



Julissa Calderon Is Helping Hollywood to Reimagine Latina Characters

Her hilarious BuzzFeed portrayals of Latina moms hooked us, and now, her magnetic energy keeps us glued to Netflix's *Gentefied*. Julissa reveals what she willingly risked to earn roles that welcome her fullest self.

Alicia Menendez:

Like many of you, I have been following Julissa Calderon since her early days at BuzzFeed when she was producing and starring in so many of my favorite videos. And I have rooted for her as she has gone on to bigger roles, including Yessika, on Netflix's *Gentefied*, a role that was rewritten and reimagined for her. We're going to get into that. I want to tell you, this is not one of those stories of someone who landed in LA and, poof, magic hit. No. This is a story of a lot of near misses, a ton of hustling and allowing your truest, most authentic self to shine.

Julissa, in preparing for our conversation, I've read pretty much every interview you've ever done. What I don't have a good sense of is how you grew up. I mean, I hear you grew up between New York and Miami. Give me a sense of what that childhood was like.

Julissa Calderon:

I was a happy kid. I actually grew up really mostly in Miami. I moved to Miami when I was five or six years old. So for me, I don't really remember much of New York, except for my experiences with my grandma. But I grew up as a happy kid, man. I was very much this person, which is so weird, but I remember to think, the things that I would do and the ways that I was and the people that I was friends with and I was always this person, just a smaller version, less mature.

I grew up in the hood. So I was a little tough. It was like tough at home, tough in the hood. And so it was a little tough growing up. Right? You have to make sure you was signing P and Q's or something was going to happen in those times. You fought because somebody looked at you the wrong way. Silly, but it's just the way that it was. But I was just this loud girl. A loud girl who was sure of herself, which is really interesting for me to see that now. I've always had this confidence as a kid.

Menendez:

I'm just so impressed that you haven't lost that. And we'll loop back to what auditioning and Hollywood looks like. But it's interesting to me that you go to UF, as you say, because at the time it's the number one party school in the country, which I love that honesty.

Appreciate the honesty. Why do you go to UF thinking you're going to become a nurse or a doctor rather than an actor.

Calderon: When I was a premed major, first semester I was taking this chemistry class. Midway through the semester, I either had to drop the class or I was going to have a really bad grade on transcripts. So I dropped the class for a semester. And I'm like, it's okay. I'll just pick it up next semester. It's really hard. I'm a freshman. Just trying to figure this out. Second semester comes, I take the same class again with the same professor and after the first exam, which was 40% of your final grade, I knew I had failed the test as I was taking it. I was like, why did I study for it? I tell this story because I remember everything that happened that day. And so I left class feeling defeated.

I was like, I'm going to walk a little bit instead of just going this way to take the bus. And as I was walking, I just so happened to pass this clear building, a gorgeous building. It just so happens to be the theater of music building. And I look inside and I stand there and I'm just watching all these people. I'm like, wow, look at all these people in college having fun and yo aqui super sad, because I failed this chemistry test and I can't figure this darn chem thing out. I remember standing there for 15 minutes. It was clear as day. I'm like, I'm switching my major. I get on the bus. I call my mom immediately. And I'm like, "Hey, so I want to let you know something." She's like, "What's up?" And I'm like, "I'm going to switch my major." She goes, "Oh, okay. Well to what?" "Oh, I think I'm going to do theater." There was silence. I know in her mind, she was like, "What the fuck?" You know, what's going on?

And a few seconds later, she's like, "What are you going to do with that?" And I'm like, "I don't know, I'm a freshman, Mom. I'll figure it out, but I know I don't want to do pre-med mom. I don't want to do that." And she's like, "Okay, well get off of that track and do that, but I want you to make sure that the reason that you're choosing this is because you really love it and you're going to give it your all and not because it's the easy route." And I remember sitting there and being like, ooh. You know when someone says something, real talk to you, and I was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. I know. I know. It's because I'm going to give it my all."

Two days later or a week later, something like that, to make it not look as easy, I dual majored. I was like, oh, I'm going to just another major, so I'll get two degrees, so she could be like, "Oh, my daughter did it." Versus I just do one, "Eh, it's not as good." But if I do two, done. So I did a dual major. And so one was in theater and the other one was in telecommunications production. I felt like I was doing the right thing. I was like, "This is what you want to do. You're going to do." I had no clue on how I was going to do it.

Menendez: I like that you were like, I'm going to work for six months, put away money, builds that safety for myself, so that then I can really go for it. Where in that process do you get fired?

