



How Aida Rodriguez Wove Heartbreak Into Comedy Gold

The comedian had her breakout moment on "Last Comic Standing," and since, has used comedy to explore everything from politics to familial trauma. It's all part of her new HBO Max special, *Fighting Words*.

Alicia Menendez:

I have known Aida Rodriguez a long time. We've been on many political panels together and while she claims that she is retiring from political commentary, her new HBO Max comedy special *Fighting Words* is deeply political and funny. And a revelation because of the intimate window it gives us into Aida's life.

Because in addition to the comedy set it's part docuseries, including Aida meeting her dad as an adult for the first time. And while we hear a lot about how comedians use their pain to fuel their humor it's a different thing to watch it happen in real time.

Aida, thank you so much for doing this.

Aida Rodriguez:

No, thank you for having me, we got history. I'm happy that you're still doing what you're doing and that you're growing and that you're getting recognition in this because you've been doing this for a minute and you've been elevating us and trying to show people who we are. And I remember sitting on a set with you in Miami and you bringing me on before even *They Ready*. So I'm happy to see you still doing this.

Menendez: No, I'm supposed to be saying all these things to you.

Rodriguez: Now we are supposed to be saying it to each other.

Menendez: Do you want to walk me through the story of the many times you were kidnapped in your youth or do you want me to offer a brief summary?

Rodriguez: So my mother took me from my father because she wanted a better life for me. He was undocumented and we lived in the Dominican Republic with him. I was his, as these right-wingers would refer to me as an anchor baby. He was a musician and his family wasn't very accepting of my mom, so my mother had to seek refuge. She came back to the United States.

There my mother fell in love with yet another man who was not good for her. And this man who was wanted for murder had us on the run with him. And we went to New York because the SWAT team had raided our home in Miami. We ran to New York to hide where all the other criminals go hide. And my grandmother found out where we were.

My grandmother kidnapped me. The babysitter was someone that was a family friend and they told my grandmother where I was. My grandmother took me, she and my uncle plotted this whole thing. They cut my hair off, flew me across state lines, brought me to Miami. My mother had an option she could call the police which would probably get her man caught or she could just let me be and go live a life of normalcy as much as that was possible and that was it. I lived in Miami and I grew up there. My mother eventually came back because the man was caught and we got on with our lives in Miami.

Menendez: I think a lot of us hear that story you must have been so angry with your mom.

Rodriguez: Of course.

Menendez: But you were happy she was back.

Rodriguez: I was relieved. The way that I processed it, it was my mom was taken away from me and then I got my mom back. I was angry towards my grandmother because my grandmother was the one that took me from my mom, because I had no concept of danger. I didn't realize how much danger I was really in so the anger was directed at my grandmother for taking me away from my mother. I wasn't able to appreciate it until later. And it's funny because I made jokes about it.

The first time that I ever did those jokes were for They Ready and then I never did them again. It was very painful for me. It was very traumatic. The trauma of growing up without my father not having answers about that part of me knowing who I am, knowing the Dominican part of me that was very traumatic. But it was even more traumatic to get taken away from my mother who was my everything. And even though I was with my grandmother and I was with relatives, I would rather be on the run with my mother than to be stable with those relatives because that's my mom.

Menendez: You say that because your dad wasn't around you would look for him in books. Where would you find him? Who did you imagine your dad was?

Rodriguez: Oh man. I started reading things that I probably shouldn't have been reading really young. I read Lord of the Flies, The Jungle, I read To Kill a Mockingbird in elementary school. I wasn't in middle school, I was in a junior high school. I found my dad in all of these books and it was interesting because I created him to be who I wanted him to be. I had to create my father to be a person. Even though my mom is a great writer and she loves to read I was like okay, this is where I got this from so I would find him in all the books that I loved.

Menendez: Fighting Words is fascinating because you break form with it and I was obsessed with that as I was watching it. In addition to the traditional comedy set there also then is a bit of travel docuseries. And there's you meeting your dad for the first time as an adult. How did all of those things you imagined he would be square with who he actually was?

Rodriguez: So first and foremost the first time you see me see my father in that documentary is the actual first time I saw my father.

