What Sonia Manzano Knows Kids Need

As Sesame Street's iconic "Maria," the actress and Emmy-award winning writer harnessed the power of make-believe and imagination to connect with children. Sonia shares how creativity provided respite from her tumultuous childhood, and how problem-solving inspired her new PBS children's animated series, Alma's Way.

Alicia Menendez:

Sonia Manzano's voice has the power to transport you right back to your childhood. That is because for four decades, she was everyone's favorite neighbor, Maria on Sesame Street, but she was also so much more. Sonia didn't just act on the show, she wrote for it, and won 15 Emmys in the process. Now she's teaming up with PBS for a new kids' show, Alma's Way. She folded lots of her own life into Alma's, but of equal interest is where their stories diverge and what Sonia's journey can teach us about the importance of using your platform and your voice to share your truth.

It is my understanding, Sonia, that PBS needed to persuade you to create a television show. So tell me, what was the resistance? Why did you need to be persuaded?

Sonia Manzano:

It wasn't that I needed to be persuaded. It was just that I hadn't thought of getting into television after Sesame Street. And I actually had never thought of creating a children's show because, after Sesame Street, the grande dame of children's television, how was I going to top that act? I had just signed a book deal with Scholastic, but when Linda Simensky at PBS Kids asked me, I just couldn't say no, because she said, "Make it a Latin family." So of course I made it like mine. And then she let me choose what the mission of the show was as well. So I couldn't turn that down.

Menendez: Which I got to say as a mom myself, the idea of critical thinking and helping kids think through problems both is so necessary and oddly missing from the landscape.

Manzano: I mean, adults want to know is bread good for you? Is preschool good for you? Is watching television good for you? There's no simple answer to that. Trevor Noah, the comic that's on television and commentator of society said, "Americans are uncomfortable with nuance." Should I wear a mask or shouldn't I wear? Well, it depends where you are, what your background is. It's a lot of components. So that was in the back of my mind, even before I thought about this show.

Menendez: Well, there's that piece and then there's the other piece, which I think really relatable to anyone, which is that line from Hamilton, from Lin-Manuel which is, "I'm not stupid."

Manzano: Yes.

Menendez: And the importance to kids of people knowing that they're not stupid.

Manzano: Right. I found myself in that situation a lot when I was a kid in the South Bronx. I would ask questions and they wouldn't get answered. I remember one time we were spelling, and she was teaching us how to spell socks. Well, my mother had just gotten me a bag of socks that spelled it S-O-X, you know how marketers change the spelling as they will. And I asked her, "Why is this not the way you're spelling it?" And she wouldn't answer me. It's interesting to me that all of those questions remained unanswered. I think that that's how kids think. They put two and two together. They say, if I saw it on a TV show, it must be true in life. I think that's what makes Alma's Way very personal to my own experience.

Menendez: Inasmuch as you baked a lot of your family into Alma's Way, this show and her life, way more stable than your home life, than your childhood was. You've said, "Because I had this tumultuous childhood, I found refuge in my brain." Can you tell me both about how that tumult would manifest, and where it was that you were seeking out that refuge?

Manzano: I was raised in a household ruled by domestic violence. So there was always the possibility of that happening. And I just developed a way of going into my mind and creating a ballet. Once I was sitting in a chair, and I created a ballet with my feet without standing up. That was the ballet. I would look at the cracks in the ceiling, and I would find shapes and numbers. I think that's why I fell in love with Sesame Street. So I just found magic in my brain and I guess I liked my own company.

Menendez: Who was the first person who said, "This kid's got talent"?

Manzano: It was a teacher, who, in junior high school, who said I should not go to the local high school. It was Roosevelt High School in the Bronx if I went to the local high school and he said, "You should go to the High School of Performing Arts." This particular teacher even went to my house to convince my parents that I should go to the High School of Performing Arts. Yeah.

Menendez: Why, what was the resistance?

Manzano: Well, it was far away from home. It was, you had to take the train. You had to go to Manhattan. You had to get off at 46th Street. Though I'm a New Yorker, I was really a small town kid, the town being el Bronx. So then I went to the High School of Performing Arts,

and my grades went from excellent in the Bronx to completely terrible at the High School of Performing Arts. I could not compete with those kids. That's why early childhood education is so important.

