



How Carolina Saavedra Finds the Heart of the Story

The Showrunner for the new MSNBC/Peacock docuseries, Leguizamo Does America, pulls back the curtain on how a project goes from a four page pitch deck to a six episode television show, and shares how her family's forced migration from Chile shapes her understanding of what it means to be American.

Alicia Menendez: Carolina Saavedra knows how to tell a great story. She's worked on documentaries like the day I met El Chapo and Jennifer Lopez's halftime, and now she is the showrunner on the new docuseries airing on MSNBC and Peacock, Leguizamo Does America. Carolina shares how she builds rapport with big names like John Leguizamo and Kate Del Castillo. How a project like this goes from concept execution, and challenges all of us to think more critically about the default definition of American. Carolina, thank you so much for doing this.

Carolina Saavedra: Oh my gosh, my absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Carolina, growing up in Chile, were you by nature a storyteller?

Saavedra: I think so, and I think who gave me that gift is my mother. So my mother was a child development educator, and as we were growing up, for instance, my brother and I weren't allowed to watch TV very often, but what my mom did do is something really incredible, which is she drew a television set on a cardboard box and then she would sit us in front of it and she would have us tell her what stories we were seeing. Like truly developing our creative juices. And it must have stuck with me because truly there's something about wanting to tell stories that has been part of my DNA from that point forward for sure.

Menendez: I think a lot now as a parent about what is developmentally appropriate, how much did your parents feel comfortable sharing about your departure from Chile?

Saavedra: You couldn't help but be aware of what was going on in our country as we were surrounded by tanks in the streets and whether we truly understood the conversations that were going on around us, I think all of that stuff was definitely sinking in. For me there was always in my household, we listened to Victor Jara, and we listened to music by people who had been assassinated by the government. Pablo Neruda was something that was always in discussion, his poetry, but it wasn't until I was, I want to say around 11 when our parents sat us down for the first time and really kind of explained to us in detail what had happened to us in Chile. Even growing up in Iowa City where my father, where we ended up because my father became a teacher assistant at the University of Iowa where he obtained his doctorate.

That was something that was constantly in discussion in our household. There were about, I don't know, I want to say six other Chilean families studying at the University of Iowa as well. So for the first seven years that I lived in this country, I was surrounded by Chilean families, all of whom on some level had been affected by what was happening in our country. Our gatherings were with those Chilean families. My father would pull out the

guitar and start singing songs by Victor Jara. And so between the storytelling that my mother injected in me and then also the politics that I basically grew up around, it kind of was the perfect formula for making me who I am.

Menendez: You really make your own way. You go to Stockton University, they don't have some big film unit. It's not that you're going there to study that. You kind of study everything else that will inform your work. The big thing I want to dig into with you, Carolina, because I have so many mentees who are in this space by nature of my being in television news, is there are a lot of producers who try to go through the normal pipeline. They work at a broadcast network, they work at a cable network, and at some point they realize, I really want to be in the field and I really want to be pursuing projects that mean something to me and where I have more agency over the type of projects that I am trying to take.

But it is very opaque how you get from being a producer on a television show where you have a check that clears every two weeks and you are not in the hustle of trying to make money, to what it is that you do, which provides an incredible amount of creative freedom, but also then requires an incredible amount of hustle. How did you make that leap from being on the inside to being a freelancer?

Saavedra: The leap to being a freelancer was not really a choice for us because I was a staff employee at MSNBC in the doc department and then MSNBC did away with that and they basically started to outsource all of their content. The freelance life is really, really hard and when you don't have parents who can just tell you, hey, I've got your rent, I've got the ability to support you for the next year while you go out there and really just pursue the things you you're interested in. When you just end up doing whatever jobs you can to survive and get that paycheck and then save enough money in between projects for those three or four months that you may not be able to work.

And that lasts for a long time, for many of us, for me, up until now, I mean I've been in this industry now for 20 plus years and I am just now getting to do the projects that I truly, truly believe in. So I just had to make ends meet and do what I had to do and work on what I had to work on until I was able to make my way back here.

Menendez: When you talk about some of the projects that you've done, The Day I Met El Chapo, Halftime, how were you leveling up with each project and how were you positioning yourself? Right, because it's easy to get stuck to be like, that is a great field producer. That is a great tape editor. And to never be able to move up. So how were you jumping those rungs?

