



Why The Tax Collector's Cinthya Carmona Defied Religion to Pursue Acting and Find Herself

Her independent spirit, strong will, and artistic ambition made her a rebel in a deeply religious family. But a supportive madrina found ways for her to hone her craft early on. Big sacrifices would follow, including being kicked out of her home. Cinthya speaks candidly with Alicia about her new film, choosing characters that defy Latino stereotypes, and the need to feel legitimate in your profession.

Alicia Menendez:

Actress Cinthya Carmona has embodied ambitious, strong-willed teens. Brandie on East Los High and Sophie Cardona on Greenhouse Academy. That makes a lot of sense. So much of Cinthya's gritty personal story was formed in her adolescence, when she proselytized for her Jehovah's Witness faith and snuck to acting classes. Then she had to choose between living at home in Miami or pursuing the thing she loved most, acting. She left and her career took off in L.A., but Cinthya felt like a fraud. She packed her bags for New York to get the technical grounding she yearned for, and now Cinthya is starring in the new film, *The Tax Collector*, where she plays Alexis Cuevas, the wife of an organized crime boss.

Did you always know that you wanted to act?

Cinthya Carmona:

I was always a performer. I was always an artist. I had this thing when I was a kid where I was a little bit of a spy. I would just watch people. I would just really watch people and I've always been really fascinated with human behavior, and I would go home, and write down things that I saw. My parents, they used to argue a lot growing up, and things were kind of crazy, and I would just sit there and listen to everything that they would say, and then I'd go on my own and I would reenact their arguments. I was always very strange in that sense, but I didn't know that acting was a thing that I could do. I grew up in a super religious... I've never said this in an interview before, but my family and I grew up as Jehovah's Witnesses. I always say very religious, but I'm telling you so you understand.

Menendez: My aunt's Jehovah's Witness, so am well versed.

Carmona: And so, growing up, being an artist wasn't acceptable in this religion. It's like that's not what you do. I'm not saying that it was forbidden, but it's just like that's not the path you're supposed to take, right? And so, I didn't really have that outlet. I played a lot by myself and I would create these little plays with my friends, and like I said, just a little spy, and my real first outlet as an artist was dancing. So, I was always very physical. I've always been a very musical person, and so growing up I just found performing in dancing, and also something that wasn't allowed for me to do. I didn't go to dance classes. I didn't have that. I just had a lot of natural talent and just practicing a lot by myself at home and watching all kinds of VHS videos. I'd watch some dance videos that my mom had from the '80s and again, I would want to be like them. I would just imitate them.

So, I started as a dancer and in school, I just got into every dance team, cheerleading squad, anything possible that I... You know, my parents didn't really have to take part in. And after a while, they got used to, "Okay, this is something that she's doing. Let's not let her get too excited." I went on in high school to be a captain of a dance team where the teacher owned one of the top dance schools in Miami, Miami Lakes at the time, and she gave me a scholarship. As long as I worked for her, I got just free training, excellent training for like four years while I worked part-time as a teenager in her studio.

And growing up, I was really lucky because I have a madrina, who happened to be a talent agent and a manager for telenovela talent in Miami. And since I was born, she always used to say, "Cintha is going to be an actress." And my parents would laugh at her like, "You're crazy, that's not gonna happen." And as a kid, I started showing these tendencies, these performance tendencies, and she would tell people like, "She's going to act. That's her thing." She would try to send me out on auditions. I'll never forget later, she told me this when I was like 19 that she would call the house and say like, "Hey, we want to get Cintha into this commercial. We would love to see her for this audition." And my parents would say, "Don't ever call here again. We're not gonna tell her." And just hang up the phone. Out of fear. It wasn't until later on in life, I was like 16 or 17, that she sneaked me away to go to an acting workshop. It was my first acting workshop and I had no idea what I was doing. I just went in there and I had to do this monologue about this young girl who was looking at herself in the mirror for the first time, like really talking to herself and seeing herself is what I mean for the first time, like looking at her insecurities and just seeing. Just really having that moment with herself. And I did it and I connected to it on a different level that impacted me so much more than dancing ever had.

Dancing was a beautiful way to express myself, but acting really accessed my soul. And that's when I kind of... I hit the bug. I connected to something emotionally on a deeper level that I said, "This is what I need in my life. This is how I'm going to just release this pent up emotional energy that I have inside." And after that, I never looked back. Two years later I was in L.A.

