

# Viva La RITA

Returning to her *West Side Story* roots, Hollywood legend RITA MORENO proves her star still burns bright

as told to JENNIFER FERRISE

**E**ntertaining has always been in my bones. As a 4-year-old child in Puerto Rico, I would boogie my little behind off whenever my grandpa put on a record, and he'd laugh and applaud. When I was 5 [in 1936], my mother and I moved to America. My mom had a friend who was a Spanish dancer, and when she saw me bopping around our New York City apartment, she said, "I think Rosita has a gift." So she took me to the studio to work with Paco Cansino, a dance teacher who had great fame in Latino circles because he was Rita Hayworth's uncle. He taught me some steps and eventually took me to a nightclub in Greenwich Village, where we danced and played castanets together. Of course the audience was enchanted. How could they not be? There I was, this little girl with big eyes twirling around as fast as I could. It was my first performance, and I knew I wanted more.

I became enamored with movies after that—I loved the giant screen and the wonder of it all. I'd pack a sandwich for lunch, get to the theater at 10 in the morning, and stay until 3 in the afternoon. It was joyous fun. I remember thinking, "How amazing would it be if I was up on that screen and people from all over the country would pay 25 cents just to see me? What could possibly be bad about that?"

In those days, there weren't really any actresses that a Puerto Rican girl could look up to, so my role model became Elizabeth Taylor. It didn't occur to me that her skin was lighter or that she had violet eyes. We were around the same

age, and she had such huge success, so my mom and I bought a waist cincher and did my hair and my eyebrows like hers. Sure enough, when I got a chance to meet Louis B. Mayer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios fame, he said, "My God, she looks like a Spanish Elizabeth Taylor." And I got signed on the spot.

I accepted whatever parts were offered to me because there weren't many roles for Latinas back then. Instead, they'd ask me to play a Native American or an Indian or an Arabian. I did the best I could with each role, but it was frustrating. Whenever I did find a role I'd be good for, they wouldn't even consider me. I was always underestimated. And when you hear someone say over and over that you don't have value, you eventually start to believe it.

My friend Marlon Brando, who I was going with at the time, said, "You really need to see a therapist," which, of course, is hilarious, because it was one loony telling another loony, "You need help." But he was absolutely right. And boy, was it life-changing. It helped me define my self-respect and figure out who I wanted to be in this industry. The other thing that helped was getting the part of Anita in *West Side Story*. Anita was Latina and proud of it. She had such a sense of dignity and always spoke up for herself. I had never experienced that before. Playing her inspired me to find my voice, and that is something that has stuck with me forever.

When I won the Oscar for *West Side Story* [becoming the first Latina to receive an Academy Award], it was truly the moment I realized that people were cheering me on. I barely got any fan mail back then because (CONTINUED ON PAGE 222)



Moreno in Hollywood in 1954.

