



How Queens' Star Nadine Velazquez is Making the Most of a Second Chance

By 30, the actress had reached most of her goals but still felt like she was living a life someone else had chosen for her. Nadine reveals what it was like to hit rock bottom, and the conversation with a Hollywood A-Lister that changed everything.

Alicia Menendez:

What happens when you get a second chance? That question is at the heart of the new TV show, *Queens*, about a 90's hip pop girls group that reunites for a second chance at fame and for Nadine Velasquez who plays Valeria, the only member of the group who is still in the limelight, that question is deeply personal. You know Nadine from her roles on *This is Earl* and *The League*. Those gave Nadine a taste of success and left her feeling lost anyway. Took being fired from a job and being given a shot at a do over to grant Nadine the clarity she needed to go after the things she wants most.

Nadine, thank you so much for doing this.

Nadine Velazquez:

Thank you for having me.

Menendez: One of the sort of dates that *Queens* hooks into is 1999 and watching it I was wondering what were you actually doing in 1999? Who were you in 1999?

Velazquez: In 1999 I was... Ooh, I think I was a junior at Columbia College. I was living with a man who was older than me. I was working for a talent agency as an assistant. And then I think I was also waitressing or hosting or something at night.

Menendez: That squares, because it seems like you're the type of person who's always living five different lives at the same time.

Velazquez: Oh yeah. There was definitely a time I had five jobs at once. Especially when I was... I moved out when I was 16, I became very ambitious at 16. I knew I had to survive. So I was determined to finish school, was determined to get a degree. I was determined to have money because I knew I could be a statistic and just be a dead beat. All the odds were against me. You know what I'm saying?

Menendez: And there've been a lot of detours along the way. I mean, my understanding that you really in your heart wanted to be a writer but got redirected. What was that redirection?

Velazquez: Acting. It's a very long story. But when I was working for the talent agency, I thought I was going to become an agent while I finished school. And after I graduated at Columbia, I wanted to get a master's in writing. And so part of that was television writing, fiction, all kinds of writing. And that's the year that I met my husband, my second husband, because I've been married twice. And he was an agent in Los Angeles for a literary agent, writers. So it was perfect. But then the agency that I worked for as an assistant, the agent there told me that I had to be an actress. That was my calling.

Menendez: Why? What was it about you that made that person say that?

Velazquez: Thought I was, she was like... She's the one who actually pushed me to get my head shots. And because she kept saying to me to this day... Her name is Merna Salazar. She lives in Chicago. She had a Latino agency, the only Latino boutique agency in Chicago for a long time. And she was also like a mother figure to me because I left early. I gravitated to just her sense of business and the fact that she was a strong woman. And so I really enjoyed working for her. And one day she was just like, "When are you going to ask me for your head shots?" And I'm like, "I am not planning on being an actress. I feel like that boat's gone." And she's like, "Are you kidding me? You belong in Hollywood. This is the perfect time for you." And so my thought was, if I'm going to be an actress, then I don't want to be an actress in Chicago.

Then take it all the way. And she was like, "No, you have to go to Los Angeles. And I thought, I don't know how to get to Los Angeles." I only know Chicago. I have this job here, I'm in school. That didn't make sense to me. And then I met my husband, who was a literary agent, who was in Chicago, happened to be working with one of his clients that was working there, there for a weekend. And then we just connected. There's a whole long story of how we actually came together. Nine months later, after September 11th, we were brought together again. But this time I fell in love with him, before I didn't.

And then that's how I ended up in LA. I did end up in... I didn't know how I was going to end up in LA, but I ended up in LA. And then when I ended up in LA, I thought about what she told me and I was like, this is the time, I'm here. She said that I should be here. The universe got me here. So I had an agent and a manager like this, overnight. And I'm like, so it's right here in my hand. What do I do? And then, so I started pursuing that more than the writing. I was taking writing classes in LA for a little bit. You're letting me talk way too long.

Menendez: I got all the time in the world. You're the one who's got a hard out.

Velazquez: Yeah. Okay. So anyway, moral of the story is I follow signs. I've lived my life that way.