Calderon: So I worked for six months and didn't pay attention to anything. I was like, "Oh, I need some money. A girl's out here broke." And then the same thing that came up, which is a ABC audition, like for the showcase, that they do every year, that's where I originally came

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out and then just never left. And so I decided the next year, I was going to reaudition. I submitted, I auditioned, I got all the way to the end. I did it in 2014, I became a part of the showcase. Which makes sense on why in 2013 it didn't happen for me. It's all timing. It's divine order. And a lot of things started picking up, but obviously I'm still working. I'm still trying to make this money. I'm still trying to survive. LA is expensive and I don't have parents that could be like "Here, Julissa, here's some money."

So I was auditioning and I think I had one guest role. I did one short film. I did a couple of things. I wasn't doing what I needed to do. So I worked in this restaurant in Brentwood, which is, if anybody knows one of the richest cities in Los Angeles, working at this extremely fine dining place. I know the chef just didn't like me. He just was like, this girl does not know what she's really doing. In that world, I can honestly say now, honestly, in hindsight, I wasn't at the level of the servers there. They could read you and tell you about wine from 1964. And that's the kind of restaurant that was. Not me. I'm like, "I bet you you're going to have a good time by the time you leave this restaurant." I bet you you're going to say, "Wow, she made it a good time." And I did.

But the chef doesn't care about that. Right? He wants you to know what kind truffle comes from, whatever the hell. And I wasn't that. So one day something went wrong. The blame was put on me because I'm the server, instead of it being the chef. I even got an apology, but whatever, it doesn't matter. The damage was already done. And they threw me under the bus so that I could take the blame and I got fired. It was the best thing that ever happened for me. Best thing. That was the blessing in disguise because I was getting comfortable in the fact that I was working, getting money and just living my good life. Two weeks later, I'm in BuzzFeed. Had no really idea how big BuzzFeed was. I was just like, "Oh, okay, cool, cool, cool. Let me go do this little audition." And I end up being there.

It's weird and it's wild, and I love telling these stories because I remember watching people in high school and in college and even before making it here, and watching people stories and being like, is that real? And now I could say, "Yeah, these stories are real that people say." The things that happen and how it happens and how the universe structures it all, it's a beautiful thing. You just got to embrace the journey because it's going to be a shit show, but enjoy it.

Menendez: Thank you. I know exactly which quote I'll pull for the Instagram though. Inspiration from Julissa. You don't just go to BuzzFeed, you become one of BuzzFeed's breakout stars. Once that character began to go viral, how did the attention being paid to you change? Did the opportunities that were coming your way change?

Calderon: Absolutely. Absolutely. Everything changed for me at BuzzFeed. I think the biggest thing is that it allowed me to tell my narrative because this Afro Latina term that we're talking about right now, that was not a thing some years back. People didn't know where the hell to place me. They were like, what? But if she looked like this, but she talks with this accent that's insane. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jaded. I was like, "Wow, I'm going to these auditions and none of the people in these audition and they don't look like me." Nor do I

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feel like I could play this character x, y, z. Once I started getting the confidence, truly, because I went in there and I didn't really know that to be a producer there you have to write, you have to produce, you have to direct, you have to act and you have to edit.

Menendez: In the world of news, we call it a one man band. You're doing it all top to bottom.

Calderon: Nobody told me this. So I went in there and at first I was like, oh my God, I just know how to story tell. And I know that if you put me in front of the camera, I'm going to turn it on. But how do I do all of this stuff?

Menendez: They're like, "But no, no, no, Julissa, you literally have to turn the camera on."

Calderon: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just turn it. The red button needs to... you got to do that. It took a little bit, but I think it was also the fan love. People in these comments in the first few videos that were put out and The Latina Mom came out and I wasn't the producer of it. They just put me in front of the camera and was like, "We think you could do this, do it." And so when I started reading these comments and people were like, "Who is this girl? How does she do this so well? And you're reading it and you're like, "Oh, I could do this. I truly can." "We want more of this." "Okay. Let me give it to you." And so it gave me the confidence to just start doing everything.

Oh, everything I put out, I'm going to make sure it is about my culture. I'm going to make sure it's true to me. And I'm going to make sure people are like, "Oh no, it's her. She's the one." I was really intentional when I figured it out. Once I knew what this could do for me, I was like, "Oh, okay. Got it. Noted. Done." Because I didn't want to work there in the beginning. I was like, "Videos? You want me to be a video girl? How can I be a video girl when I'm a trained thespian?"

Menendez: I like you say, "truffle", whatever. But then you break out, thespian.

Calderon: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We're talking Greece and Paris. Oh no. Oh. But yeah, I was really weirded out that I was going to do videos. And one of my friends, my best friend, she was like, "Nobody knows you, nobody knows who you are. You'll be fine. Just do it for a little bit and if you don't like it, then leave. But who cares?" And I was like, "I need an audition and that's going to take away time for my auditions because it's a nine to five." "Julissa, you're going to figure it out." And I was like, thank God I listened to her. Thank God she gave me that little real talk like, "Girl, don't nobody know you. It's going to only help you." And it did everything for me. It allowed me to create this narrative. But I think most importantly, out of everything, it allowed me to be more confident in my abilities, in my work and me as an artist, it solidified everything that I knew that I was.