Saavedra: Again, not an easy thing to do. I spent many years being told by certain producers that they liked me where I was because I was so good at what I was doing and I was making them look good. So I was never promoted even though I was not officially promoted not being given the title even though I was doing all of the work. So when I was a story producer, I was doing producer work. When I was a producer, I was doing supervising producer work. When I was a supervising producer, I was co-EPing and when I'm co-EPing, I'm show running and it's without the title and without the pay. And basically, I finally, and this was a big chance with El Chapo, this company, they interviewed me and they really liked me as a person, my perspective, and they really took a chance on me. That said they also paid me what I now know to be ridiculously low salaries.

I was doing all of the show running, but I just did not, they didn't give me that title. And so I knew at that moment, okay, I'm going to take a lot less money than I'm going to deserve, but this could be a really big thing for me, period, in terms of my career. So it's not been an

easy journey. It's been a lot of making choices that at times sucked. I was working on that show nonstop. I mean around the clock when you average out the hours that I was working with the pay, I was at times making less than minimum wage, but it was the job that really helped catapult me into the next level. And so it was a wager on myself that I was willing to take.

Menendez: Let's talk about your latest project Leguizamo Does America, which is how you and I have come to know each other.

Saavedra: Yes.

Menendez: Which I am so grateful for.

Saavedra: Me too.

Menendez: Take me from concept to execution. What was the pitch in the room?

Saavedra: Well, I wasn't part of the pitch in the room initially. That was something that John and his producing partner and the director of our project, Ben Dejesus, had been pitching for about seven years. At the time, it was really kind of just a celebration of our culture and our people. And when I came on-

Menendez: You come on and it's already been greenlit.

Saavedra: Yes. So the project was finally greenlit and purchased by MSNBC Films, but I came on and I had essentially two months to develop six full episodes. What I initially saw was a four-page deck that very loosely covered the kind of show that it would be. Celebrating our stories, et cetera. And at the time it had some segments in it that were more comical that where John would play characters, et cetera. So I grabbed onto that and I started to add my thing to it, which is always historical context. It's always giving people a perspective that they don't usually have about us. It's the why, it's the how. It's not just this is what it is, look at our great tacos, but it's like why is this family here? Why did they end up coming to this country? It's all of that stuff that I feel is fundamental to telling our stories. And so in about a week or two, I had written a template script of what I thought the show should be and the studio and I went back and forth and then we started developing the show. And so I hired three incredible producers, all female. And together between us and the field producers that I also brought on, which all but one were female as well, we started to really develop these six episodes. And what I did is I made sure that every day when we met at 10 o'clock, everyone jumped on the Zoom and it became a writer's room. And it was all of us sharing our stories, giving our input, helping one another out. The producer for New York City and Puerto Rico, she was helping also kind of guide us with the Chicago story because it's a story that really focuses on the Mexican American experience and she's a Mexican American.

So for me, it was imperative that we all kind of worked together to make this series what it actually is and what it became. And obviously part of the creative process was also bringing that to Ben and to John and letting them know what it is that we were discovering. And they were always on board, very enthusiastically supportive of our team. And John was just this creative force that can't be stopped and he's so willing to go wherever we wanted him to. And really, we always created all of this with him in mind. Part of my job is to make sure that everything feels authentic to John.

And so it was for when I first signed on, I also, although I was already a fan of John's, I went and did extensive research and pretty much watched every single YouTube interview that he had ever done really to get to know what mattered to him, what his whole vibe was when it came to politics, the pain that he was in before he wrote Latin History for Morons

based on what would have happened to his son and the bullying that he experienced for being Latin American.

All of these things informed the kind of stories that we were going to go after. I think very quickly, he understood that we understood him. And so he was able to just kind of relax into the process and we worked really well together collaboratively every step of the way.

Menendez: I would argue, I mean, this is the way I see it, and you can tell me if you see it differently, which is I always feel that part of my job is to show up as who that person needs me to be in order to reflect back the greatest, highest version of themselves. So for example, I think with John that people are accustomed to talking to John as a comedian, and that is sort of the energy and the vibe, and they try to match that energy and the vibe. Where if you study John as you have and as I have, there is a really deep, soulful, intellectually curious person who is desperate to be seen, who wants you to see that version of himself. And when you reflect that back at him, you get such surprise and animation and it's so much more than the flattened version of him. I get when people think he's just a comedic actor.

