canada...so if I don't do it, who will? I'm not trying to be a token, I'm trying to push past the fear of being judged and am looking to make space for the history of where I came from.

What do you love most about Fringe?

A lot of the shows that are made and presented are made without the pressures from institutions and the mainstream, so you really get all sorts of stories, which is amazing. The camaraderie of everyone putting up a show together is great, I'm so excited to be back live again, and I'm excited to hang out at the Fringe tent.

Lastly — your show aside, what are you looking forward to doing this summer?

I plan to take August off and just explore so many parts of Toronto that I haven't been able to in the last few years. There's so much cool art stuff happening in Toronto all the time, my new favourite thing in Toronto is how much Filipino brunch is happening. It's a great thing to look forward to on weekends: **BB's Diner** in Parkdale (sometimes they serve Moro food which is so cool) and **Kanto by Tita Flips** in the Junction does an all-you-can-eat brunch buffet. There's NOTHING more Filipino than an all-you-can-eat brunch.

10 artists to watch at the 2022 Toronto Fringe

<https://nowtoronto.com/culture/10-artists-to-watch-at-the-2022-toronto-fringe> (Glenn Sumi, NOW Toronto, July 4, 2022)

“Alia Ceniza Rasul

Alia Ceniza Rasul: Moro Girl

Growing up, Alia Ceniza Rasul identified as a “Moro,” a Filipina Muslim. But she also attended Sunday School. Now she's finally coming to terms with these seemingly conflicting identities in a play. Three years ago, Rasul was part of the breakthrough Fringe hit **Tita Jokes**, which featured a killer Filipinx ensemble cast. Can't wait to see how Rasul handles a solo show.”

Derrick Chua 2022 Toronto Fringe Picks

https://dchua64.wixsite.com/2022fringepicks-1/post/derrick-chua-2022-toronto-fringe-picks?fbclid=IwAR2wCD0gah3pSwaLb4WE4BoyZao-G3r-_RZ7Z5sczWqm8sZvW3t6Z-WD64I (Derrick Chua, June 30, 2022)

“Alia Ceniza Rasul: Moro Girl (p.49).

Best known to Fringe audiences as a member of the award-winning Tita Collective, comedian and author Alia Ceniza Rasul embarks on her first solo show with Moro Girl. Born in the Philippines but raised mostly in the Middle East, Rasul shares stories about growing up half-Muslim, half-Christian and obsessed with her very Catholic country of birth. Now mid-thirties, grappling with her seemingly conflicting identities, she is looking to finally figure out who the heck she is, why she likes charcuterie so darn much, why every single school she went to was haunted and whether or not she really was descended from pirates.”

Pinay in Canada debuts shows about growing up as half-Muslim, half-Christian

<https://www.theglobalfilipinomagazine.com/2022/06/22/pinay-in-canada-debuts-shows-about-growing-up-as-half-muslim-half-christian/> (Ryan Namia, The Global Filipino Magazine, June 22, 2022)

Press release published in The Global Filipino Magazine.

Alia Rasul Grapples with Identity in New Solo Show, “Moro Girl”

<https://clichemag.com/interviews/alia-rasul-grapples-with-identity-in-new-solo-show-moro-girl/> (Erin Tatum, Cliche Magazine, June 21, 2022)

Alia Rasul felt the pressure of straddling two cultures early. “I think when I was younger, I just wanted to be everything my parents were. They were my heroes. I remember pretty young deciding that since being Muslim (my dad) and being Christian (my mom) was important to each of them, I would do my best to try to always make room for both in my life. I didn’t want to play favourites (although honestly speaking, my favourite would be the parent who spoiled me last, haha), I needed to make a reality where many things can be true, and while that was confusing at times, I think it serves me well today to move through everyday knowing that my way isn’t the best way or the only

way.” Journeying through childhood as a “Moro” (a term referring to the Muslim Filipinx population) was isolating for Alia and she at times felt compelled to downplay that part of her identity. “Isolating! I was always different but not different enough that I couldn’t pass and integrate. I mean, how can you tell if someone is ‘half-Muslim Filipina,’ right? So there’s a lot of not offering that information up. But I had my brothers who were in the same boat as me, so we had our little community. But there’s a lot of minimizing that, so I didn’t make a huge effort into expressing myself in that way, or exploring it further, which I regret.”