Menendez: It is - and yet you make your way out. I mean, you make your way out. You begin a career as a working actor. That's just a rarity.

Manzano: Yeah. But my mother said, si note sale por una manera, que salgo por la otra, which means if it doesn't turn out one way, try it another way. Be flexible. She was Anita in West Side Story, the washing machine, joined the union. She was pushing my father all the time. And she would say to him, "No, you have to join the union." And when it was time to go to college, my grades were so terrible. I said, I have to go try out for a college that will accept me on an audition. So that was my plan. And I did. I got the application without telling my teachers at Performing Arts, because they told you that you could audition. You can go to Juilliard, Carnegie Mellon, NYU. So I just did it on my own.

Menendez: And you get in, you go to Carnegie Mellon, which, by the way, is academically incredibly rigorous. So how did you make your way through that?

Manzano: I struggled with the academics because it was pass or fail. That's all and then everything was acting, acting, acting. But it was a different time in America. It was a kinder time in America and it was the civil rights movement and people speaking up for themselves and I was perfectly comfortable saying, excuse me, society put me in this position and it's your responsibility to help me get over this hump because you have let me down. We were comfortable saying that, talking about the system, how bad the system was, and the system messed me up. So you have to fix it.

It was a youth-driven time in America, marching against the wars. Latinos, for the first time, were being seen with the young Lords, the Puerto Rican Young Lords, and the activists on the West Coast. If it wasn't for the activists on the West Coast and Emilio Delgado and I, who plays Luis, would not have been cast because they were the ones who said to Sesame Street, you have these wonderful role models for African-American children. You have to do the same for Latinos. And that's how we got cast.

Menendez: Did you, at the time, know that you were a part of something special or were you talking to your girlfriends like, "I don't know, I work with puppets all day"?

Manzano: Well, I was in the show called Godspell - that's why I was in New York - that we did at Carnegie Mellon University. And then I just went to this audition. It was already a couple of years old and I thought, oh, this show's not going to last. It had already been satirized on Saturday Night Live. They called it Reality Streets and they had all these pimps hanging around, but it was such a wild show. You should watch the movie Street Gang, that documentary, because it really captures those early years. And the fact that television is

art, it's an art form. And Jim understood that. And I used to watch a lot of television to escape what was going on around me in the Bronx. So I always loved television.

And so, Jim said, "I just love the idea that they're taking techniques used by advertisement companies like, 'plop, plop, fizz, fizz. Oh, what relief it is, plop, plop fizz' to teach the alphabet." One of the founders of Sesame Street said if they could learn plop, plop, fizz, fizz, they could learn A B C D E F G. And that was - it was smart. It was really sophisticated. It had that magazine format. It was so exciting to be around those people. I just fastened my seatbelt and just rode with it.

Menendez: But you didn't just fasten your seatbelt. I mean, you very much became a part of it as more than a performer. Could you remember sort of the tipping point? Did someone say to you, you should write, you should be a part of the writer's room? Did you suggest that?

Manzano: That's exactly right. First of all, I remembered how I used to watch television and the effect that not seeing anybody who looked like me had and feeling invisible. And I didn't know what I was going to contribute to a society that was blind to me. And I remembered that, so when I got on and they kept saying, "No, we want those little girls to see you as who they are." So I went with it and then Matt Robinson, who's the original Gordon, who was a writer on the show, said, "You're not here to be the cute little Latina. You have to make sure that Latino content is accurate."

And I thought, who elected me mayor of Puerto Ricans? I mean, I'm 21. I've never been in a television studio. I'm a nervous wreck talking to Big Bird. But then what he said stayed with me and I noticed that there was a fruit cart on the show and on the fruit cart were apples, bananas, and the usual things one finds on a fruit cart. And I went to the producers. I said, "If this was a diverse neighborhood, you would have platanos, guineos, coco, piña, yuca, all of that stuff that was in my neighborhood, bacalao hanging from the thing. And they said, oh great idea. So I always say that I diversified the first fruit cart.

