



Encanto's Adassa is Guided By Her Why

The reggaeton star reached new levels of global fame playing Dolores Madrigal in Encanto. Adassa shares the health ordeal that threatened her life and career, and the force that drives every decision she makes.

Alicia Menendez:

Whether you fell in love with Adassa as the voice of Dolores Madrigal in Encanto, or you have been a long time fan of her reggaeton career, there is so much more we need to talk about like how she manages her amazing career and her seven children and the life altering illness that nearly derailed it all.

Menendez: Adassa, thank you so much for doing this.

Adassa: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Menendez: I am so excited and like the voice of every parent everywhere, your voice is in my head literally all the time these days. But I want to start at the beginning. Adassa, tell me who was the first person who told you you had talent?

Adassa: The first time I had somebody tell me that I had talent was my parents. I started singing very early in church and they used to do a lot of ministering. They go to different churches and sing and do that kind of work, and that's when I knew I wanted to be a singer. But when The Little Mermaid came out in 1989 and I heard Jodi Benson sing (singing) I knew it. That's when I knew I wanted to be part of that world someday.

Menendez: When you go to your parents and you say, "I want to be a singer." What do they say?

Adassa: They were concerned at first, when it wasn't just Christian music with due rights. Sometimes I took lefts and rights as I was finding myself, and then I found how much impact music has on everyone. It's not just what you want to do, but you have to think about what is an influence that I'm leaving behind for other Latinos or Latinas or other kids? That's when I really started doubling down on my lyrics and my musical style and what I really wanted to leave as a musical legacy.

Menendez: Because going from gospel to reggaeton is a big shift in genre.

Adassa: My difficulty was the fact that I was going into a genre, number one, that was very male dominated. Number two, I was a Colombian doing reggaeton. Right now you got your Karol Gs, you got your J Balvins, your Malumas, and it's like, oh, my and they're celebrating now Colombia. When I started, man, I paved the way in blood. It was not easy. But I'm forever grateful for my label, for Universal. Universal Latino that really stuck behind me. And whenever I said, "This is what I want to do. This is who I am." They were like, "Okay, we'll figure out a way to make it happen." And I was able to do things with Ciara, Missy Elliott, Luis Fonsi and Juanes and travel the world with my music.

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Adassa: But it wasn't easy because right now you see a lot of the camaraderie that goes around in music, where girls are supporting girls. But back then, it was not as easy. I was like, "I want to get along with everybody." But that wasn't the case back then. I'm really glad how much the evolution of music has happened that now people really like to support each other so much more, especially female artists.

Menendez: Okay. Where in all of that touring do you find the time to have seven kids?

Adassa: You don't find the time, you make the time. Because with a family, sometimes when you get your opportunities a lot of people think, "Well, this is my moment right now, I got to cash in. I got to do whatever it takes." But you have to understand why you're doing it, set your balance before your success. So say, if family is important to you, if you have a wife, if you got a relationship, you got kids, you have to say before anything happens, "If I'm ever successful, this is how I'm going to handle the situation."

Adassa: My husband and I, from the beginning have been very clear that interviews, like right now, we're doing it during the day and when my kids get home, it's kids' time. And sometimes you have to say no to money, so you can say yes to family. It comes down to that. When you are given a lot of great options, all right, you have this to do, this, this, this, and then you see your family, you have to value that you can never buy back memories. You cannot buy back time.

Adassa: I have to decide sometimes whether to take this money or go do this tour or this appearance or stay home, and it's both of them that are valuable. That's what people don't understand. It's not like, oh my gosh, look at what it's costing me. I'm losing a hundred thousand dollars, because I'm staying in here for you to yell at me or to go to your dance recital. No, those moments are the ones they will remember and cherish forever. They see that sacrifice-

Menendez: And you will too.

Adassa: Me too.

