



America Ferrera Knows What Real Power Looks Like

The Hollywood A-lister reveals how she advocates for herself, maneuvers through complex power dynamics, and deflects the “Brown Discount.” She also shares about the work that went into Season 2 of the smash hit, *Gentefied*, streaming on Netflix now!

Alicia Menendez:

We've spent 20 years watching the rise of America Ferrera. *Real Women Have Curves*, *Sisterhood of The Traveling Pants*, *Ugly Betty*, *Superstore* to say nothing of her advocacy and political work. And while we were falling in love with America in front of the camera, she was falling in love with being behind it. The latest proof of her success, season two of Netflix's *Gentefied*, a show she executive produces. She also directs several episodes this season. And as America and I tend to do, we jumped into this conversation at the deep end.

Hi.

America Ferrera:

Hi.

Menendez: Good to see you.

Ferrera: Good to see you.

Menendez: I am dressed exactly as we were dressed for our last interview and you on the other hand look very glamorous so...

Ferrera: Great. Yes. Well, professionals came and helped me out. Don't worry about it.

Menendez: I am familiar. America, I want to go back to the origins of *Gentefied*, at least the part where you come in. As I understand it, you're at a general meeting with Charles King who's doing incredible work at Macro. And at the end of the meeting in passing, he sort of says like, Hey, I've got this project you might be interested in. Gives it to you. Over the weekend you read it. You come back on Monday and you're like, yes, I'm a yes. What was it that jumped out at you that let you know you were such an immediate yes?

Ferrera: I had just never read anything like it before. It was funny. It was stylish. The humor was both kind of generational. It was like millennial cool. It was just current, cool, funny, but also had all the depth of the multi-generational aspect of it. Like our funny, scary parents and their parents. I loved how it captured, not just the quote unquote voice of a generation. It was multi-generational. And you cared about a 60-something bar owner in the neighborhood who was about to lose his bar to another ramen shop. It was just funny and it made me laugh and it felt very representative of many different generations. It excited me. It made me laugh and cry. And I was like, I'm in.

Menendez: Gentefied wasn't originally imagined as a streaming show, it was originally supposed to be a digital series. And one of the things I found really interesting when I was talking to Lindy Yvette Chavez, who of course is one of the co-creators Gentefied, was the bidding war that went on for this show. So much of the hard work is convincing a network that a show is worthy of investment, is worth bidding on. How many did you get? What was it? Six.

Ferrera : Yeah, I feel like all but one network that Linda and Marvin pitch, all of them made offers. And yes, it is super duper, duper exciting when you're out there pitching to get an offer in a room or to get an offer period, to get multiple offers. But if we're talking Latina to Latina, as I know we are, that's also just the beginning. I've now coined the phrase brown discount. It's one thing to get a yes, but there is a way in which our yeses generally come packaged and they're often at a discount and they're often less money.

Menendez: Right.

Ferrera: Less support, less power, less marketing, less faith in general. It's still this sort of unspoken risk that anything unproven Latinx talent is never going to garner the kind of financial backing and then all the other support that you need for a show to be successful. And so, yes, it was a wonderful, amazing celebration to go about town and get six offers. But oftentimes when those offer come in, sometimes they're more insulting...

Menendez: Right.

Ferrera: Than exciting because it's like, you want us to make what on what, on what budget as if our stories are done pro bono.

Menendez: Which should be the opposite, should be paying a premium for the fact that it is hard to access this kind of content.

Ferrera: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I agree with you, but it's the reality of the situation. And then there's a version of that every step of the way, right? It's like you get a yes, but then it's like, how are you resourced? And then how are you empowered? Because it's one thing for them to say

yes to the story, to the idea, to the project, but like everything else, the real success or lack of success lies in the minutia, in the boring benign phone calls, note giving, decision making in which very ingrained power dynamics exist. And so unless all of these things that are sort of unspoken about who has the real power and who's empowered to decide what version of the story is getting told, all these tiny, tiny, tiny decisions can add up to a version of the story you never set out to make, that you don't even like.

And so there's that part of the process that people don't see, which is like the give and take, the compromise, the power shifting one way or the other that really determines at the end of the day, what the final product is. And I'm not speaking specifically about Gentrified right now. I'm speaking in general, my experience as a producer and all the other things I've done in this industry for this amount of time. There's this sort of like self-fulfilling cycle that just perpetuates the lie that our stories don't work. Oftentimes what I see is a network saying, yes, we want to make that show. We're not going to pay you for it. And oh we really love, we love so much of what you did. We don't understand this part. Can you make it make more sense to us? Can you explain this more? Can you tone this down? Can you back off that just a little bit? We don't want to isolate anyone. We want to get to the best version of this story as if best version is some sort of objective thing. Best version of the story to whom is the question.

