This page: Gillia lime-green dress, Tamar’s Collection four-strand green pearl necklace with gold-filled chain, Tamar’s Collection gold and green triangle earrings with nine gold-filled drop chain.

Opposite page: Elie Saab Couture lavender tulle gown with copper beading, Anna B. Bogren “Twist of Faith” necklace.
Bright Eyes

Indie actress Sheetal Sheth shines in Albert Brooks' new satirical film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*.

STORY Teena Apeles  PHOTOS Charlize Lin

WARDROBE Edgar Revilla, crystalagency.com  MAKEUP Reann Silva, avantgroupe.com  HAIR Bertrand, avantgroupe.com

LOCATION Shot at a private residence in San Marino, Calif.

It's mid-December and actress Sheetal (pronounced "SHEE-thel") Sheth has been back in the States for less than 24 hours. The 20-something-year-old beauty is dressed in a casual shirt and jeans and looks surprisingly fresh and composed, despite having been in an all-day photo shoot for *Audrey* and arriving from Dubai the day before, where her new film, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, had its world premiere at the Dubai International Film Festival.

The film is written and directed by and stars Albert Brooks, one of Sheth's favorite actors, best known for such movies as *Mother* with Debbie Reynolds and *The Muse* with Sharon Stone and Andie MacDowell. In typical Brooks-poking-fun-at-himself fashion, *Looking for Comedy* features the character "Albert Brooks," an out-of-work comedian, who is recruited by the U.S. government — because all the popular comedians were already busy — to go to India and Pakistan to find out what makes Muslims laugh. It's a new strategy by the president to improve diplomatic relations in that part of the world. post-9/11.

Brooks is informed there's no compensation involved, but the possibility of receiving the Medal of Freedom is dangled in front of the actor to entice him. All he has to do is deliver a 500-page report to the State Department and let the government know what makes Muslims laugh. Brooks agrees and embarks on what he sees as a heroic mission to improve American international relations, with a motley cast of characters providing him with support — and often grief — along the way.

Alongside the washed-up actor and his incompetent sidekicks — two government agents played by John Carroll Lynch and Jon Tenney — is the shining jewel of the comedy search crew, the scene-stealing Maya, elegantly played by Sheth. Maya is the bright-eyed, well-educated local who is all too eager to work
come respite from the typical "clueless American in a foreign land" scenario.

The movie has Maya and Brooks approaching random individuals on the street, without distinguishing if they’re Muslim or not, against the backdrop of some of the most breathtaking mosques and settings in India. For any casual foreign visitor to try to discover something so ingrained and complex about a culture (or group) — from what makes people laugh to how they define love — is a lofty and ultimately unachievable feat, but pursuing this knowledge and inevitably failing, which Brooks does repeatedly in his various misadventures, perhaps is the point of the film. “It is a commentary on the world,” Sheth says. “Specifically, how all of us misinterpret each other, have misconceptions about each other and how silly we all can be and ignorant. And Americans, in particular at times, because we don’t have the education sometimes about the Eastern part of the world.”

**Culture Clash**

Sheth, who attended the famed Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, carries herself like a pro, even though *Looking for Comedy*, released on Warner Independent, is her first Hollywood film per se. Considering the New Jersey native has appeared in a handful of television shows, such as Lifetime’s *Strong Medicine* and CBS’ *The Agency*, and has been playing leads in award-winning independent films since 1999, she has plenty of reasons to swagger. Sheth starred in the 2005 drama *Dancing in Twilight* with Kal Penn (*Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*) and Mimi Rogers; she won best actress honors at the 2001 Cinevue International Film Festival in Florida, for her portrayal of a young woman caught between two cultures in *Wings of Hope*; and she also honed her acting skills playing complex female characters in two celebrated indie flicks, the 1999 drama *ABCD*, which received best indie feature at the Houston Film Festival, and the 2001 comedy *American Chai*, which won audience awards for favorite feature at Slamdance and GenArt, two films that also explore the struggle of first-generation Americans coping with their immigrant parents’ expectations and values.