Menendez: That's the thing that I got wrong or that I didn't understand before I was a mom, was that I thought parents were going to all these things under duress, right? That they're like, "Oh, I feel bad for my kid." And it's no, you want to be there.

Adassa: Exactly. I want to see the joy. I want to make their beds. I want to cook that meal and I like to be a hands-on parent, so then I have to balance being that hands-on parent and being an example. Because as a female, I know how difficult it is in this business and I want to make sure my kids understand you can have it both ways. You can have it all. You just got to sleep a little less and say no to money sometimes. That's it.

Adassa: Because I want to be a mom. I want to be there for them. I can't forget why I'm doing this for, and for me, my why is my family. If you are disregarding your why, when you're finally successful you have nobody to celebrate with.

Menendez: Adassa, take me back to when you found out about the role of Dolores.

Adassa: It was the most amazingly special and most grievous time in my life. I think that it was happiness and sadness at the same time. Because when I was doing the audition I felt great, I was so excited. I was in front of Byron Howard and Jared Bush and I was singing and I was having the time of my life and at the same time, I was like, "I'm feeling a little sick to my tummy." And I thought, "Oh man, what if I'm pregnant?" And I'm like, "Ah, it's not on camera, so it'll be fine."

Adassa: After my callback, which I met with them and I presented the story of my family and I told them about the sacrifices my parents made for me to be able to be born in the United States and everything they had to go through and being an Afro-Latina, growing up in a world where people that looked like me never had a principal role. They were supporting characters. They were dancers. They were in the kitchens, they were serving, but they never sat at the table and that's really impresses me about Encanto. That scene where we're all at the table, and it happens multiple times that we are all sitting as equals, all of us. That's so special to me because I wish my grandma would be alive to see this.

Adassa: And when I did that callback I thought, "That's it, I can die happy. These amazing people that will make impact, that will resonate for hundreds of years listened to my story, heard my father's story, heard my mother's story, my grandmother's, my grandfather's story and that's enough for me." I was feeling a little sick, so I told my husband, "I'm going to get some pregnancy test just in case I'm pregnant. Okay?" He was like, "All right." So I went and they were all negative, but it had happened with my second kid that all my pregnancy tests came out negative and then lo and behold on April Fool's, my doctor calls me and says, "Oh, by the way, you are pregnant." And I was like, "Ha ha."

Adassa: So I thought, "I'm just going to go get a blood test and I'll be back." And my husband was like, "You want me to take you?" I'm like, "Nah, I'll be fine." But once I got there, within an hour, my health took a turn for the worse. I had had COVID in January of last year, and then in March, when I went into the hospital within just an hour, I could not speak and I was slurring my words. I couldn't move my body. I was starting to get paralyzed on my legs. I couldn't feel my legs. I couldn't move my hands. And I thought, "What is going on?" So they started running tests, CT scans, MRIs, blood work of every kind that you can imagine. At the end they told me, "We don't really know what's happening." I leave that hospital, which they didn't really want me to, but I signed myself out saying, "If I'm going to die, I'd rather die at home with my kids. I don't want to die here." With all the restrictions, my husband couldn't even get into the hospital. So I said, "You know what? I'm just going to go home." Then I have a paramedic friend that came to my house and he's like, "Maybe you're having a stroke. Why don't I drive you to Vanderbilt and we'll get a second opinion?"

Adassa: Same thing, all the tests, MRIs, scans. And then the neurologist came to me and told me, "With COVID there's so many unknowns. We don't really know where your issue's stemming from. All we can do is monitor your situation, try to make you more comfortable and then run more tests." And then I said, "Just send me home. Just send me home."