Saavedra: Oh, a hundred percent. I mean, this is a man who has so many layers and there's so many levels to him. The first biography show I ever did was for MSNBC, and it was about Jim Carey. And so I read all the biographies on Jim Carey, and one of the things that always popped out and that he so eloquently always expresses is that his comedy came from his pain. And so John, I think is the same way in that so many of the shows, if you watch his shows, his stage plays and his one man shows, they're all comedic, but they're based on his real life experiences and often those experiences are just based in pain. Pain of being misunderstood, pain of not being good enough, pain of being the other. As a producer, getting to know John was absolutely crucial in understanding exactly who this man is. And so when he sees that we see him, he's going to naturally want to give you everything, which is I think exactly what he did for us on this show.

Menendez: Carolina, the thing that my deep Google search could not explain about you, is you are super intense. Anyone who meets you within the first three minutes is one of the first things that becomes immediately apparent, and you are particularly intense about telling our stories and telling our stories properly. What in your own life experience, where is that intensity coming from?

Saavedra: Well, I think because I was this kid who grew up in a dictatorship, who knew and understood very early on what it is to be an outsider and the history of what caused me to be an outsider. I was constantly aware of what made me different. And constantly aware of the fact that our stories weren't being told. In high school, I was reprimanded often by my sociology or by my history teachers for reprimanding them for not telling a full story. And I constantly protested that. I just wasn't being seen. My father's story wasn't being told, my mother's story wasn't being told. I kind of was like that child. And then later on, this adult woman who was banging her head up against the wall constantly because I knew and fully understood how limited the stories about us were. People just think that we landed here, but that we're all chasing this American dream, but so many of us are not here because we want it to be.

It's because of what happened in our own countries that caused us to be, and often that is at the hand of American foreign policy, which is something that I also wanted to make sure we included in our show because a lot of Americans are under this impression that we're all just here trying to take people's jobs and that we're chasing this dream that's only promised to us here in this land. But I can assure you that I would've thrived in Chile as

well. My parents never wanted to be here. Our story is one where we were kind of forced to be, and so the full picture of what the immigrant story is in this country has never been told.

Menendez: Carolina, when your come-from is that you feel as though you have been forced here by outside circumstances. What then did your internal process of becoming an American look like? What did it take for you? I mean, do you embrace that identity? Is it one that... What was the journey to get to wherever it is that you are?

Saavedra: Recently, PopSugar wrote an article about me and they called me a Chilean American, and I literally gulped in that moment and I was like, wow, okay. How do I feel about that? I have never not seen myself as an American. South America is also a continent. The United States doesn't have ownership over the word American. People from this country call themselves Americans because this country is really a description. It's the United States of America. It doesn't really have a name right, like Chile, Argentina, Brazil. So am I a Chilean American? Yes, because I am part of South America, I'm also part of this country. I have yet to become a citizen of the United States. I'm a legal resident here, but I am a citizen of Chile. Something that I will be changing soon, I will become a dual citizen, but I didn't want to become a citizen of this country until Chile recognized the dual citizenship, which they did not until a few years ago.

And so I am part of both, and I think my friends will listen to this and be like, I can't believe you quoted him, but Pedro Pascal– the Chilean actor who I think all of America's obsessed with right now–he talks, many people do, about the duality of not being either from here or from there. And that's something that I think all of us struggle with. I certainly do. When I go to Chile, they call me gringa, right. And when I'm here, I'm very clearly not. I'm clearly not American by their standards, and so I kind of live in this world of, it's a little bit of a limbo.

Menendez: Carolina, what did I miss?

Saavedra: What I'd like to just mention and highlight is I think this is something that's unique to me and people like me who have had the benefit of having parents who never for a second saw the benefit of ignoring who we were as Chileans in this country. I would not be who I am if I had not been raised by two people who were fiercely proud of where they came from. If we believe what we tell ourselves about our country, which is that we are a country of immigrants and we are better off for it, then I think all immigrant families should walk into this country knowing that. That it's okay for them to retain their individuality because it's that thing that they're going to offer this country that's going to continue to make this country great.

Menendez: Carolina, thank you so much.

Saavedra: Thank you so much.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcasts, Good Pods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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