

Ana Villafañe is Still a Supernova



She got her big break playing Gloria Estefan in the musical hit *On Your Feet*. She cherished the role, but it also forced her to “erase Ana to sustain Gloria.” Now, with *Chicago*, her second Broadway show under her belt, and big projects on the horizon—like Apple TV+'s *Bad Monkey*—Ana’s learning how to allow her art and her life to live side-by-side.

Alicia Menendez: From the outside, Ana Villafañe had the meteoric rise that so many dream of. She won critical acclaim, bringing Gloria Estefan to life in the Broadway smash “*On Your Feet!*” But behind the scenes, Ana was feeling lost and depressed. Now as her run as Roxie Hart on Broadway’s “*Chicago*” comes to a close, we talk about how she learned to listen to herself, even when surrounded by a chorus of loud voices, big miss that ended up being a blessing in disguise, and how she’s learning to have a speed that is set somewhere between zero and 100. Ana, this always happens where I remember, I don’t know if I was at LaGuardia or JFK and just seeing your face splashed everywhere. And it was so cool and it felt so meaningful and so big. What was happening behind the scenes was of course, much more complicated. You recently said that you felt completely lost and depressed. “I was really young. Wanted to please everybody and thought I had to be superhuman at all times. I was constantly self-medicating and self-sabotaging.” Can you give me a sense of what that looked like?

Ana Villafañe: Moving to New York and not knowing anybody and being thrown into the spotlight at that level where it is such a niche world, Broadway in and of itself-

Menendez: Ana, they called you a supernova. They called you a supernova.

Villafañe: It was a lot for me to handle. And I was definitely not in a place where I had like the foundations to handle it as gracefully as I maybe could have. So I was really scared. It’s such a massive responsibility to play someone like her, who means so much to so many people and to me. Not because of her fame, not because of anything other than what my family went through to get to this country and what she represents in terms of the cultural success story. And it’s not about the tangible success. It’s not about money. It’s not about any of the glory or any of that. It’s about the album *Mi Tierra*. I have been with her and with Emilio at events where any person who comes up to them and wants a photo or wants to just thank them for representing us at the highest level and at the highest caliber, they never turn them down. Let’s say we’re at a luncheon or we’re at the White House, which happened being at the White House, during the Obama presidency and all of the people who you would expect being there, all of the fancy people. But they never turned down the servers, the valet people, when we’re at restaurants here in New York and you have the entire kitchen staff coming out at the end because that’s like they’ve never forgotten where they came from. And that to me was huge. And that’s how I was raised. And that almost had more of an impact than the fact that we were at the White House. Do you know

what I mean? And so I think the responsibility weight on me a lot and being alone and not being able to speak a lot because I was singing 17 songs per show in her voice, like in her style of singing, not mine. And I would gladly do it again, to be honest with you. But it was very difficult. I had to erase Ana to sustain Gloria. And there are a lot of things about Broadway that you're not told until you're in it. Such as to have an army of doctors on speed dial, acupuncture, physical therapy, the entire mechanism of your body needs to be taken care of. It's basically like being an Olympic athlete. You need to go to a level of performance that is extraordinary every single day, sometimes twice. And I was forced to learn very quickly. And I'm very grateful because I had the support of Gloria herself who would send me meditations to go to sleep to and would give me all of her tips and tricks and stuff and flew her voice teacher out from Australia to work with me. But I was still at the end of the day alone and had to be here doing it and doing press and showing up at a red carpet and not looking exhausted and all of those other things that nobody really talks about. But I was lonely and I didn't have any friends in the city other than the cast. I didn't know anything about the city. So I lived three blocks away from the theater, my entire life revolved around these three block radius in Midtown for three years.

Menendez: Well, on top of which those years are already hard years, just because you're a young adult in the world trying to find your place. So you then lay on top of that. All of a sudden being in a bubble, that's a lot for a lot of people. What I find interesting about you Ana, is that you talk about the responsibility and it being about Gloria and of course, I think a lot of Latinas, definitely Cubans, feel that affinity for her. But you feel a lot of responsibility in everything you do. Right now you are playing Roxie Hart in Chicago, which is of course iconic. But in every interview, I have seen you do for this show, you talk about embodying that role as a huge responsibility. And I wonder where that huge sense of responsibility in literally everything you do comes from.

Villafañe: I think it's a combination of things, but I think at the end of the day, I'm very respectful of the art forms because for me as a kid, music and movies and everything that I ended up being part of in my life, which is just art saved me personally. So I respect it so much that I want to do it justice, and I want to do my best. I'm like zero or a hundred because I tend to go until I can't or to push myself to an extreme and then not take care of myself. So that has been like a very big learning curve for me, just like self care in general, but I respect the art forms. So for on your feet, obviously it was honoring Gloria and respecting and doing my best to uplift them because that was my job, at the end of the day. There was zero... It's so funny, because I think about my pictures being all over the city and all over JFK and LaGuardia and it was not a vanity project at all. It couldn't be in order to do it right in my opinion. But now going into Roxy who... The character is all about vanity, that's literally her whole thing. I respect the work of Bob Fosse and I respect the fact that it is an iconic piece and that being a Latina and stepping into it, I wanted to really just honor what it is. And especially give the industry a chance to see me do something that they wouldn't have necessarily connected me to immediately, like you don't think, "Oh, Gloria Estefan, Roxie Hart. That makes sense." You don't, but I wanted to respect the dancing. I wanted to respect and ranking. I am the first person to play role since she passed away literally a year ago. So I think that for me is maybe the common thread, is just like the respect that I want to have for all these things.