Menendez: Right.

Ferrera: And then oftentimes what that results in is a watered down sort of Frankenstein version of something that no one set out to make. It's not what you wanted to make. And it ultimately isn't traditional and therefore it pleases and satisfies nobody. It doesn't succeed. And then a box is checked of like, well, we tried that and it didn't work. Well, no, you didn't try that because what trying that would entail is actually giving real power, real control, real decision making to the creatives you are saying, you're there to support, not sort of sticking the new kinds of material through the same machine that's just going to turn out the same crap. And ultimately at the end of the day, confirm your bias that those type of stories just don't work.

Menendez: I had an EP who once described it to me, as they're asking you to make a lobster dinner, and they're sending you to the grocery store with \$5.

Ferrera: Yeah. Yeah, always. Yeah.

Menendez: America, for those of us who grew up feeling like we didn't see ourselves on the screen or in the magazines, whatever it might be. I think so often we start from a place of representation. And by that, I mean, if I can just be on TV, if I can just have the byline, if I can just tell the story, then that will change things. And I think there comes a point where we realize even that is not going to be enough to change the system, that in order to

change the system, you have to be the one who is in charge of resources and how resources are getting spent. You have to be the one who's making the decisions. Do you remember what that moment was for you?

Ferrera: To be honest, I feel like it was thrust upon me from the beginning. I mean, I was 17 when I began my professional acting career, which is so much earlier than I ever imagined. Most people didn't think it was ever going to happen for me, but I just didn't expect it to happen at 17, which is young. You're really young at 17. Like I recently went back and watched *Real Women Have Curves* after, I don't know, maybe 15 years of not seeing it like a long time, far enough removed where I could have some sense of objectivity and I could be like, look at that little girl, she's 17. And she did that. She showed up number one on the call sheet day in, day out, got her butt up at 4:00 AM, drove to set, worked all day, went home, finished her calculus homework.

And what strikes me is that even at 17, I knew right off the bat that it was going to be my job to advocate for myself and to advocate for the roles, for the characters that I was lucky enough to get to play. And to your point, it's a miracle that we get any opportunity, right? So that when you do get the opportunity, the message is like, just be grateful you're in the room, be grateful, do the work, put your head down and don't ruffle any feathers. And by God don't challenge anybody, like just be happy you're in the room. And unfortunately, or fortunately like, that's just, not in my DNA. I don't know how not to like, be like but, but what... And I think from very, very, very early on, I was often the only Latina, the only woman, the only young person on the set, raising my voice saying, I think this can be better.

And I had to learn very early on how to do that in spaces that were predominantly white, predominantly white male, and the goal was to succeed, right? The goal was that the better idea win, the goal was that I didn't have to say that terribly offensive line. That I got to be more dynamic, that I got to be more complex, that I got to be more authentic. That this character not be an embarrassment, but a new kind of representation. And with that being the goal, I had to learn how to get the idea in without threatening anybody, without making anyone feel bad, without shaming anyone, without calling anyone out. It was sort of learning these mental jujitsu tricks for like, how do I get them to think it's their idea, to see that it's a good idea, to put it in, to keep it in.

Because as an actor, you don't have a lot of power on set. You give your performance. Sure. But what happens after that is not up to you. And so I feel like I came up learning how to advocate for myself within a very, very complicated power dynamic where I didn't have the power, but I had to get the people who did have the power to make decisions, to pick the better idea. And that is exhausting to say the least. I'm glad I did it. It's worth it, still doing it in my career. And listen, that's part of the work, like part of the work is educating. Part of the work is having to bring the people who hold the power to make better

decisions along and educate and to do it with compassion and not just burn the whole place down or make everyone feel like crap because nothing good comes out of that.

Menendez: Right.

Ferrera: And there's guilt around that too, because there's a part of that that feels like I have to swallow my discomfort and make sure that said person in power never feels that level of discomfort. It's a lot of work. And to get to a place like season two of *Gentefied* where Marvin and Linda were running their own show, hiring every writer in their room, directing the episodes or deciding who was directing the episodes, not having to spend 65% of your time explaining your decisions, but just getting to make the decision is an anomaly. And we need more of it. We need not just the opportunity, but empowered opportunity, supported opportunity to tell our stories genuinely with the power to decide how they're being told.

Menendez: So much about *Gentefied* is that push and pull around the pursuit of the American dream and the tension that emerges when pursuing that dream forces you to leave a place or people behind. America, when has that showed up in your own life?

