



How Netflix's Carolina Garcia Picks Binge-Worthy Hits

She learned on the job as an assistant to one of the most powerful women in Hollywood, and spent nine years at Twentieth Century Fox before making the leap to Netflix. Now its director of original programming, she lets us in on what it takes to sell a big idea.

Alicia Menendez:

If you spent quarantine consuming everything Netflix has to offer, then you can thank Carolina Garcia, Netflix's Director of Original Series, for bringing you *Stranger Things*, *Atypical*, *13 Reason Why*, *Fuller House*, and the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. Carolina walks me through what makes a project stand out, how an executive shepherds an idea from pitch to execution, and how she learned to bring more of who she is and what she loves to the place she works.

Carolina, thank you for doing this.

Carolina Garcia: Of course. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Here's where I want to start, which is by the time a project reaches your desk, who has already seen it and how has it gotten there?

Garcia: So, most times, I see a project through an agent or a manager. I have relationships with many agents and managers in the business and through those relationships, that's where we get most of our submissions. Now, I think we're coming to a place where we understand that not everybody has access to an agent or a manager and we want to be cognizant of that, and so a lot of times colleagues of mine or I will find something that someone has created and just put out on the internet and we'll say like, "Hey, that's a really cool idea or that person has a really great voice, what are they about?" And then we'll kind of get into tracking that person down, I guess you could say.

Menendez: And are you looking at things in various forms? Like are you looking at scripts and three-page proposals and books? Are things coming to you fully baked or are they in various stages?

Garcia: Various stages. So, there are times when it's just an idea that a writer has, and they come out and they pitch the story. So, tell me a story. What is that story? So, sometimes there is already a script that has been written, which is always helpful, because then you can kind of see the execution and it helps in the, "Well, can this person actually do it?" And then there are also times when we option books that we love and try to attach a writer. Usually that happens with kind of more senior writers who we'll go to them and say, "Hey, we would love for you to bring this to life."

But I would say that a lot of younger writers and a lot of people who are newer and coming up always have a script ready, because that is just the easiest way for me to say like, "Well,

can this person actually execute it?” Because a lot of people can pitch me a great story, but can she write it?

Menendez: Once you decide that you love something, what happens next?

Garcia: It's not a committee decision, but what it is is it's an investment for the company, and we have to make sure that the investment will result in people who give money to us every month loving it, right? So, if it were only up to me, I don't know that I would want that level of responsibility on my shoulders, but we talk about I'm not ever the only person in a room when I'm hearing a pitch. When material comes in, lots of folks read it on the team, and we really discuss as a team and talk about who is this for? Who's gonna really love this? We really pay attention to more than just our own personal tastes. We try to think with joy in mind.

Menendez: Well, it does, and I think that's also universally applicable, right? If it's for everyone, then it's for no one, especially in this type of market where there's so much content that it's like you have to be crystal clear about who is going to sit down and be like, "I'm just gonna watch every episode all at once."

Garcia: That's right. And I think that in storytelling, in specificity there is universality. And so, it's really important to have that clear vision from someone so that we can lock into the humanness of it and how it will translate to hopefully many people loving it.

Menendez: I also wonder for you, though, because you are focused on young adults and family content, and you and I, though we are very young, are no longer considered young adults in the market, how do you even tap into that? How do you get to a place where you say, "I think a 13-year-old girl is gonna love this."

Garcia: Well, we've all come of age at some point. Those key moments in our youth, they're ingrained in our hearts, in our minds, in our souls, and we know what it feels like to be in that moment.

Menendez: Yes. And there is no amount of money you could pay me to go back to those moments.

Garcia: Exactly, right? So, like those are etched, and so it just is about feeling. Obviously, our jobs require a lot of thinking and a lot of critical thinking and all of that good stuff, but also you have to feel something when a story comes in, and I think that's what matters most. If you can move me, there is a good possibility that you'll emotionally move someone else.