As Maya, Sheth arrives in Brooks’ shabby Delhi office, adjacent to an Indian call center that fields calls for every kind of U.S. business from Toys “R” Us to the White House, as the answer to all his prayers. She can type and do shorthand in her sleep and is “sweet and positive” with a “thirst for knowledge,” notes the actress. “She loved to just learn and no matter what, she was the most positive person out there,” adds Sheth. “And I think the comedy in a sense is that she’s this very smart

with the American comedian on his honorable quest to help his people better understand her people (well, around 15 percent of them, according to his orders) through what tickles their funny bones. As she guides the audience and her Jewish boss through the foreign terrain, it is her admiration for the comedian and his dedication to the mission, as well as her desire to understand comedy (something she can’t learn from books) and Brooks’ motivations, that make for a wel-
woman but tries to break down comedy in a way, like, let’s see how I can learn, too. . . but you can’t do that. Albert was teaching her that, and I think they learn a lot from each other."

Brooks, the director, like his character, imparted his leading lady with knowledge about his craft and likewise turned to her for guidance. "I’ve seen Albert work and how specific and diligent he is. He was incredibly sensitive and asking questions all the time," says Sheth. In turn, Brooks wanted to make sure he portrayed Indian women fairly. "Not that I can speak for women from there, but I feel like I can speak a little. I have some knowledge and my whole extended family is there. His obvious concern was: 'There could be no question that you're not from there. Can you do that?'" From advance reviews, she succeeded on that front and then some.

Variety movie critic Deborah Young wrote that "Sheth beams like a ray of sunshine" in the film. Lynch (Fargo, The Good Girl, The Drew Carey Show) who plays Stuart, one of Brooks’ incompetent government handlers, similarly had only praise for the actress. "I was disarmed by her honesty and charming humor," says her co-star.

While the actress found playing an Indian woman learning facets of American culture a thrilling experience, conversely, off screen, being raised American in an Indian household posed many challenges for her. Like most immigrants, Sheth’s parents traveled to the States for the American dream and to take advantage of the opportunities the country had to offer. "It was hard in a sense growing up — not like I had a horrible life," she stresses. but she had a difficult time sorting out "what was important to me. who I was, what part of this do I appreciate, what part am I rejecting, what do I like."

She travels to India often, spending up to four months at a time there, something she has been doing since she was 16. But every time she returns to the U.S., there’s always some adjustment involved. "I have a period of a few weeks where I’m just sad. It’s hard being in India. My family in India used to always say to me, ‘You could never live here’ because I’m constantly like ‘Why is this like this?’ she says, referring to the living conditions for most people. "And I’m crying every two minutes when I see this. And no matter how many times I see the poverty, it still gets me.”

Though her family members say she’s “too sensitive for this place,” India is still a second home to her. "I love it over there. I’ve traveled a lot and I’ve never met people with better hearts than people in India. I really haven’t. I think that they are the most generous, open, loving people. They could be on the street and offer you a glass of water if they felt you needed it over themselves. It’s really amazing.”

Resisting Labels

What stands out most about Sheth when you meet her in person is how straightforward and confident she is. qualities that make you want to engage her. But even more evident than that is her desire not to be viewed simply as an “Asian American” or “Indian American” actress. She simply detests labels of the kind, but in the world of entertainment she is faced with it on a regular basis as a minority in Hollywood.

"It never occurred to me that my race would be an issue because I don't look at things that way," says Sheth who, when venturing into issues of identity, seems more idealistic than restricted by the marketplace and society in which she lives. Her NYU universe apparently operated much differently. She describes school as a place where she worked hard at her craft and received great roles. But after graduation, "every other question in the professional acting

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— Sheetal Sheth on growing up bicultural.

Did You Know?
What you won’t learn from Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World:

India Factoids
> Has the highest poverty rate in the world, with more than a quarter of the population living below the poverty line.
> There are more men in India than women.
> It has the second largest population of people living with HIV/AIDS in the world (about 5 million).

Pakistan Factoids
> The population is just over 162 million people.
> It is about 97 percent Muslim.
> Women on average have 4.14 babies.
> Just over 35 percent of women, age 15 and over, can read and write.

Source:
The World Factbook, 2005 edition, compiled by the Central Intelligence Agency

This page: Pamela Roland mint trenchcoat, Kenneth Cole blouse.
Page 70: Grey Ant blazer, Sworn Virgins top and Kenneth Cole trousers. See Audrey List for shopping info.
world is 'What are you? You don't have an accent. You know, all these horrible things.' Yet these things exist outside of the acting world as well. Most minorities in America have had such questions and statements directed toward them, yet, for Sheth, these incidents still shock her.