She intends to reconcile that dissonance via her new show, *Moro Girl*, which will be just as complex as she is. “It’s a collection of stories from early childhood through to university, which sees me grow up across a few different countries, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Canada. I talk about my doorbell nickname ‘Linglong,’ lots of Filipinx have those, I talk about demon hunting at my school (all of my schools were always haunted), and I talk about me and my dad’s rivalry around who the best karaoke singer is: it’s my dad (I have to say that because you have to respect your elders), among other things. There will be a little bit of a show and tell, as we touch on the history of the Moro people. These stories are specifically stories where I have found aspects of my identities run into each other, and I unpack that through this show. It gets complicated, it gets messy, but it’s pretty funny (I think anyway). I have always used humour to get me through complicated times (that and therapy obviously), and I feel like I am most myself when I am silly.”

Alia actually feels uncomfortable identifying as Moro due to its roots in fierce resistance that she considers herself culturally adrift from. “My dad’s family is Moro, so therefore I am Moro, but I have always felt uneasy to claim that identity because it is attached to a history of resistance that I don’t think I have contributed enough to. Having grown up in the diaspora, I have never lived in Mindanao, I have never really experienced the struggle that Moro people do, and while I understand the Tausug language, I don’t speak it, I don’t cook the food, and I don’t practice any of the arts, I didn’t live the history. So it feels uncomfortable to claim it, it almost feels appropriative, but that messes with my head because my dad’s family is SO Moro, they are very much a part of fighting that fight, so I was always caught between feeling like I should be doing more and feeling like it’s not my space to take, because of the privilege I have enjoyed.”

Her focus now is to use her life experiences to remind Filipinxs of the importance of the Muslim community, using laughter as a means of building connection.” Now that I am older, I’m looking to better understand myself, my place in this world, and what I can contribute to my community as we move forward to a better future. The more I get to know myself, the more I understand what I need to be accountable for, and what my strengths are. I’m a storyteller and a comedian, my position in life is to tell stories that serve the community, tell stories that embrace our whole history so that people can see themselves reflected in it. I fully believe that laughter is a form of resistance. So I’ll do my best to help my community laugh. It’s important for people to wake up to the fact that the world is larger and more complex than what’s in front of them. I think a lot of the stories that we grew up with and saw on film and TV did us a disservice. It showed one kind of story and it limited our imagination, our capacity for compassion, it limited our ability to relate to each other, and see each

other as neighbors, which I think is a reason for a lot of the issues we see today.” Having ties to two cultures is a powerful honor lovingly reflected in her art. Alia sums herself up simply: “My name is Alia Ceniza Rasul. I have awesome parents who come from different worlds. It’s been a privilege to grow up in the in-between. I am a comedian and storyteller, and I just want to make you laugh.” Moro Girl will play at the 2022 Toronto Fringe Festival from July 6th – 17th at the Tarragon Solo Room (30 Bridgman Avenue).

Alia Rasul Debuts Her Solo Show MORO GIRL At The 2022 Toronto Fringe Festival This July

https://www.broadwayworld.com/toronto/article/Alia-Rasul-Debuts-Her-Solo-Show-MORO-GIRL-At-The-2022-Toronto-Fringe-Festival-This-July-20220620?fbclid=IwAR06_NqBRlbtIY3fSEK9uBrNsSDSXM64CiqVfelfveojyq7SyumecHeCN4o (A.A. Cristi, June 20, 2022, BroadwayWorld)

Press release published on BroadwayWorld.com.

Toronto Fringe Festival to Return in Person for 2022 Edition

https://exclaim.ca/music/article/toronto_fringe_festival_to_return_in_person_for_2022_edition (Kaelen Bell, Exclaim, June 1, 2022)

“Some expected highlights of this year’s Fringe include Nam Nguyen’s *A Perfect Bowl of Pho*, Alia Ceniza Rasul’s *Alia Ceniza Rasul: Moro Girl*, Donovan Hayden’s *X And Da Spirit*, and so many more.”

23 funny books for your holiday shopping list

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/23-funny-books-for-your-holiday-shopping-list-1.6249434> (CBC Books, November 21, 2021)

“*Super Important Filipina Thoughts* by Alia Ceniza Rasul

Super Important Filipina Thoughts is the first poetry collection from comedian writer and performer Alia Ceniza Rasul. Rasul shares her funny and irreverent reflections on identity, family, relationships and her upbringing.