Menendez: I do want to get to the moral of the story because I think there are a lot of us who are not going to be Hollywood writers or Hollywood actresses, but your story, as I understand, is very much one of being ushered in a direction and then after you had achieved some success, ushered down that path. Sort do hit a dead end where you start to wonder for yourself, is this really what it is that I want? And that is a very familiar feeling for a lot of us, right? Whether we feel like we have been ushered into partnerships, into motherhood, into careers that somebody else picked for us and for you, that realization comes pretty dramatically. And at what could have been an incredibly high cost. You're on this film, you're acting alongside Will Smith. And as I understand, you just burn out.

Velazquez: Another breakup, coming off of a TV show I hated, being away. I hated being in North Carolina. I hated being in Vancouver. I was questioning everything. Why did I take the job? Why do I think that I have to just take any job? What am I going to do if I don't take the job? I'm with the guy only because I'm 37 and I think my time is running out and I should just stay with him because who's going to want a vieja? A lot of ideas that were false that I bought into because I had a plan. Sometimes I tell this story, I saw my life up until I was 30. When I was a teenager, for whatever reason, I just saw till 30. And I didn't see past that. Maybe I thought at 30, it'd be going so well that I would then think of the next 10 years, but I never saw my life past 30.

I just knew I wanted to be professional. And I wanted to be a millionaire by 30. That's what I said. I would always say that. By 30 I'm going to be a millionaire. And by 30 I was. I was on My Name Is Earl. It was several seasons. I was making really good money. I had a husband. He also had an incredible income. We had a home in Los Angeles. We had car, we had everything. I had it all the way that I envisioned it. But I didn't plan for the evolution of girl to woman. There's a time where you need to know who the fuck you are. And if you have a man and you're identified with all these things that you thought you wanted and suddenly your identity and your mind changes, like what do you do? And so that's the phase that I was in.

I was like, "Oh my God, this man for the rest of my life? Oh my God, I'm shallow. I'm a shallow person. And I want to deepen my sense of self and I can't do that in a box." And so I divorced and after My Name Is Earl, I just, I was frozen. I was paralyzed. I didn't know what was next. I was like, "Am I acting only because I want to make money. Am I acting because I think I'm supposed to because I get hired for certain jobs because of how I look? And also because of one type of character that I play well? This is also still a safety zone. It's still a box." And then I had to look at what I was afraid of. Oh my God. I actually don't think I'm more. I actually feel like this is what I deserve. I actually don't think I'm smart enough to do something different. I don't think I... I only planned to this point. I didn't foresee change

Menendez: Sort of wild to me because I'm pretty sure growing up I only saw my life after 30. I wasn't clear about how I was going to get to 30, but I knew what adulthood was going to look like. Take me back to you're on this project with Will Smith, flame out on the project, but then he calls you up and wants to know what happened and offers to take you to lunch.

Velazquez: Yes. He says, "I've never experienced this before. You're here working with David Air, opposite me, everyone was excited about you and you don't want to be here basically." And so because Will is very psychological. He is very deep spiritual man. You'll find... I'm going to plug in his book. You'll find that out in his book. He just wanted to know we had a conversation and I think it was because it was just such a breaking point. I just felt so rotten as a person, I was going through this breakup with this guy and I literally needed support. I went to a support group to break up with him. I went into SLAA which is Sex Love Addicts Anonymous because it was such a toxic relationship yet I couldn't get out of it. And I didn't know why, like I was able to break up. I was able to leave my husband. I was able to leave all these other people, but why couldn't I leave this particular person who was so wrong from me and was fucking up my thoughts. I couldn't even be present at work. I had no ambition. When he would leave, I would fall apart. And so what the blessing that he was was that he showed me that I had an abandonment wound that I was covering up with work or whatever. And that I had never dealt this serious wound that I still have. And so when I was talking to Will, I just felt like telling him everything. So I was just like, "I'm in a really bad place in my life. I don't get it. I don't know why I don't have a desire to continue to act. I have no desire. It's gone and I don't know what I'm going to do next." I was like, "I think I move back to Chicago and I'm going to move back in with my mom and dad because I can't figure it out." And so it was just a humbling time. And then I told him too that I wanted to be a writer. And then I had always dreamed of having my own show and that I wanted to show run it and all this stuff. And he was like, "If you write your story, I will executive produce it." And so he gave me a mission. He gave me a task and he said, "I'm not going to call you about it. I'm not going to give you any deadlines. I'm just going to tell you I'm a resource if you want it, take it." And so that ambitious part of me just kicked in and I was like, "Oh my God, the universe just dropped Will Smith in my hands. And he just told me from his mouth that if I write a show, he will executive produce it." It can't get any clearer than this.