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Menendez: How do you get from that resistance to you then being in L.A. and making that leap?

Carmona: Ooh. I got kicked out of my house. Yeah. I mean look, I grew up in a very strict household, right? Religious, strict household. I'm a rebel. I'm a rebel. I always have been. I don't... I think that that makes me me. I was born the year of the horse, so freedom is really important to me. Running wild is really important to me. I'm a Capricorn, so I'm also really

stubborn, and totally believe in these things, by the way. I'm a Capricorn and I'm just really ambitious and stubborn. I like to just do things my own way. And all my life-

Menendez: So, take me back, though. I mean, is there a conversation that you had where they were like, "Cinthya, if that's what you want, then that's fine, but you can't leave here anymore?"

Carmona: Absolutely. Absolutely. It was masked in other things. It was like, "Oh, Cinthya was being..." Like if you asked my parents now, they'll be like, "Oh, she was being difficult. She was rebellious." And I know, it's like I wanted to do things all around. I was just an artist and you can't trap an artist. It was absolutely like if you want to live your life the way you want to live your life, you can't do it in this house. If you don't want to conform, if you don't want to live... Si no quieres vivir por estas reglas, you need to go.

And I did. It was the best decision I ever made in my life, because I needed to be free, and I needed to take that risk, and I was homeless for a while. I lived with some really weird people for a few weeks and months, and then my madrina, came back into the picture and was like, "You are not gonna live on the street. You're not gonna be with all these crazy people. I'm gonna take you in." And she nurtured me for a few months. I would say almost a year. Guiding me, encouraging me to fulfill my dreams. And then I reconnected when I was about 19 years old with the very first director that I had ever worked with on a sketch comedy show and I was like 16 or 17, who at the time in Miami was doing a project for Chayanne called Amor Inmortal. And he was like this big New York director, who was making moves in Los Angeles, and doing all kinds of stuff, and when I connected with him and I was like, "Hey, I want to act and I want to go to Los Angeles, and I don't know anyone there. Can you help me?" He was like, "Absolutely. You should have been. I'm so glad that you want to be an actress. This is exactly what you should be doing. You have a lot of talent. I'm gonna help you."

Menendez: Then though, 2012, you move to New York to train at OnTheRoad Repertory Company. Is that right?

Carmona: Yeah. Yeah. With Alice Spivak.

Menendez: So, take me back to deciding to make that leap.

Carmona: I trained as a dancer, so for me, I always knew that I can't get on stage, no matter how much natural talent I have. I can't get on stage and do a bunch of turns, and leaps, and jumps, and all of these things without having trained a performance day in and day out for hours. And even though I had a lot of natural talent as far as acting goes, I didn't go to college for acting. I didn't get a degree in this. Till this day, it's always been a chip on my shoulder. I'm like, "Man, I wish I could have gone to NYU. Man, I wish I could have done Tisch. Man, I wish I would have had that." I didn't, so I knew that I needed to train with the best. I knew that I couldn't necessarily call myself an actor without studying the greats, without studying Shakespeare, and without studying as much theater as possible.

I was already working in L.A. at the time. I already had a manager. I already had an agent. I had already had credits under my name. I had done a couple of movies and TV shows. But I felt like a bullshit artist. I didn't believe myself. I was like, "How the hell am I gonna call myself an artist if I have never really trained theater?" So, I moved to New York. And that's when I really sunk my teeth into what I know as an actor. Natural talent helps a lot, and I feel like I'm a really sensitive person and I've had a lot of things all my life that have really

formed me and shaped me on this journey to be an actress, but honing down those skills and studying the greats is probably the most important aspect of my training.

Menendez: You do a different type of job hunting, right? Than the rest of us. Finding an acting job feels so distinct. What did it look like for you to get to the point where not only were you getting auditions, but you were getting auditions for roles that you really wanted, and you were getting called back for those roles, and then actually landing some of them?

Carmona: When I first started acting, it almost came really easily. And I hate to say that, because that's not fair, and that's not how real life is, but I stepped in shit. I had that beginner's luck and right away it's like, "Oh, I moved to L.A. Oh, I met with this producer. Oh, I got this TV show. Oh, I got this movie." A lot of the jobs that I was getting at first, I wasn't really auditioning for. It was like connections that I had made and honestly, beginner's luck. It's very real. If some people can experience it, God bless you. It's wonderful.