Menendez: I wondered, but your face kind of gives you away.

Rodriguez: It wasn't rehearsed, we didn't shoot it more than once. Nadia, the director, Nadia Hallgren insisted that it would be organic so long as that was okay with me and it was. It was breathtaking, it was heart-wrenching, it was nerve-racking, it was heavy. There are many people that I know who don't know who their fathers are, haven't met their fathers, have this romantic idea about meeting their father. And to see my father be skinny I could see the struggle on his face.

Knowing where he was in a Dominican Republic, second world, it was hard, it was painful. I immediately wanted to rescue him and everything was forgiven in that moment. I hugged him and I could feel his bones and it was a very heavy moment for me. To this day I'm still processing it.

Menendez: What was so fascinating of you was that I felt all that heaviness and then it splices right to you making a joke inspired by that meeting. Where you talk about how you're sitting together and all these women walk in he's like, "Oh, it's your sister. Oh, it's your other sister. That's your sister too."

And to feel both the depths of the hurt and the disappointment and then to see you on stage, just sort of turning on a dime and all of a sudden it is a funny thing that happened in the past when really it was right there.

Rodriguez: I've learned to process my pain through jokes. I've been doing that since I was a very young kid in Miami. Black and Brown kids find a way to deal with their pain through humor and we clown each other we joke on each other. That's a survival mechanism for us.

I just specifically remember having a friend that came through the Mariel boatlift to Miami and she would say "Yo soy Mariolita!" Like herself just let's get it out of the way before you get me, I'm going to get me. And just remembering later thinking wow, how hard it is to have to be on a boat, leave your homeland, get on a boat, risk your life just for safety so that somebody can come make fun of it.

And it's just like oh, that's what we do. It is a survival mechanism for us. And I've always been able to do that. I have journals all over the place. I'm looking at them now because I'm working on some new stuff. And then I write what happens and then I figure out how is this going to be funny. Some things resonate better through a joke than they do a good preaching to.

Menendez: I want to step back for a second because in preparing for this conversation, I read all these interviews with you. I watched all these interviews and there's always this question about the first time that someone suggests to you that you do stand-up. But there's a piece to your bio that I feel often goes mentioning which is that period where you're a model. And so before we even get to the who told you, you were funny, who found you and told you that you should be on stage doing comedy. Who found you as a model?

Rodriguez: You know it's funny it's like people skip over that part because I didn't make it. I wasn't a supermodel. But there are a lot of models who you don't know that have a very comfortable life modeling that are not Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford. I was at a mall with my mom and an agent came up to us and started talking to us at the Omni in Miami. The lady was like talking to us and I can immediately feel the resistance from my mother. I perked up because I was like oh, an opportunity to get out of here. That's immediately what I was thinking. And this woman named Katia Jarretsie at Michelle Palmier, who was the first person that said she thought I had a look because that's what they would say. I made my grandmother sign me up for Barbizon and I went to Barbizon just to learn how to just walk on the runway. I was like, "I'm doing this." I did this competition called Models of the South and...

Menendez: Already amazing.

Rodriguez: Yeah, it was really funny. It was Models of the South and it was all of the agencies were there. And this woman named Monique, she was in the states from Milan and she wanted to sign me and she was like, "I will take you to Milan and I will make you a star and you'll be one of the highest paid models in the game."

It was a woman in Miami at a mall who just came up to me and she just said it and I went and got a portfolio, I went and took pictures and then I started doing runway shows at department stores, which were paying really well for me to be that young to make that kind of money. But you know how many women and men and non-binary people walk runways and for these designers and work throughout and that you never hear about and they make a comfortable living and they are the models. And they are supermodel because they do it every day. Because they love to do it, not because of the fame.

I was just part of this community that, I never really fit in. I was La Payasa behind the scenes making fun. But it was something that I did and I was really good at it. I was very good on the runway. I hated taking pictures but I was really good on the runway.

Menendez: Which makes perfect sense and part of the reason I bring it up is that it is fascinating watching you on stage how you own the stage, like you have such presence. It's like you can just tell that you're at home on the stage.

Rodriguez: Yeah. I love the stage.