Adassa: During those days I would get completely paralyzed sometimes, and my husband would have to just carry me from the shower, place me on the bed until I could regain my movement, which sometimes would take a few minutes, sometimes it could be up to an hour, two hours before I could feel anything in my toes and I could speak again. And then while I was learning to walk again and talk, and I had to talk very hush tones with my kids like, "Hi honey, could you please clean the table?" Or, "Oh, I love you so much." We get a call from Jamie Sparer Roberts, which was the casting director of this film, and she's like, "I would like to personally congratulate you. You've got the role as Dolores." I cried, and my husband looked at me like, you need to tell them you can't take this. And the only thing that I could muster to say was, "Thank you so much. When do I start?" And she's like, "Three weeks." Then I looked at my husband, I'm like, "I guess I got three weeks to get better."

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Adassa: And that was it. For the next three weeks, I trained like Rocky except I wasn't punching meat bags. I was just like, "I'm going to make it from here to the kitchen without passing out." And then that would be the goal. And then it was like, okay, from here down the street. Then, from here down the street while talking. Then it was, from here down the street while talking and moving my hands. It was little things until, honestly I would just say it was a miracle from God that I was ready by the time I met with the directors and I felt like a tiger, like I was going to take the world on.

Menendez: You drafted a will.

Adassa: I did. I still have it. And within the year, by the end of the year, one of the people that actually signed my will, which happened probably like nine or 10 months later, he contracted COVID and he ended up passing away. So even somebody who signed my own will is not here to tell the story anymore.

Menendez: You touched on this, but I want to loop back on it. In what ways do you see yourself in Dolores? Do you see your life in Dolores's life?

Adassa: Oh, wow. Dolores is a standout character. I think that she is so loving and kind, and people think that she's chismosa, like super chismosa but she's not. She knows everything, but she doesn't go ahead and tell everybody's everything to everyone. When you listen to the song of All of You, you know what I mean? It literally says, "Yo, I knew he never left, I heard him every day." She knew that Bruno was there. She didn't tell. It wasn't her secret to tell. She knew that whatever happened, things would get resolved within time. I see myself in her because sometimes I do say a little too much, but it's all real, y'all. It's all real. Maybe I just let out a whole bunch of TMI right here, and people are like, "Oh my gosh, she needs to draw it back."

Adassa: Yeah well you know, I am very much like my character, I say it like it is. Because that is what is reality for me and I think that people have gotten too much into this fake belonging, just to try to fit in. I think that the more original that you are and the more true to yourself that you are, people will actually gravitate towards that and find themselves reflecting over who they really are.

Adassa: Dolores's character is real, and to me, an inspiration for all Afro-Latinos because they drew her in such an incredible, beautiful, accurate way. The way that her mom and dad look, and the way that Camilo looks as opposed to Antonio, as opposed to Dolores, is exactly like a Latino family. There's some times, even within my own kids, one of them has curly hair, the other ones don't. Same dad. It happens like that. I think it is very accurate to what a family is. And Dolores herself is so sweet and so soft spoken until there's something great to tell and then (sings). Which is the way that I am. I'm pretty much chill unless you give me a microphone, then I start singing.

Menendez: Here's the thing that I think has got to be strange for you which is, you are already a global artist, right? You have found an audience, you have found fame and then you do a project like this and it just launches you to another level. I think that is interesting in two ways. One is, we all get big in our circles and you lose perspective sometimes on how big or small your circle is. I cannot imagine to be part of something like this to have to reassess or reconfigure your brain.

Menendez: And two, I've spoken with so many other Latinas about this, that when this moment hits, there's all this pressure to seize your moment, right? This is it. We got to maximize. That

this can be a point where mistakes are made or where decisions are made that will set the path for the rest of your career.

Adassa: I think that goes back to before you have success or while you're having it if you didn't pre-plan, you really have to define what your outcome will look like. You have to be able to see what isn't there. For me, what I'm doing now is I do take on as much as I possibly can without infringing upon my why. My why, my family, my why, my marriage, my why is making sure that I bring up joy to everybody, but not making sure I take it away from those who I care for within the walls of my own home.