Menendez: Yeah. I don't know how you ended up getting fish on the fruit cart, but that is incredible.

Manzano: Maybe it's not, maybe I'm exaggerating, but my point is that everybody has a little bit of power in whatever your job is and it's worth your while to keep pushing the envelope in ways that are appropriate and you can control.

Menendez: 1971 to 2015. That is forever. As you thought about leaving, was there that moment of who am I without this show?

Manzano: No. I always think be yourself, everybody else is taken. I didn't say that, a famous writer said that, but I think it's such a great line. I just thought the time had come. One time I got to the studio and there was this beautiful girl singing. And she came up to me and she said, "Oh, Maria." She said very flattering things, "I loved you. I've been watching you. You're terrific." And when she walked away, I said to somebody, "Who's that beautiful girl,

what a beautiful voice." It was Alicia Keys. So I want to say when you don't recognize the guests because they're so young, it's time to create Alma's Way. That happened with Bruno Mars. I call my daughter, "Gabby, this guy, he's out of control here!" "Ma."

Menendez: This happened with my grandma. Ricky Martin was in a Puerto Rico tourism commercial. And she's like, "That kid is going places." And we're like, "Grandma, he's already there."

Manzano: He's already there. I know. I know. So it was time for me to create Alma's Way.

Menendez: You've won 15 Emmys, is that right, for your work writing television?

Manzano: Yeah.

Menendez: Yeah, no big deal.

Manzano: Yeah.

Menendez: What goes into creating a great television program and what goes into a great television script? Because to your point, part of the art is you do not have a lot of time to hit a lot of beats. So as you were thinking about Alma's Way, what is it that you were like, this is the scaffolding that is going to make this great?

Manzano: I think it's good stories. Kids like good stories. They lean in when Alma's in trouble or - she never gets into trouble because it is a idealistic television show for children.

Menendez: But when she has a challenge, she definitely runs up against challenges.

Manzano: Right. When she doesn't know what to do, kids lean in, I think. They're interested in drama. They like a good story. And I always like good stories. I had quibbles with the Latino content on Sesame Street and Dulcy Singer, the producer, said, "Why don't you try writing some?" And that's how I got writing. And then she gave me the curriculum notebook and I saw, oh my goodness, this is a lot of stuff. And she said, "Now you know what we go through behind the camera." So I understood immediately that that's where the power was. It's in the writing and I think good stories make a good show.

Menendez: Do you remember a time when you changed a story that was going to be told or where you reworked a story that was going to be told? Just like the editorial equivalent of that fruit cart, where there was something then that you said, "No, this is how it would go down."

Manzano: No, I don't remember that, but I do remember thinking that all of the Latino content was static as if cultures didn't move, okay? Puerto Ricans say wepa now. They didn't say wepa when I was a kid. I mean, it's fluid and that we had to teach that hola means hello. And I remembered how much I loved Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in Top Hat. And I thought that was the epitome of sophistication and zaniness and beauty. So of course I wrote myself dancing with Emilio Delgado singing kind of a takeoff on Cole Porter, that hola means hello. So I was able to put my own sensibility in the content.

Menendez: It's so funny. I have all those songs just burned on my brain. It's like...

Manzano: Yeah, music is important. Yeah.

Menendez: It is important. It's so sticky.

Manzano: Yes.

Menendez: I can't remember dates of certain people I love's birthdays, but I've got all these songs jammed in my brain.

Manzano: Yeah. And also it reminds you of a memory, a feeling. Whatever you were feeling at that moment will come back to you.

Menendez: One of the fascinating things about being a parent or thing I didn't expect is so much of children's programming, like Alma's Way, yes, it is primarily for the child. They are the primary audience, but it really also - I've learned so much about how to be a good, mindful, thoughtful parent, the ways in which to engage them, the ways not to just clobber them with information, the ways to make them an active participant. For you, when you became a mom, did you find that you were able to be the same person you were teaching parents to be on Sesame Street on Alma's Way?