Rasul is an artist, producer, comedian, performer and writer from Toronto. She is a member of the comedy troupe the Tita Collective.”

How Instagram unlocked comedian Alia Ceniza Rasul's writer's block

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/how-instagram-unlocked-comedian-alia-ceniza-rasul-s-writer-s-block-1.6095013> (Vicky Qiao, CBC, July 15, 2021)

To combat writer's block, comedy writer Alia Ceniza Rasul took to Instagram to upload her hilarious and irreverent poetry – those poems would become her first poetry collection.

Super Important Filipina Thoughts reflects Rasul's musings on identity, family, navigating relationships and friendships, and growing up Filipina.

Rasul is a Filipina comedian and artist based in Toronto. She curates the annual Tawa Comedy Festival and is also part of the consulting firm Bespoke Collective team.

Rasul came on CBC's *Fresh Air* to talk about her book.

How did your poems first end up on Instagram?

Basically I had writer's block, and I wanted to push through that. So I gave myself an assignment. I promised myself that I would write a poem, whether it was one word or multiple words. And I put it out every day and committed to it.

When I put it out on Instagram, I wasn't really expecting anything. But people started to respond to them and that encouraged me. Instead of doing one a day, I started doing three or four a day. It was so fun. It was a whole book of poems at the end.

People can engage more deeply on Instagram. They can like it, but they can also comment, reflect, engage and share it with the world. I think for many years a lot of people are like, "Oh no, where's the person to person touch?" I do feel like with poetry, there is that extra layer of connection and ways that you can engage with it.

Did your work change when you realized more and more people were attracted to it and reacting to it?

No. But that doesn't mean I wasn't tempted to change.

I think something about social media and getting addicted to "the likes," it's very tempting to start catering to your audience. I had to pull back into my intention. I wanted to put my voice out there and I wanted to stay open to what that means. A part of the commitment was whatever you're thinking at the time, pay attention and write it down.

I wanted to make sure I didn't edit who I was because I'm trying to figure out who I am, too.

- Alia Ceniza Rasul

I would describe my book as almost a journal. I come to it with the energy with which I wake up every day. One of my poems speaks to the fact that I don't know myself; because I never paid attention to what I was thinking. I wanted to make sure I didn't edit who I was because I'm trying to figure out who I am, too.

I'm still figuring out my own voice and what I care about. Maybe it's a little bit of a kitchen sink of all the thoughts that I'm thinking; and then as I progress as an artist, I assume I'm going to refine that voice.

In one of your poems you write, "I didn't choose to be Filipino but I didn't fully live until I embraced it." What do you mean by that?

I think there's a pretty common narrative for a lot of people who are millennial and trying to reconnect with their roots.

When I moved away from the Philippines, my Filipinoness took backstage. In fact, I kind of ignored it because I had internalized the idea that my heritage didn't matter if I wanted to succeed as an immigrant. No one specifically teaches you that.

Growing up, I never really put my Filipino heritage and my relationship to it to the centre of who I am, until recently — until I turned 30. And honestly, it was liberating because it kind of gave permission to be my full self.

I didn't realize I was two people. I was myself, who was a bit more Filipino in my family and in my community. There's the other version of me where my Filipinoness was removed, and I didn't realize how limiting that was.

- Alia Ceniza Rasul

I didn't realize I was two people. I was myself, who was a bit more Filipino in my family and in my community. There's the other version of me where my Filipinoness was removed, and I didn't realize how limiting that was. Until I finally just said, "Okay, this can only be one Alia."

Do you find yourself thinking about how universal your story is?

When I was studying comedy at Second City, one of the things that really stayed with me is that the more specific something is, the more universal it becomes. Because that is really the only narrative I can honestly share and authentically share.

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I want people to laugh. I want people to look at my story and maybe it'll give them confidence. Before I started comedy, I had a huge fear of public speaking and it just got worse in university. So I took comedy to get more confidence in public speaking.

After five years of that I realized I wasn't confident being vulnerable and sharing who I authentically was. I did it through this exercise and it kind of uncovered by accident how vulnerable I would get — and it was liberating. I wish someone, when I was younger, had told me that all of my thoughts were important.

55 Canadian poetry collections to check out in spring 2021

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/55-canadian-poetry-collections-to-check-out-in-spring-2021-1.5970122> (CBC Books, March 31, 2021)

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