Adassa: So, yes, there are so many more things to do. Yes, I am touring, but I make sure that has to be respected. And it's not a temptation when you know, no, that's not going to happen. One day that it did happen and it was my daughter's birthday and I immediately said, no, but she was in the room and she's like, "What is it?" I was like, "They're asking me to go to a Comic-Con." And she was like, "No, can that be my birthday present?" I'm like, "Okay. Well, if she wants it." Because she's like, "I'm going to get dressed up. I'm going to bring my money. It's going to be amazing." And I'm like, "Okay, all right. If you're into it, that's fine." Now all of them were like, "Can I go to a Comic-Con on my birthday?" I'm like, "We're going to be in Canada." "I want to go to Canada." Sometimes I do bring them all along so they can have the experience. For Miami I'm doing a Colombian festival in July and they're all coming with me, but what are we doing right after the Colombian festival? We're going to Orlando and we're going to Disney World. That's what we're doing.

Adassa: I sometimes try to make sure that they understand they are my priority. But yeah, it is not easy and the mistakes do happen because you have so many opportunities coming at you. If you know who you are and what you want to put out there in the universe, and for me, I take a lot of care on kids. They are the future. For me, the future generation and for me to leave a good footprint for them to follow, to know, no, you don't have to take off your clothes or talk about sex to be able to make it in this industry. You have a talent and you have a light that needs to be shown to the world. Work on your craft, do that accurately so when your opportunities come, you are ready and you don't have to sell yourself short for something else. You can learn to say no as well.

Adassa: I want to make sure that I can make a show that grandma can enjoy, that a 25 year old can dance to, and a two year old can cheer to. That's the kind of show I want to give and that's the kind of content I put out and that's the kind of jobs and opportunities that I take.

Adassa: So saying no is one of the most important things as you become more and more successful that you need to learn to say. No to certain opportunities. No to having more time, so you can say yes to your family. No, to saying, "I'm not going to take on that project because it's going to really destroy the impact that I want to leave and showcase to others that you can do." That it is possible to be a mom and work. It is possible to be an artist and not have to take off your clothes. It is possible to do positive things and leave that great footprint that others say, "Oh, that person did it, that means I can do it too."

Menendez: Adassa, can we talk about the performance at the Academy Awards?

Adassa: Yes. Let's.

Menendez: It's like a lot of people kept their kids up hoping to see real people perform the song they've listened to a million times. I imagine it was really disappointing to not be able to do it in full.

Adassa: It was disappointing to not be able to do the Dolores part, but it's not for me as Adassa. Me, Adassa, as a performer I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is the Oscars. Mama see me now." You know what I'm saying? I'm just glad to have had that microphone. But for kids who were hoping, dreaming about to see themselves realized in what Dolores represents, the first Afro-Latina that was going to perform a rap in the Oscars, that's what Dolores represented. It was the directors, it was the Oscars. They had a vision and the choreography was insanely beautiful. The colors, amazing. And that doesn't at all take into disregard who Luis Fonsi is, which I've worked with before. He's an incredible artist. Becky G? Come on. Megan Thee Stallion, everybody knows she's an incredible artist as well. And they all did a great performance. But the people were hoping, expecting, dreaming, looking forward to seeing the full cast be able to sing "We Don't Talk About Bruno" for the first time live, ever.

New Speaker: We did not know what was going on until we literally got to the Oscars to do our first practice. That's when they showed us a video of, this is what you're doing and I was like, "Okay." And they're like, "And you're going to go practice." I was like, "Okay." But it wasn't up to us to decide what was going to happen and I don't really know that Disney either. Disney gave us such a great opportunity, and what Disney has showcased is incredible. And from what I heard, Disney's planning some great things, but you didn't hear it from me.

Menendez: I like how you even do the lean in.

Adassa: I do, because I am Dolores and I do know a lot but I can't tell. (whispers) I want to. (laughs)

Menendez: Adassa, thank you so much for doing this.

Adassa: Thank you. Thank you for your time.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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