Menendez: One of the first interviews we did for Latina to Latina was Gloria Calderón Kellett. And I think she had just learned that. Like History Of Them, which you slated to star and wasn't going to go to series. It was so recent, like she still had all of your head shots up on the board in her office and she spoke about how much she loved you and how much she loved everyone who was in that cast. And I asked her at the time how, when you create something and then you actually have this odd experience of selling it, but then the network owns it and they choose not to move with it, how you let go and move on. And I think it's one thing to do that as the creator. I think it is another thing to do that as the actor. What did it require of you to really accept that project wasn't moving forward and to move on?

Villafañe: That was my first pilot. I had been living in LA prior to moving to New York for Broadway and all of the auditions, all of the shows that I was so close to and didn't get, one of them is Pretty Little Liars for example. And I remember it killed me inside, but at the same time, I had not had that jump off that On Your Feet! gave me. And so History Of Them, everyone at CBS, everyone at Sony, they were convinced it was a sure thing. And so I had planned my life around it going. And that was the learning experience for that project from me. Even right now, I'm about to go shoot a series for six months. And I was like, I'm not getting ready with my place in New York because I love my place in New York and I'm going to get a furnished apartment on location and I'm not going to tie myself down to any one outcome of the situation. Because now we all get a little more PTSD as we go along. But it's learning. And at the end of the day, I'm so grateful because what History Of Them gave me was just the knowing, the information and the experience to then grow and understand that it has nothing to do with you. I had to learn to listen to myself and say, wait, maybe this isn't the right move. Maybe I do want to go back to New York. And then I got offered to do a play, but had it not been for History Of Them, I would not have known that I wanted to stay in New York. I think ultimately I was right off the heels of On Your Feet! So my whole putting myself back together, because everything they tell you about when you make your Broadway debut and it's a massive hit, is that then when the show closes, you need a moment. And I did need that moment. But History Of Them came immediately. So I don't think I would've been ready to carry my first ever TV series while I was actually still not processing. And hadn't grieved, I guess, the loss or ended the chapter of On Your Feet! Now looking at my next year and looking at what I have ahead with my new apple TV show and everything. I am so grateful that it didn't all happen back then because I would've just stayed in that same kind of hamster wheel moment. And I would not have been able to create great work.

Menendez: Well, it's really hard because in that moment, when you are being called a supernova, everybody tells you, you have to strike while you're hot and you can lose that heat and you can lose your moment, which is how it can feel. Then when something like History Of Them doesn't move. But you also do need a minute to come down off the adrenalin high of having been in a blockbuster project. And those two things, I think that is the challenge for someone like you, which is those two things will always be at odds, the be at odds every day of this career so long as you pursue it.

Villafañe: And it's so interesting too, because I was so scared to even take the moment because of what you're saying and like the momentum, everything is leveraging momentum and blah, blah, blah. One of my actually really good friends, David Ortiz, who's a producer and who

Latina to Latina: Ana Villafañe is Still a Supernova

is always championing all of the Latin creators and actors and whatnot. And he told me, I remember I was super depressed and I called my mom when History Of Them didn't happen. And I was like, "I don't know what to do. This is it. What do I... I'm a failure. I'm in letting everybody down." And he was there with me and he was like "Leverage and momentum, relax, no one can take away what you've already done. And what's yours is yours, "lo que es pa' ti nadie te lo quita." Like what we grow up being told and learning to trust and to be patient and to be okay with that, it was a really tough pill to swallow and for a second it fast forward from that when I screen tested for the In The Heights film and I didn't get it. And that was when I really had to step away because the hard thing with social media, when you have eyeballs on you waiting to see "Oh, what's she going to do next?" Because that's what everyone asks. So what do you have next? What are you up coming up? And I deleted my Instagram for a year and I remember my team was like, "You are what?" And I was like, "I just know that I need to." And low and behold. I not only had a holding deal with ABC for a year where I was like developing stuff with them, but I booked two other pilots while I was off the grid and off Instagram. And that empowered me that it wasn't about the optics that maybe I do bring something to those table. And when I got back on it, it was fine. Everything was still there. The people were still there. Everyone was just glad I was back and I had enough time to look at myself in the mirror and not be worried about what I was pretending to be or projecting into the world. I had to actually just align myself with myself. And then I do the Night Court pilot, and I got written off. I haven't even spoken about this in an interview until right now. But when I said yes to Chicago, we knew that NBC was in first position because I had just done the Night Court pilot over the summer. We're waiting to see if we were going to get picked up and it got picked up. But they were writing off my character, which has never happened to me. And it's very hard not to take that personally. And I was depressed for three days, but I chose to still go to the show and started hitting the ground, running again, putting myself on tape for everything, balancing the show on Broadway and doing every self tape that I was getting. And then I booked my dream job, which I'm about to go start shooting next month. So I'm like, that trust and that patience and also just learning from every single bit of it.