Menendez: Let's talk about how you got here. You were born in Argentina. Your parents had three kids. They were in their mid-thirties when they moved to the States, which I used to hear things like that before I had kids of my own and was in my mid-thirties, and it hit different than it does now that I'm that age. And the idea of just starting all over again, and in my thirties, like you put it a way that I thought was very beautiful that I've never thought of before, but this idea of almost being reborn in your mid-thirties in a new country and looking at starting over again. For you as a kid, what do you remember watching them go through that?

Garcia: Yeah. I mean, I am obsessed with my parents. I have the utmost respect for them and the journey that they went through and are still going through. My parents gave everything up and a pretty comfortable lifestyle in Argentina to come here. They grew up in a pretty tumultuous time politically in Argentina, and it was my dad's dream to move to America, I think starting when he was 18. And when they came here, like they knew basic English, but

my dad learned a lot of his English listening to Bob Dylan. One of the things that my parents to this day, they were never victims of their circumstance. They made a choice to move here with \$6,000 and three kids, and they were like, "We're gonna make this work."

I'm sure they knew the challenges that would come, but they never... The struggle was real, but they just were always like, "All right. You work hard and you're gonna get ahead, like it's fine." And I remember my dad, growing up, he was like, "You will not lead with the fact that you're an immigrant, not from this country. You're gonna do a good job. You're gonna make a name for yourself through your work, and your ethic, and your character, and that's it. That's what you will be judged on more or less." And looking back, I'm like, "Man, I just really respect that because I don't know how they did it."

And to still have a loving, nurturing family life and home life is pretty remarkable.

Menendez: As you're growing up, you're a professionally trained dancer and you talk about this moment where when you went to college, you sort of surprise yourself by choosing to pursue business. I feel like there's something more in that story, and I say that in part as a former theater kid who got to college and was like, "Oh, wow. I love theater, but wow, there are other people who love it a lot more, or who are just more dedicated to this, and there are other things that I'm interested in, so maybe I should go check those out." And also, I will say coming from... Both my parents are born here, but when you're in a larger extended immigrant family, there is this emphasis on security, and it was always clear to me that theater was never going to be secure, that it was always going to be this huge risk.

And so, for me, those two things compounded to shift my focus. What did that look like for you?

Garcia: It was a bit of a handful of things. I found my people when I found theater, like I just... I love it so deeply and performing is something that always came naturally to me. I never had to really try hard or work hard at it. I just was kind of born with that sense. And it was weird, because like when I was a kid, I was like, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna go to Juilliard. I'm gonna try to do that." And I just never thought about it.

And then it came time to... The reality of what the world is, and like how I couldn't quite two things, wrap my head around how do you make a living, right? How do you survive? And I didn't have the luxury of parents who could help me in the event that I was unemployed for a few months or whatever. And I also kind of was like, "Okay, performance is the thing that I'm naturally good at, so why study it, and why not study something that will really help me grow, and expand, and something I really know nothing about?" So, there was that, and also, I had this moment that will actually probably break my parents' heart, because they are always like, "Do what you want. Do what brings you joy," of like my parents didn't come here and struggle and make sure we got educations and make sure that we excelled to see me continue to struggle. And so, I was like, "No. I am gonna go to business. I'm gonna focus on something that I can make a career out of and go from there."

And I think through that is where I ended up now, and I'm very happy, and also reading between the lines there's a fair amount of I probably also thought like, "Well, there are so many people who want to do this. Who do I think I am that I can make it in theater performance or whatever?" I've since adjusted my thinking, because now I'm like, "Well, why not you?" So, if you are one of those people that has a dream and really wants to do

it, but you're thinking like, "Why me? How could I ever?" Just flip it on its head. Why not you? There are so many people that make it in whatever profession or whatever career, why not?

Menendez: Well, and there's also the irony of you've gone onto do something that is extremely competitive, that a lot of people would like to do.

Garcia: That's right. And I think so many immigrant kids have that just like you're gonna persevere, and you're not gonna stop, and it doesn't matter how hard things get. You're just gonna keep going. Because that's really the recipe for success, I think.