Manzano: Well, not on Sesame Street. It was very, very hard because my daughter played my daughter in the beginning and she simply - this is a lesson all parents should learn - did not like it. She wanted to hang around with the Muppets in the Muppet room. She didn't want to do things over and over again. And she said, "I don't understand why I have to make believe you're my mother, if you really are my mother." And I saw that she just wasn't having a great time on the show. And my mother who was still alive at the time, who - the sun rose and set on my child - when she said to me, "She not having a very good time there."

Menendez: Let me ask it a slightly different way though, which is, I think a lot of us growing up and watching you on Sesame Street were like, "Oh, I wish that were my mom. I wish that were

my tia." That person who is always friendly and smiling and waiting to engage you. And it's hard because as a parent, especially as a working parent, it's hard to show up as that person all the time.

Manzano: Yeah. Yeah, but you should see some of the really early shows. I come across downright snarky. On YouTube, you could see yourself, at 20, 30 for the whole thing. And there is a couple of bits that I just can't believe they let me get away with it. I was snarky to Oscar, but I think kids knew I didn't mean it or that was just how I was. And I think it's important that kids see you as you are, because then they feel they're part of the tribe. I used to think that my mother went to work - she was a seamstress - because she wanted to, because it was more fun outside of the house than being inside the house. So I thought she didn't want to be with us. And I asked her and I said, "Why do you go?"

And she said, "Because we couldn't possibly make it on what your father earns. I would love to stay here with you, but I can't." Well, all of a sudden I felt like I got this, Mom. I'm cool. I'll entertain myself. Now I know what's going on, as opposed to, "Be quiet, everything's fine, you'll understand when you're older." And that made me feel powerful. So in Alma's Way, Mami loses her keys, she forgets stuff. Papi picks up a toy and inadvertently puts it in the washing machine, and Junior's looking for it. We try to show them as real as possible, warts and all.

Menendez: Sonia, I was so struck in preparing for this interview. I've also seen you on your press tour now. So I feel like every time I look up on my television, it's like, Sonia on the Today Show. I mean, you've lived in many ways, the type of life that I certainly, and I'm sure many of our listeners would like to emulate, which is it's meaningful work. You have been of service, you have done something that you loved. You were part of something that was special and iconic. When that was over, you went on to create a way for yourself that continued to be of service and of value. I mean, not many people get to do all of those things at once and be a mom. I know there's no secret, but what's the lesson? What do those of us who want to do the same thing, what do we take away from your story?

Manzano: People have to do what really turns them on. And I guess kids do that for me. Like if you watch a news show in Syria or any war-torn place and the newscaster's giving the news and in the back a kid is like jumping up and down and waving at the camera and sticking his tongue out. And you want to say, "Kid, you're in a terrible situation," but still they find a way. And I find that uplifting and hopeful.

I'd like to take this opportunity to say one more thing. People praise me for being the first. First of all, Sesame Street had a lot to do with that. I mean, they opened the door and I ran with it. But something that Mrs. Robinson, Michelle Obama's mother, said stays with me. They said to her, "Mrs. Robinson, you must be very proud of your children." And she said, "Oh yes, I'm very proud of them. But there was lots of kids like them in the South side of Chicago." And that kind of stayed with me. And I'm thinking the first this, the first Latin this, there were others that had the talent. The stars lined up for me. I don't want people to

think they don't have the talent or the capability. They do, but there's other things that have to line up as well.

Menendez: I'm a big believer in that. And I appreciate you saying that because it is exactly right. You do all the work, you do all the preparation. You have to love it. You have to be excellent. But there is this other piece, which is things got to line up.

Manzano: Right. Things have to line up. It's finding yourself. Yeah.

Menendez: Yeah. I love it. Sonia, this was such a gift. Thank you so much for your time, for your generosity.

Manzano: Sure thing. You're welcome. Thank you.

Menendez: This conversation was such a treat and there's just a small moment that I want to highlight because I keep thinking about it. And that's the moment when I ask Sonia if it pained her to walk away from Sesame Street. I was struck by the fact that she was so unbothered, that she knew it was time to walk away, that she didn't let a single role define her. I mean, can you imagine being so clear on who you are and what you offer that you can move in the world with that faith in yourself and that lack of fear?

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