"I hate the word 'ethnic.' I hate the word 'exotic.' You know I hate these things," she continues. "I hate that I even have to have a discussion about it. Right? Like if I'm right for the part, just freakin' give it to me if you think I'm good enough, and unfortunately it's not that simple." Sheth mentions one of her first manager meetings, where the party expressed interest in representing her, but at the end of the meeting asked, "Which one of your names do you wanna change?" "I couldn't wrap my head around it for a long time," she admits. It was a big wakeup call for the aspiring actress — despite the fact that numerous actors in Hollywood, Asian or otherwise, have endured similar dialogues for decades.

But Sheth hopes someday there won't be those kinds of discussions. She shares her frustration about other Asians referring to ABCD as a South Asian film or people calling it an ethnic film. "I was like, why would you call it that? Why would you take a movie that we've spent all of this time making and put all of this work into and take it and make it into that thing?" she says passionately. "When we're trying so hard for people to recognize the fact that we're just as much a part of this culture as anyone else, and all of a sudden just do it to yourself? Like they're already gonna do it." Sheth is aware that the marketplace and media will slap a label on a product to make it easy for consumers to easily comprehend, especially categorizing films by genre, such as comedy, drama, ethnic. She is frustrated by how this practice tends to simplify complex stories and may prevent audiences from being open to movies like ABCD.

It's obvious this is an ongoing struggle for Sheth the actress as well as Sheth the woman who doesn't want to be labeled, but still embraces her cultural background as an American daughter raised by Indian immigrants, and whose heart is with the Indian people. "Just because I happen to be a certain ethnicity, you're gonna all of a sudden label it a certain way," she rants. "And it bothers me immensely. Like, it's ridiculous. We're just people. You have to pick a story. You have to pick the context of it — it just so happens to be an Indian family," she says. "It's a universal idea. It's a universal thought. It's a universal feeling. It's a universal struggle. It's just specific within a culture.

"And I think that we all need to make more of an effort to realize how we're representing ourselves and putting ourselves out there because we need to be smarter than everybody and we need to blow people away," she goes on to say. Then she comes out with the greatest lesson she can share with any aspiring minority actress: "Because it's not going to be enough for me to go in there and be good in order for someone to give me a part." This, too, has been echoed by many actresses. Talent and beauty can get a person's foot in the door for an audition, but for women like Sheth, there's still a greater obstacle to face — Hollywood still hasn't completely welcomed minority leads. There are just a handful of Asian and Asian American actors that regularly grace the big screen in America.

Yet, like Brooks in his new film, Sheth continues on her journey to discover how to improve the world she lives in, undaunted by the forces against her, especially the American entertainment industry that either wants to tone down her ethnicity or pigeonhole her as one type. "So I really had to find things that meant something to me and that I was moved by. And I didn't believe in working just to work. I'd rather bartend or waitress and work on the stuff I love when I can," she notes. "And so I just do a lot of independent film that I thought had great characters and stories."

Though her past films were small releases in terms of distribution, her choices certainly had national press taking notice. Los Angeles Times' Kevin Thomas wrote that she "Ilumimates the tempestuous Nina" in ABCD. and Jonathan Foreman of the New York Post described her as "lovely," resembling "an Indian Alicia Silverstone." Merle Bertrand of Film Threat called Sheth "effervescent" as Maya in American Chai. and Philip Wuntch of The Dallas Morning News found her Dancing in Twilight performance as Nicole "appealing." That film's director, Bob Roe, who has worked in the entertainment industry for more than two decades, chose Sheth to act in his debut feature because "she brings this wonderful energy to the movie; she truly is the smile of the film. I thought she did a fantastic job." And now, with the release of Looking for Comedy, the rest of the country will hopefully get a taste of this young woman's talent, whether Indian, Indian American, South Asian, Asian American or simply another American in search of a dream.

And plenty of folks are rooting for her, especially Roe, who believes Sheth has an incredible career ahead of her. "I honestly think she's hoping to cross over — not just be a South Asian movie star. She can be like Jennifer Lopez who isn't only [considered] a Latina movie star. I think she's got a lot of potential because she is so beautiful. She's a really sweet woman. She's not a pushover ... she's very bright. And she's been on her own for quite a while. She's persevered and there's a lot to be said for that — that she kept at it — and that's really great."