Menendez: You then spend nine years at 20th Century Fox, which is not very millennial of you to spend nine years anywhere.

Garcia: I know.

Menendez: You started as an assistant for Dana Walden. What made you a good assistant?

Garcia: I'm gonna preface this with saying I was not a good assistant, especially-

Menendez: That was my guess.

Garcia: Yeah. I mean, Dana took a chance on me. I was fresh out of college, and she was chairman. She must have seen something. And I started as a second assistant to her and Gary Newman, and they were partners at the time, and then I went on to get promoted to be Dana's first assistant. So, she shaped me. I had zero knowledge of anything in the entertainment business aside from my deep obsession with a show called 24. I knew nothing. I was not great at critical thinking. I didn't study entertainment. I was like so in over my head.

She genuinely shaped everything in my foundational knowledge of entertainment, which looking back, I'm like, "Man, what an education." And she is the smartest person in almost any room, and she was tough. She was fair, and she was tough, and I lovingly call it the Dana Walden boot camp because she whipped me into shape. It was tough because A, I had no idea what I was doing, B, I was very young, and C, what's required in that job, she's a mother of two, she's a wife, she's a daughter, she's running a company, and you have to make sure that she's able to show up 100% for all of those things, which is... any working mom can relate to. I couldn't. Well, I still can't, because I'm not a mom, but like at the time, I was like, "Huh." And then you really see what it takes to be at that level, and also be a good mom, and also be a good wife, and it's a lot.

Menendez: One of the tricky things about those sort of unicorn assistant jobs is that there's scenarios like yours, where you're the assistant to someone very powerful, they invest in you, they teach you, and then they set you free to go have the rest of your career, and then there are also people who end up assistants for the rest of their lives because they get very good at being an assistant, and then the person that they work with can't live without them. How did you avoid that trap?

Garcia: I was a 20th forever and I could have stayed at 20th, and I was a 20th baby, and I loved it, and it was like family to me, honestly. But I also was like, "Okay, I have to expand. I have to be brave enough to suck at something, because otherwise I will be at this company for the rest of my life." And I knew that I could probably eventually do that job in my sleep, and I was like, "No. You have to try something new." And at the time, Netflix was just kind of like

new, like they weren't really hiring. There was just this kind of curiosity of like, "What are they doing over there? Because it seems really interesting."

And their culture deck is online, so anyone can find it, and read it, and I found it, and I read it, and I was like, "Oh my gosh. Does this really exist?" Like it was so different than what I was used to, and I was like, "There's no way." I somehow found my way through many informationals and like anyone who would take a general informational meeting with me with my boss, and he was just starting this new division that was the young adult family division. There weren't many people really catering to the youth and true four quadrant programming.

Menendez: What does four quadrant mean?

Garcia: Four quadrant means you can watch it and enjoy it and your kids can watch it and enjoy it. So, like Pixar movies. You would probably still go on a date with your husband to watch it, but it's also you can take the family. Or like a movie like Jumanji or something like that. It's a multigenerational viewing experience. It was like this new thing that Netflix was doing, and it was still very nascent, so I got to be there for kind of the discovery of what would be.

I mean, they still had like House of Cards and stuff.

Menendez: I think a lot of people hit their version of this inflection point in different industries, which is you were at a place that is considered traditional, and then you consider making the leap into something that is newer, less traditional, and I think there's almost always someone who says, "You're absolutely nuts. Why would you leave this thing that is a known entity, that is prestigious, to go somewhere where... Yeah, maybe it's a thing, but maybe it's a flop." And I wonder how you navigated around that.

Garcia: Number one, you have to bet on yourself, like trust yourself. You're always gonna get so many different points of view and people that care for you, that want you to maintain the stability, and the security, and the safety of it, so always trust yourself and trust your instincts. A lot of times, it's about not overthinking, and following that little voice that's like, "Go this way." And you go. I'm all about growing and throwing myself into situations that I don't know much about. I think you also have to tell yourself like, "Dare to suck. I'm probably gonna suck at this in the beginning, but I'll get better. I'll learn it."