Menendez: There are a lot of auditions between BuzzFeed and you landing your role in Gentefied. It wasn't supposed to be a Dominican character. You walk into the room, tell me as you remember it, what that experience was like and the feedback that you get after your first, second audition.

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Calderon: The feedback I got was, "We're passing things." The first one was, "She was great." I can't remember. I'm trying to remember. "She was great. She's just not what we're looking for." Okay, cool. The second one I think was, "Really want a Mexican girl and she's just not it." I didn't think much of it, to be honest. I didn't feel no ways because you go into so many auditions, you get told no so many times, but after the second one, I was like, "What? Why did you call me back? You saw me already." And then they passed another cool call, but you know what? I was still grateful. I was like, that's really great. But they still wanted me for the producers' session. That tells me that I'm doing a good job.

And then I get a call about three and a half weeks later, saying that they wanted to see me for the chemistry read. What? What does that even mean? I remember being like, "I don't get it." And the day that I got the call of the chemistry read was my last day at BuzzFeed, April 3rd, 2018. It doesn't make sense.

Menendez: Also somewhere in there, you are supposed to be going on a month long trip to Sweden.

Calderon: To Eat, Pray, Love, girl. I was going to go Eat, Pray, Love because I knew I was quitting this place and I had no plan. And I was like, people know me, but I don't have a plan. And I don't know if I'm inspired right now. And I don't know what I need to do. I was going to Europe because I was sponsored at that time by Absolute. So they were sending me there for a week-long trip and I was like, "Okay, cool." And then I was, wait, the most expensive thing of going abroad is the flights. After that, once you're there, you do what you got to do and it's a little cheaper. I can handle that. So I was like, oh, that's perfect. I'm just going to tell them to get my flight biz and then get my flight for three and a half weeks later. And that's perfect. Then I'll spend my little money there.

And what do they say? Make plans so God can laugh at you or something like that. And that's exactly what happened. I got the call that morning, the last day of BuzzFeed. And my manager was like, "Hey, I'm about to F-up your whole world. Gentefied called again, they want you in a chemistry read tomorrow. They're down to the last four girls and you're one of them." "What? But they passed on me." "Yeah. Someone's rooting for you in that room because they want to see you again. And I know you have a flight tomorrow to leave to New York before you leave to Europe, but you're going to have to push that flight back because the chemistry read is at this time." "Oh, okay. Cool. Got it." "Also, they want you to dial back this accent of yours and they want you to sound more East LA."

"Oh, okay. But I don't know how to do that." "Yeah, yeah. We're going to get someone to come talk to you." "Okay." Next morning, April 4th, I wake up. I'm a mess. A lot is going on in my head. I sit down with someone, they start teaching me how to do this East LA Mexican dialect, trying to tell me, okay, dial back this and say it like this. I'm like, "What?" I don't know how to do that. That's not my strong suit. I could do a lot of things, but that's not it. I tried. And so about two hours before the audition, I didn't tell my manager, I didn't tell anybody, but I decided I wasn't going to do the accent. I was like, I'm going to go in there and I'm going to do it like this. Because if I do the accent, my acting is going to be

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horrible. I need them to actually know my acting. And then later we could talk about this accent.

But also, I'm leaving to New York tonight. They already told me no twice. And I'm going to Eat, Pray, Love. Ain't nobody got time for this. That was my mindset, which is crazy, right? But that was my mindset. But that's the honest truth. And then I walk in there and I remember it was different. Whatever came over me when I walked into the casting whole office, it wasn't that anymore. They just said, "Hey, Julissa, how are you?" No one ever does that when you walk into auditions. You just sign your name on a piece of paper and you go sit down in the waiting room. When someone came out to me and said, "Hey, Julissa, we're so excited to see you here." Everything shifted in my head. And I was like, oh, oh, oh, step up because they know who you are now. So you got to do what you got to do.

I was the first girl in the room. I remember giving everything like I'm talking about everything. The tears, because one of the chemistry scenes were in season one, the breakup. I was crying. I don't know what overcame, but it was a freaking outer body experience. I'm talking about, I was crying, crying. It was interesting. It was not acting anymore. It was like we were there. We were doing it. We were breaking up. And as I was walking out, I felt like I needed to say something. And in these rooms, you don't say nothing. Look at the power in here. You do your job, you do your audition and then you get out. But something was telling me, "Nah, you got to say something." And so I did. Right before I walked out, I was like, "Hey, can I talk?" Or I was like, "Excuse me." They're just looking at me like, "Go for it."

