Niva La H

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

as told to JENNIFER FERRISE

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)



had the Internet and loved to have used it to expand my worldview even faster. I would have loved finding kids like me. I know that there are lots of things that have to be done differently. Lots of changes that need to be made, so I understand your point of view too. But no, I would've liked it, and I hope that I would have had the wherewithal to balance the use of it.

LB:Corporately, there aren't a lot of "kids like you" who are known as deeply human leaders. Why does that sort of, regrettably, stick out? TC:Well, I stay grounded. I work with people who are much smarter than I am, and we debate things, so that atmosphere keeps you even more grounded. And then, when you find a job that is identical to your values, it's like an epiphany. You don't have to transform yourself to be something different. You're just focused on becoming the best version of yourself.

LB: When are you not the best version of yourself? Because we all have those days when we don't want to get out of bed, or we're grumpy, or the news cycle is spinning. **TC**: Fortunately, I don't have that many.

LB: Damn you! TC: They probably happen when I'm one step beyond exhaustion. A reminder that it's time to take one of those hikes. ■

Viva La Rita

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my Latino community didn't know where to send letters. But when my name was announced at the Oscars, I heard that my neighborhood in New York went up in smoke. People were screaming "She did it!" out of their windows. What they were really saying was, "We did it." And that made me feel marvelous.

Fame is ephemeral, though; it comes as quickly as it goes. But you can't let that frighten you. Because no matter how tough it gets sometimes, performing is the only thing I've ever wanted to do. That's why I'm still doing it all these years later. It's my version of the American dream. And when people tell me how much West Side Story or Singin' in the Rain or The Electric Company means to them, I still find it astonishing. I was at an event the other day, and Angelina Jolie came up and said how happy she was to meet me—I damn near peed my pants. [laughs] In this business you never know who is watching or what could be right around the corner.

So when Steven Spielberg called to tell me that he was remaking West Side Story and asked if I wanted to be in it, I couldn't believe it. I thought, "How am I still functioning in this business long enough to see a remake happen almost 60 years later?" [laughs] But Steven and [screenwriter] Tony Kushner wanted to get it right and to correct the original film with respect to the Hispanic characters, so I knew it was in good hands. Tony wrote the character Valentina just for me, and she's the heart of the film in a lot of ways.

Being back on that set was a wild full-circle moment for me. What's crazier is that the film comes out the day before I turn the big 9-0. And just for a few minutes, I wish my mom were alive to see it. She would've never believed it. And I think she'd be proud that I'm still dancing, whether it's onscreen or just around my house to Bruno Mars. Why stop now?

Moreno is a star and executive producer of West Side Story, out Dec. 10.

CREDITS

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