Menendez: Eventually you had a roast, producer says to you, "Aida, you're a stand-up comedian," no, no, no, yes, yes, yes. You do a bunch of open mics. These stories do sort of go the same way. I think what makes your story particularly unique and different is that you're doing this exactly as I would.

Where you have like a real job. You're working at a brokerage full-time and then also working as a full-time comedian learning the business. And I always love that you come back to that this is a business you're learning not just how to be a com but how to do the business piece of this. What was the moment where you felt secure enough to walk away from the job at the brokerage?

Rodriguez: I'm waiting on that moment if I'm honest with you Alicia. I'm having all of these people asking me for stuff. People that I know, people that I don't know, people who I'm not that cool with asking me for stuff. I get paid for this job and I have this moment, this panic, this meltdown saying to myself what do I do with this money. Where do I put this money, this is like backup money just in case something happens because we never know how this career is going to go.

I don't ever take it for granted. I will never ever take for granted or ever think that I fully arrived because I've seen people who have had way more than me lose it all. And so this industry never makes me feel secure. What makes me feel secure is the knowledge and information that I got from Edward Jones, which is where I worked on how to save my money, where to put my money for the future, how to protect myself as an individual. All of those things that I learned there is what I feel secure in. Nothing to do with a paycheck ever from the entertainment business.

Menendez: That's so real.

Rodriguez: It's true.

Menendez: What did it take for you to actually start gaining traction?

Rodriguez: Last Comic Standing. It was Wanda Sykes and Page Hurwitz putting me on that show. Last Comic Standing is where I started to make a decent wage as a stand-up comedian where I could quit my job and live my life decently. I had to quit my job to do Last Comic Standing. I had to make an executive decision and that was one of the most nerve-racking decisions I ever made in my life because I got to take a chance. And I'm walking away from a full-time job now.

Menendez: You're a mom walking away from a full-time job.

Rodriguez: I sat down with them and we talked about it and we decided to do Last Comic Standing. And thank God I did it because I was headlining ever since I was never a feature again. And if I featured, I featured for such big acts that my pay was even more than that of me as a headliner because of course we get paid less than everybody but it was Last Comic Standing.

Menendez: There's a part in Fighting Words where you say you're retired from political commentary because, "You people are exhausting," which really resonated with me. And I also love the whole riff about woke people going and getting their signs so they can let people know just how woke they are.

What do you think since you do look at all of this from a different approach? First of all complete BS that you have retired from political commentary. This comedy special is nothing if not searing political commentary. On everything. On the state of US politics on latinidad. There is a sense when I was watching a special I'm like oh, she's going for it. Anything she sort of has had back here that she's maybe I'll use that later it's like you're just done.

Rodriguez: Yeah, I agree.

Menendez: Angry but also resolved.

Rodriguez: Yeah, absolutely. It's interesting to watch people take other people down. And the reason why it's not revolutionary for me and the reason why it's not a gangster for me it's because it's easy to take other people down. The real revolutionaries are trying to take institutions down. They're trying to take the man down. Not other people who finally just crept in the door. Because we are all victims of white supremacy all of us even white people.

Whether we want to admit it or not you look at those poor white people in the middle of the country who don't have a dental plan, they don't have healthcare, they don't have a decent education and they think that they're better than us just because they're white that is the ultimate illness. While you are drowning in this pool of ignorance and thinking that you're better than me just because of the color of your skin when your conditions are so poor and so sad and so pitiful. And that alone makes you think, tell me that's not mental illness.

So when we sit here and we talk about all of these people who are revolutionaries and gangsters because they're taking other individuals down, they only take the individuals down because they know better. They know better than to mess with the institutions because that's when it ends for you. I think that turned me off because I thought I was running towards a revolution with people behind me and next to me and in front of me that we're going to go do this and I realized that it was fueled by envy and insecurity and self hate. And that is what has held so many people back.

So when I talk about solidarity and when I talk about allyship and I talk about finding our power, I actually mean that shit it comes from my soul. And so when I met with these

people who are so performative, they're doing it because it's the right thing to do and the right thing to say and they know how to say all the right things and they use all the right terminology. But their souls are rotten. Because it is not actually fueled by the desire to want to create better conditions for our people where someone like me who I don't get it right all the time. I don't say Latinx all the time.