"I know I'm an East Coast girl and I have this accent and I know that Yessika is supposed to be this East LA girl. There's no one in that room that's going to do it better than me. I am the girl. I just wanted y'all to know that. Thank you so much." And I walked out. Until I got to the car, it was when I realized what I had done. And I was like, "Are you crazy? You Bitch, you don't talk. You don't talk in those rooms. It was just what needed to be done.

And a few hours later, I'm finishing up my packing because I'm taking this red eye to go to New York, to go do this whole thing gig before I go to Europe, my phone's vibrating. And I look. It's my manager. I pick up the phone and there's silence. And he's like, "You're Yessika Castillo." "What?" "They said, Julissa you got it. You're Yessika." "What?" And the floodgates opened again and I'm crying and he's just like, "Yeah, this is insane," all this stuff. "I don't know if this is bad news, but you start filming on the 15th." "Wait, what? In a week?" "Yeah, in a week and two days." I got back on Friday and Monday I was already taping. It was insanity. Insanity. I couldn't make that story up even if I wanted to.

Menendez: When you say that when you and I were coming up, the term "Afro-Latina" just wasn't as prevalent as it is now. I do wonder for someone who has become among the most recognizable faces of Afro-Latinidad, if you feel that is something you have chosen or something that has been foisted upon you.

Calderon: Probably both. I think that I chose it after I saw that it was put on me and I was like, okay, I'm going to run with it because happy I don't know what the fuck this is. Most of these people, they don't know what the fuck is going on and what latinidad means. So if this is going to be the title, that the term that you're going to understand, and I don't have to explain to you, then let me tell you a little bit more, let me keep using it. But then I really got to know what it was. At first, I didn't like the term. I'm not going to lie. I was, why are we making a subdivision already of something? Why are we doing this? But it allowed people to understand a little more. And if it was going to allow you to understand a little more and not look at me like I was a three-headed dinosaur, then cool.

And now I embrace it because it's a beautiful thing and it has allowed me to understand my roots and where it really come from. Listen, we're going up in Miami, and I've been honest about this, I didn't claim blackness. I never said I was a black girl. I didn't, because in Miami, the black girls didn't say I was black. They were like, "No, you speak Spanish. You are not black." Actually, they didn't even have that conversation with me. They were just like, "You're not us." They were very adamant about that. So when someone's telling you, you are not of them, that's how you grow up. And in my household, very Latino household, Spanish was spoken only. Very little do we speak English. So I grew up as a pura dominicanita, pura Latina, not understanding my blackness.

Then, when I got to LA, was when I really understood all of it and I had one of my really good friends, Sully Chap do a deep dive with me and tell me, "Girl, we are black people." Yes we're una mezcla, we know what we are, but we've only talked about our Spain roots. Why are we not talking about our black roots too? The Caribbean is full of black Latino's, but we've only talked about our whiteness. Now I've learned to embrace it and I love it. And I'm like, oh my God, I'm so grateful that I understood all of this. All of these things that I've learned in the past few years, it is now my duty to give that knowledge back to my people and to everyone. That's why I say now I choose that term because I want to teach you.

Menendez: You've said, Julissa, that we come from long lines of guerreros, and I would argue, guerreras...

Calderon: Yeah.

Menendez: Can you tell me about someone in your family who that brings to mind when you use that word?

Calderon: Yeah. That's my grandma's sister. She passed a few years back. They came to this country in the sixties with nothing. They actually fled Dominican Republic and one day I would tell that story. I didn't appreciate my aunt until she passed and I was very sad. It bothers me, right? It bothers me a lot because I could have learned so much from her. She was in the arts. She is and was the reason why there is a Dominican Day parade in New York. She was one of the founders of it. She's also one of the founders of the Juan Pablo Duarte

statue that's in New York. 168 is now named after her. They just named it. She has a post office that is also named after her. This woman came and shook the community up.

She came and because our name was tarnished in Dominican Republic, feel like she had a point to prove here and she wanted to start over. She had nothing, but she made sure that she did everything. And listening to my godfather, whose her son, talk about her days and what he saw when he would come home from school. And she was in her office with books and papers and talking to different political people and trying to talk to the mayor and telling them that we need this for the community. She was an advocate for the Dominican community. She rode hard for us and she wanted what I am right now. That's what she wanted for her people.

It's so true. Listen, I squeeze my hands when I talk about her. I pinched myself a lot because she fought for me. She fought for me to be able to have this platform. She always was like, "You carry yourself with class. You carry yourself like this. You're a woman like this." I remember all of the sayings that she would tell us. She passed only four years ago. And so I was already an adult and know her and understand her and listened to her sayings and sufaces and take them with me. And she paved the way.

Menendez: Such a class act. Julissa, thank you so much for your time.

Calderon: Thank you, mi amor! Nice to see you. I am so excited to hear this.

Menendez: Hey, thank you so much for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua 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](mailto:hola@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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