Menendez: It's so wild. It's so wild. And I got to tell you, I remember being like, "Where'd she go? Where'd she go? Why am I not seeing her on my 'gram anymore?" And I do have to tell you, because I am older than you and I have had the experience in my own career of having people in my ear about being a supernova and needing to strike while it's hot. And to be honest, just losing some perspective on why I did the work and why the work mattered and what my actual a place in the universe was. Because when you become a big fish, no matter how big the pond is, that can become incredibly disorienting. That when I see it happen to other young women, I'm like, "Oh, I hope she's okay." Because it's just so easy to lose your sense of self. And I am very impressed that you took the time away. And I got to tell you, when you came back, I saw the switch. I watched the alignment happen where I'm like, "She is happy. She's not performing happiness."

Villafañe: Yeah. It's so wild. And thank you, because that means a lot. When I reactivate Instagram, I looked back and I could tell you, there's a whole section that I could tell you, there's one picture specifically. And I remember because it was fashion week. And I remember that my best friend was in town it was when I was doing collective rage off Broadway. And I remember being on the way, in the car to the fashion show. And this is of course pre

Latina to Latina: Ana Villafañe is Still a Supernova

COVID and throwing up from my anxiety because I was just so anxious. And sitting there in this gorgeous dress and getting photographed and whatever. And we were supposed to go have a nice ladies who lunch moment afterwards, because we were all decked out and like, I'm either sweatpants or Louis Vuittons. Like there's no in between, I'm either in gym clothes or fully red carpet ready. And so we're like, let's take this moment. Let's have a girl's day. And afterwards we got back in the car to go to the lunch reservation and I was like, "I can't do this." And I was just crying. There had been a breakup and all these things, I was just in such a bad place, but the picture looks stunning and looks perfect and you couldn't. You would never know from the picture. And I remember posting it and now when I look at it, it's so bizarre to me that nobody would know that I was in such a dark place. That we didn't go anywhere afterwards. We went straight back to my apartment and put on leggings and watched horrible TV and I was just like crying. But it's that image versus reality thing that got a little bit out of hand, I guess for me. And I didn't want to be pretending because the show has to be the show. My real life cannot be the show. And that's what I learned. The show has to be on stage or on set or whatever it may be. And then that's it. And you're not a failure if you had to take a moment or take a deep breath. And I remember being at the airport and I sat down and got myself a glass of wine and I deleted Instagram and that was it for a year.

Menendez: Ana, I am not going to ask you what is next, but I do really want to know from you, what is the dream? What the thing that you are aspiring to that will let you know that you did this right?

Villafañe: I honestly, and this is like not to sound all hippy or whatever, but truly the dream is to just go to sleep at night, proud of myself and fulfilled. And I love the fact that I get to do what I love for a living. It's not lost on me, especially after the pandemic with so many friends out of work that I was on set and whatnot. I'm walking away from Chicago. So grateful to have been on Broadway for a second time, leading a show that is completely different and in a completely different style than anything I've ever done before. And that the world got to see that. And it's been so satisfying for friends and for just people in the Broadway world and the Broadway community to come to the show and be like, "Oh my God, I did not know you could do that." That has been enough for me. I don't know if it's a cultural thing or if it's a female thing or if it's just like a human, that we don't give ourselves enough credit sometimes. And so I try to check myself and be like, "Wait, no, hold on. You are literally doing all of the things that you have set out to do." Sure. I have a bucket list items that I would love to do. Movie musicals, I would love to do a voice for Disney, I would love to one day host SNL. But on that list was also star in a Broadway musical, which I've done twice. Was also be part of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, which I've opened twice now. All these things that slowly but surely have been happening and that I've been doing, how exciting and ridiculous is that? Especially, I think about my dad coming from El Salvador when he was 16 years old and not knowing English, that's a very large jump. It's a lot. And I think that just going to sleep, knowing that I'm proud of myself is good and is enough. And that maybe that means that maybe "I am enough?" I don't know question mark. I don't know.

Menendez: I always love a person who's in progress myself. I appreciate because I can see both the work and I can see that the work is ongoing to really stick that landing on a, "I am enough"

period. So I am 100% with you on where we are in that journey. Thank you so much for doing this.

Villafañe: Of course. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. We love hearing from you, it makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMS on Instagram. Tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop and remember please to subscribe or follow us on radio public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Ana Villafañe is Still a Supernova." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. January 24, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