You know, that early terror, that can be an exciting thing if you apply it properly. You just gotta do it. Don't think so much about it. Don't overthink it. Just take the leap. You'll be fine.

Menendez: Yeah. It's also where there's a nice parallelism with your parents, where it's like if they took that leap, you leaping from one company to another, no big deal.

Garcia: Oh, yeah. No big deal. No big deal. Yeah. And I was like so scared in the beginning, I was like I had total imposter syndrome, which I think everyone probably does to an extent when you start something new, but that also can fuel you. You just gotta figure it out and get good at it.

Menendez: I imagine sort of once you get through those first few days, where like you're on boarded and they teach you how to log into your laptop, and where the coffee is-

Garcia: The snacks.

Menendez: I don't know if you remember this moment, because I definitely had this moment when I started at NBC two years ago where I just was sitting at my desk and I was like, "So, what do I do now?"

Garcia: Yeah.

Menendez: Like no one sent me any... There are no meeting invites on my calendar, like I am not entirely sure what it is I'm supposed to be doing here.

Garcia: Yep.

Menendez: And I do think that that is like the beginning part, where you do have to be a little self-directed, and where you do need to ask... I mean, for me, I learned to ask like, "What should I be doing?" That can seem sort of juvenile, but I think that is actually sometimes necessary to begin getting yourself woven into the fabric of a place.

Garcia: Yes. Absolutely. I think we are always so scared to ask the question because it'll look like, "Oh, gosh. We don't know what we're doing, or we should know what we're doing." But I think there's such humility, and honestly, it's so smart to ask the question. I drove my boss insane with like, "Give me more to do. Throw me in here. Put me in, coach." Because I was in that same situation of like, "Oh, gosh. What do I do now? I want to make sure that I'm additive to the company and not just sitting here and doing nothing." So, it's always great, especially in those first weeks and months at Netflix, I was just like, "Put me in wherever you need me. Give me work. Put me in meetings."

And think about it. If you have an employee like that, you're like, "Wow. They're driven. They're gonna do it." It's a good look.

Menendez: If you're in a place with good culture fit. If you're in a place with bad culture fit, you're like, "This person's driving you bananas because they want to do way too much, way too soon."

Garcia: Yes. Very true.

Menendez: We are all familiar with many of the projects that you have helped develop. So, of those projects, is there one that you considered your first win internally?

Garcia: There's so many that I just absolutely love.

Menendez: I feel like Stranger Things, for example, is the type of thing that it's like you either get it, or you didn't get it, and then there had to be some satisfaction once it was out in the world and it just exploded.

Garcia: Yes. Yes. That one was so awesome because you know, we're working on projects for years before they're ever shown to the world, and there are so many times where you're like, "We have something super special here," and you know it, and when it resonates with the world, it's just like a wonderful feeling. And so, Stranger Things was an incredible one way at the beginning of my tenure. 13 Reasons Why was also one that was a huge thought starter. Raising Dion is another show that I am so proud of because that was a show that resonated throughout the world, and we are so happy about that, because you're like, "This story could be universal." And we hope that the world agrees, and they did.

So, Stranger Things, 13 Reasons Why, Atypical is another one that I absolutely adore.

Menendez: I loved Atypical.

Garcia: Oh, yay! Yay!

Menendez: I loved it. I interviewed him when I was at PBS, and I watch... I even loved the way it played with form, like I loved those 15-minute episodes. I was like, "Does every show I watch need an A story and a B story?" Maybe it's okay to just be like, "We're just gonna follow one story."

Garcia: That's right.

Menendez: And then it's done. And I was like, "Oh my goodness. I've watched eight episodes of this."

Garcia: That's right. Yeah. There's so many. They're all like children. I love them all.

Menendez: So, give us a sense of what it looks like from your perch once a project has been greenlit and you are actually in the process of making it and rolling it out.