Sometimes I miss the mark because I'm still learning and I'm imperfect but I actually want to see a better world for people and I look like the bad guy next to somebody who knows all the perfect terminology. Because there are a lot of good people that we've lost in the fight who just gave up and said you know what, I'm just going to get my own bag. Because at the end of the day, these people are not waiting for anything but an opportunity to set me on fire. And I can't afford that because I got to take care of my own. And I understand that. I understand why people feel that way.

Menendez: Here's my final question. And I've been dying to ask you this one because I love it, I might steal it. Your Instagram bio says I get my likes in person.

Rodriguez: Yep.

Menendez: I feel like that is an ethos.

Rodriguez: You know this is the thing I don't idolize anyone. I met Muhammad Ali. I shared baklava with Muhammad Ali. I went to his hotel room with my kids. We spent some time with him and his family, his daughters, his wife, that was my hero. And every single thing that we talked about because I asked all the questions that I wanted to ask was about his human experiences with people on the ground in person. He was a citizen of the world. Everywhere you go you hear Ali boma ye! in Africa. Everywhere you go people loved him. And all he talked about was his experiences with people in person.

I was like that's what fills me. Because Instagram is not real, Twitter is not real, Facebook is not real. It's to keep us distracted, to keep us ill informed, to keep us buying products, to keep us feeding this capitalism and I was like, "What do you get out of this?" I get nothing out of that. What I do get out is I was at the improv I made... this woman came up to me after my show, I thought she was going to beat me up if I'm honest. She was like I need to talk to you, she was very serious and stern. And she said, "My son hung himself two weeks ago and my backyard and this is the first time that I laughed since that happened. I will love you forever Aida Rodriguez."

It was an A list actor who shall remain nameless as long as I'm alive. That came up to me and said, "I watched you at the improv you talked about your eating disorder. I was about to go binge and I went to a meeting and it was because of you."

It's about a young Black girl that said to me, "I got kidnapped by a family member and people think it's funny but I appreciate what you said on They Ready. I'm from Miami too and you my hero." Those are the things that matter to me and that keep me going to the

next day. People hating on Twitter, exercising their demons and their illnesses and their deficiencies and their insecurities, not that everyone is but many of us are.

I include myself and that doesn't feed me in any way because I know pain when I see it because pain recognizes pain. So for me that's why I love what I do because I have a life experience with human beings and I get to talk to people and I get to feel people and I get to see people and I'm never going to let social media trump that for me.

Menendez: Aida, I want to say one more thing to you before I let you go which is my absolute favorite moment of the entire special. Is you're in the car you're just sitting with your dad, you're processing it all and someone's asks you if you're all right and your son says she's doing her best. And I was just, man you raised such good kids. On top of doing everything else on top of the fact that it's you've had 17 different careers, you're exploding in the one you actually care about. You raised two phenomenal human beings who seem to enjoy being with you. Who seem they support everything that you do but that moment I was like oh man, whoever gets to marry this boy is so lucky because he is so attuned.

Rodriguez: He's a great human being. He is the biggest feminist in my family, he's so pro-woman but one thing that I taught them is we got to let people be okay. It is okay to just be okay. The aspiration to always be perfect, to always get it right all the time it's a trap and it causes a lot of pain and it causes a lot of... it stunts your growth as a human being, your evolution as a human.

So, he was the one who held my hand. They both held my hand throughout the experience, they were my protectors throughout the experience, tomorrow we have the premiere they will be my protectors on that red carpet and throughout the entire event. We reciprocate and yeah, I am doing my best.

Menendez: It's coming through. Aida, thank you so much.

Rodriguez: No, thank you my love. I'm happy to see you and your babies on social media. It makes me happy.

Menendez: I just want to say one more time Aida has worked so hard to get to this place. And when she talks about how she's still waiting for the moment when she can trust her passion to pay her bills I was sort of kicked back both because I rarely hear that level of honesty and because I think it's really important as we watch others rise to understand that what it looks like on the outside is very often different than what it looks like on the inside. Yet another reminder to get your likes in person and remember Fighting Words is streaming on HBO Max.

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