Ferrera: All the time. Always, always. I mean, I guess it's the beginning of my story, right? I mean, my parents left Honduras. They came to the United States for the American dream and in a way it was ingrained in me from the day I was born onward that like, I always knew what the sacrifices were that were made so that I could have the life that I've had. And therefore always felt the response ability and the burden of satisfying those sacrifices. And I feel like maybe all first generation children of immigrants, or really even just anyone who straddles cultures really understands that journey of what was sacrifice so that you could be on your path and knowing that like you carry all of that on your back.

Here's the thing that I loved about *Gentefied* and felt so seen in is that the kind of bigger metaphor of gentrification was the perfect metaphor for the inner struggle of a first generation daughter of immigrants. The how, when the assignment is succeed, when the assignment is do more, be more, get more, have more, grow. When your parents give up everything so that you do that and then at the same time, the very real expectation that you stay grounded and identified in exactly where you are and where you came from, that right there is the biggest contradiction, the biggest tension by all means succeed. But also don't become that. Don't be that, go win that, but don't be that. And it's like, what do you even mean? Like, what are you talking about? How do you do that? And you're always failing. And so it is a deep tension that I've felt internally for so long that I just thought Marvin and Linda nail and capture in this whole series, just starting with the issue of gentrification, because to me is the externalization of something that we all experience very personally on the inside.

Menendez: And I think a sub plot of that is that many of us were raised to believe that our value is in our doing, not in our being. That we are not inherently valuable, that we're valuable by the things we accomplish, or the things we succeed at, or the things that we do. And not just who we are at our core.

Ferrera: Exactly.

Menendez: What is the work that you have done to disentangle those notions?

Ferrera: So much, so much work. Lots of therapy. I've explored a lot in my creative work as well. Like just trying to grow as an artist. How to be more honest with what is versus trying to be what's expected of me. I'm a pleaser. I was told to get straight A's, I got straight A's. I was told to get into a good college, I got into a good college. I was told to do the things you like, but also excel in all the other things at the same time. Go be an artist, but like be the perfect student and get the great grades and be liked by everyone.

And that's a lot to disentangle and I think what it comes down to for me, it was always really, really important to be liked by my teachers, to be liked by the Latino kids, and the white kids, and the black kids. Important to be liked by college admission people, important to be liked by my friends' parents, important to be good, right? Because you were this extension and representation of your family and everything you did was a reflection on them. And therefore like, don't fuck it up. Right. And I think just recently, I would say in the last six to eight years of my life, I decided that needing to be liked was a very big problem and a very big obstacle standing in my way, because I couldn't do what I needed to do and prioritize being liked at the same time. And it was hard. I mean, really hard.

And I remember at one point sitting in a trailer crying because I wanted to have a conversation about what wasn't working for me, but I was so scared that when I had that conversation, this person would stop liking me. And I had to figure that out and be like, what is going on? Why are you so afraid to just have the conversation respectfully, kindly, confidently? And I had to admit to myself, I want all those things. I want to be good at my job. I want to contribute. I want to maximize my value in this space. And I can't do that when, on top of all of that, I need to be approved of and pleasant enough and just a dream, and a charm, and a pleasure to work with. You know what I mean? We all want to be a pleasure to work with, and it's not about being rude, or being mean, or being dismissive. It's just about being able to say what's true, and real, and honest, and to contribute and to give what you're there to give. And that the fact that, that doesn't always square with being liked.

Menendez: Right.

Ferrera: I think when I started to acknowledge that, to identify it and say, what's going on for me here? Oh, it's that thing. That's why I'm so scared. I'm so afraid that they won't like me. If my cast members won't like me, if my producing partners won't like me, if I exercise my power in X, Y, and Z ways, and I had to let it go and I'm still letting it go every day. And I do feel like it's a trade off, but what I gain is more respect for myself and more respect for being the person I want to be in the world and having the courage to offer what I have to offer above needing everyone to say, oh, that America, she's such a nice girl.

Menendez: And I just want to say in the process of doing what you need to do for you, you shift everybody else's perspective on what a likable lady leader is supposed to show up as. America, thank you so much. This was in fact a pleasure.

Ferrera: Well, thank you. Thanks Alicia.

Menendez: Hey, thank you so much for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantugua and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Jimmy Gutierrez is our managing editor. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from your email us at hola at Latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Remember to subscribe or follow us on radio public, Apple podcast, Google podcast, good pods, wherever you're listening right now. And remember, every time you share the podcast or you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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