Garcia: Yes. So, my personal philosophy is I'm not here to make the Carolina show. I am here to... You know, like I don't want to give you notes that are gonna change the trajectory and the DNA of what it is that you want to make. This is why it's so important in the pitch phase and in the are we gonna make this show phase to make sure that we're on the same page about what we're getting into. So, that way the thoughts and the feedback that I share with creators, like I want to make sure that it's helping them best execute their vision.

And then also, it's important to know when to get out of the way, like not every single piece of material needs tons of notes. So, it's about like, "Okay, what are you trying to do? What are you trying to tell? Is it clear? Is it resonating?" And if not, we're gonna have a creative conversation about how to get it to the place where you really feel the impact of that moment you're trying to make. Like any creative process, it takes some rounds of getting to it. Now, there are certain creators that just... They're so amazing that they don't need notes and it just comes in perfectly. But a lot of times, the creative process requires a little bit of that back and forth and that kind of pressure testing of like, "Okay, is this the fully realized version of what you actually want to do, or can you make it better?"

So, that's a lot of where my feedback and my point of view comes from. It's also we work with artists, and creators, and they have to feel safe to take the risks and create, and it's a big part of my job to make sure they feel that safety. Because obviously, you know, we're in a business, but this is a creative business, and you want to make sure that the experience is good.

Menendez: And I'm gonna have to say having so many friends who are in this field, that freedom has come to outweigh eyeballs, which used to be the metric, right? The metric used to be how much money am I going to make and how many people is there guaranteed tune in. And I think that this generation of creators has really shifted to, "I'd rather be able to do what I want to do the way I want to do it."

Garcia: Yeah.

Menendez: Maybe with some guidance and some molding, but I will trade that. I will trade a number for that freedom.

Garcia: Yeah.

Menendez: I do want to ask about one more thing, which is you still dance. I've heard you tell this story of wanting to keep that secret in the early days of your time as an executive because I

think this is true across industries, that there's this idea you won't be taken as seriously. If you have other interests, period, but specifically for you, if you are in what is considered a performance or creative space and you are wearing the hat of being an executive, but you also happen to be an artistic person who's a performer. My question for you, though, is I do think there is some truth to the fact that if you had come out the gate being like, "I'm an artist," that people would have been like, "No." Like that's not what we're looking for. We're looking for an exec. It does feel when we talk about bring your whole self to work that in some ways that is a thing we ease into rather than a thing we lead with.

Garcia: I think you have to prove yourself in the job that you're in. You have to do a good job in the job that you're in so that people know that you're serious about it and that you... You're there, right? And you're showing up fully. I think the thing that... where I kind of grew to embrace was like, "Yes, and I have to make sure that I have a life, and a fulfilled life, and a full life that brings me joy outside of work so that I show up to work as my best self."

Now, I agree that like if you're in the beginnings of your career, you can do those things, but also just take the job that you have seriously and do a good job in that. And so, it's not like your attention is divided. So, I do think, though, that we should all have full lives outside of whatever our profession is, because that will fuel us and nurture our careers. And for so many years, that fear crippled me. I didn't have the courage to do it. But then I came to a point where I was like, "Carolina, life is short." My grandma always had a saying, "La vida hay que vivirla" Like, you have got to live your life. People don't care about me as much as I think they do, which is a huge blessing, because like you know, we're so afraid of the judgment, and the, "Oh, gosh, what are they gonna think?" And it's like am I really gonna live my life like that?

And then I also was like, "You know what? Dare to suck." Because if I'm just afraid to do it, that creates a ripple effect of other people being afraid to show who they are. And then I'm like, "How can I be eventually a good parent or a good mom if I wasn't honoring who I was and I was keeping that quiet?" That's not fair to anyone and it's especially not fair to me. It just takes courage and you gotta do it. And I think if more of us can, it creates this normalcy. I really was in the beginning afraid, like I was like, "Oh, boy." But then I was like, "You know what? Toma el toro por las astas." That's another saying my mom always says, like grab the bull by the horns. Just do it!

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

Garcia: Thank you so much. It was so wonderful talking with you and connecting with you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, keep sliding into our DMs on Instagram, and tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe and follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now, and know that every time you share the podcast or leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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