Menendez: I can't get any clearer than this, but it also doesn't go one to the other, right? It's not like then you wake up and you're a new person.

Velazquez: No, but what I discovered is I was so clear that I was going to get it done. So that was the first clarity that I had. It was like inspiration. It was huge inspiration and it motivated my next moves. It motivated how I woke up. It motivated how I moved from the industry, how I interacted with my agents. I just really believed in it. And I believed him. And there's something that I want to say about that. And it's what I discovered in that year process that it took to get it done was... And he and I talked about this and this is where he and I have a very deep spiritual... We have a love for spirituality. We have a love for how God works. We have a love for how the universe works. And we talk about that a lot. It's very fun. And one of the things that he showed me and that we talked about was like, he said, "The way you do, one thing is the way you do everything. You can literally just focus on creating this show and you will see everything you need to work on in your life. And anytime you

want to do anything, it's an idea to creation. You're going to build it along the way, but you're going to encounter yourself, your demons, what's your obstacle, the voices in your head." So it was no different than everything that was happening and acting, except it just felt more linear. So before acting just felt so abstract that I could get lost in thinking it was its own thing, but really just having an end goal and having the belief that it could be done, which is faith, made me be laser sharp on all the things I needed to work on.

Menendez: Yeah. When I saw the trailer for Queens, I think part of the reason that I identified with it, I think a lot of people identify with it is that you are looking at women in their forties who've had their big moment and it feels like their big moment has passed them by, is potentially in their rear view. Feel like their best days are behind them. Have you felt that way at any point?

Velazquez: Yeah. I think Queens parallels exactly my journey. The idea of second chances like, it's so humor... For me, the cosmic humor is this show. You know what I'm saying? Even how that came about. It's like, how the hell does the perfect show land after I just lived this? And so now I'm so ready and equipped to bring an experience to my character where I know where to pull that from.

Menendez: You're also the only of the cast members who doesn't have traditional music training. When I read that my hands sweat for you, because to be performing with Eve and Brandy, how did you feel your way through that?

Velazquez: How did I feel my way through that? I think the door was open, right? So it's again, a sign. The universe puts it in my hands and says, "Hey, walk through that door. Are you up for the task?" And my thoughts could be, I'm not good enough. I don't deserve to be up there. I don't have the experience. I shouldn't be. And I could sabotage it or I could say I'm here because I'm supposed to be here and everything I need to learn is in front of me. So I'm just going to take one step at a time and I'm going to meet every challenge in front of me. And I just decided to do that.

Menendez: Can you tell me about the work it took to get from being in a place where you felt hopeless, disconnected, to what seems now like a very aligned sense of self, right? It seems like now you have an organizing principle of the world. You understand the agency that you have. Was that therapy? Was that coaching? What did that work look like to get to this place?

Velazquez: How old are you? Do you mind me asking?

Menendez: Me? I'm 38.

Velazquez: Okay. So the things that I'm talking about are not unrelatable, right? Would you say that that's just the journey of a woman? That we go through cycles of digging in deep, whether it's with therapy or just within our own mind, do you think that's...

Menendez: I think so, but I think everybody comes to it at a different point. From what I'm hearing from you, it's like you had an inflection point in your teens, then you had another inflection point at 30 and it's all happening again, 10 years later from now. I've been having like a midlife crisis since I was 11 years old. So I feel you 100%, but I also feel like there are probably people who are happy and go about their lives and don't think too much. And then all of a sudden, one day they're 55 or they're 60. And they're like, wait, what?

Velazquez: Yeah. This is actually a curious question that I have. Because sometimes I feel like is my story that unrelatable or unrelatable? I just, in my heart, I feel like the process is part having self inventory, right? Being conscious enough, being in touch enough with your life crisis, that you could fix it. And some of it is even if you're not life is going to make you wake up. That's what I believe. So as a woman, I feel like we go through these phases where, whether you have therapy or it's a very trusted woman, there's something inside of you that knows that you have to evolve so that you have a grasp of how to live your life in this world. And so, yes, it was a combination of spiritual studies, but studying different religions to find the commonality so that I can come up with the idea of God that resonates for me. That gives me faith and belief in taking steps that are uncertain or unknown. So that has been a process. And I started that in my twenties.

And obviously if anything, you study, you just get better and better at understanding concepts and ideas. It was a period of three years of therapy every Tuesday, even if I couldn't do anything else, I knew I was going to show up for my 12 o'clock appointment on Tuesdays. So there was that. And then the people that I meet, like the Will Smith, my master teacher, Ezise who's my spiritual teacher, and then narrowing down, who's my elders that can help guide me in this next place. And then always just paying attention to who the universe sent and who was the wise one, never closing the door on those people, just being very open-minded and listening to their counsel and taking their advice and things like that. While also figuring out the things they can't figure out for me, not that they could figure out they could guide me, but there was other things that you just can't articulate. My abandonment wound is for me, me alone. I don't think a therapist can help me on my abandonment issue.

Menendez: It strikes me that you are "known for your comedy." And I guess, because I've only seen you in comedic roles and because I think of you as a comedic actress, then when I was preparing for this interview and I was reading all the other interviews you've ever given...

Velazquez: Oh my God I'm not funny at all, I'm a drab.

Menendez: No, but you are a very deep, spiritual... That's not to say that a person who is funny cannot be all those things, but they do seem to exist in contrast to each other.

Velazquez: I think about Will he's that way, you would never know it, right? Or you do because he reveals himself in his interviews, but he's very... He can go and be very funny.

Menendez: But is the comedy for you a release?

Velazquez: The comedy... I don't know what the comedy is. I've always had this as a kid, the ability to perform. It's weird. One thing that my ex-husband used to say is I think part of the comedy that works so much for you is that you actually don't think you're funny. So it's a thing that happens when I'm in a room or in a space with someone. And I feel like I can lighten up the space. I'm a very heavy person on my own. You know what I'm saying? I'm in my emotions...

Menendez: I do.

Velazquez: I'm working shit out. But when I'm in a space, I feel heavy energy. I know how to shift it. And so comedy has always been the way to do it.

Menendez: Do you think that's a survival mechanism from your youth?

Velazquez: I'm sure. But my mom's also very funny. My dad's really funny. Puerto Ricans in general are really funny. So there's a lot of being silly and stuff. That's very... Comes very easily because of how I grew up. I can't say consciously I knew that it was, I'm going to be funny so I could be loved. I didn't have a thought like that.

Menendez: Right.

Velazquez: But I noticed how much people enjoyed it. So maybe it's something that I just subconsciously took on. Oh, this person enjoys comedy.

Menendez: I have a final question for you, which is, I was so struck by your story and I agree, I don't think you are alone in it. I think what is unique and remarkable about your story is just finding a way out. Because I think there are a lot of people who find themselves living without passion, who feel like they are lost, who feel like they have gone down the wrong path and it is too late to turn around and choose again. For someone who is there, who is in that moment of their life, what is it that you want them to take away from your story? What is the best advice that you have for them in that moment?

Velazquez: Be brave. Just be brave in the dark. Be brave to take steps you never thought you could take, never even imagined you would take. I'm big on first steps, the ABCs of moving forward. Take the first step.

Menendez: Nadine, thank you so much. This was awesome.

Velazquez: Thank you.

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 you 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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