And then when I moved to New York and I was up against some of the most incredible talent I've ever been exposed to in the world, it was rough. Going out on auditions with the stars on current shows on Broadway. It was absolutely terrifying, and that's when I really felt like, "Oh wow. Okay, this is not... I have to work really hard right now." And I'll be honest, my three-and-a-half years that I was in New York, just studying as much theater and just doing as much theater as I could, I wasn't really booking anything. I wasn't booking film and television. I was doing commercials, and I was doing little modeling jobs here and there to just get by, but I was not booking. It was definitely rough, but I was fulfilled as an artist because I was just immersed in the world of theater.

Menendez: You play Alexis Cuevas, the wife of David Cuevas, The Tax Collector, who also leads a Latino organized crime group in L.A. What about playing this character appealed to you?

Carmona: Alexis is so much more than just The Tax Collector's wife. First of all, just working with David Ayer, who writes these incredibly complex characters and wants you to tackle them from every different angle, so Alexis is this woman who has been with her husband since she was 17 years old, and grew up in an affluent, wealthy family, and has had an alcoholic father and a traumatic childhood, and she latches onto this gangster, David, for protection. And she basically throws away any future of the life that she could have had, and instead she latched onto someone who gave her some sense of power in her life. And all of that comes from a place of feeling powerless.

And the movie is about the price of power, how far are you gonna go, how much are you willing to sacrifice to get what you want, and every character deals with that in some way. Shia LaBeouf as Creeper deals with it. Bobby Soto as David Cuevas deals with it. And for me, Alexis Cuevas sacrifices her family and her well being in order to protect the little girl who was afraid of her father growing up. I've latched onto situations or people in my life to also feel safe, and I wanted to explore that side of myself.

Menendez: As soon as the trailer dropped for The Tax Collector, there was controversy in part because Shia LaBeouf is playing what many perceive to be a Latino character, and David Ayer has said the character is meant to be white, non-Latino.

Carmona: Totally.

Menendez: And there were also people who felt that by focusing on gangs, the film perpetuates stereotypes about Latinos, and I wonder what your take is on those critiques?

Carmona: First off, when it comes to Shia, we have to just be mindful that it is loosely based on how David Ayer grew up. A lot of the world doesn't have the opportunity to be around David as much as we did, and if you were to be around him, you'd see that he's a white boy who grew up in the hood. And Creeper is exactly that, and I know it because I dated those guys. I dated the white boys from the hood. That was my type for a while. Especially in Miami, so that's what Creeper is, and Shia plays that so insanely well. Jesus, he's so good.

I understand where the criticism would come from as far as the stereotypes. I do feel like we should continue to evolve from that. We should continue to move past that. So, for me it's not about constantly showing Latinos as gangsters or drug dealers. It's like, "No, this is an inside look at the streets of L.A. How some people actually really live." We go deeper.

Menendez: Does the politicization of Latino roles put pressure on you as an actor when you're considering roles and projects?

Carmona: Absolutely. Yes and no. I'm looking for interesting stories. I'm looking for real stories. I like the stories that make people uncomfortable. I want to tell the stories that other people are afraid to tell, like a Tax Collector, for example, and my goal in the characters that I choose is versatility and authenticity as much as possible. But it's also really important to evolve, to continue to bring Latinos, especially in film, in television and as artists, forward. So, were my family members growing up when we first came to the United States, did they work as maids and clean toilets? Yes. That's very true. That is my experience. I used to... When my mom first got here, she wasn't able to fulfill her medical degree at first, and she cleaned buildings and I went with her. Every Friday, I'd go with her and I'd help her take out the trash while I read my books, and I was a kid, but I always saw her working as hard as she can and she used to look at me and say, "You know what, Cinthya? This is not who I am. This is what I'm doing right now so that I can be who I am. This is just a means to an end."

And while I do respect that that is very true, we don't have to continue to tell those stories. We should go beyond that. We should play beyond the maid, or the gangster, or the sassy Latina. We are so much more than that. And that's my goal as a Latina, as an actress who represents and is constantly fighting to represent herself as an actress in this industry. It's let's tell other stories. Let's tell the story of who my mother is now. She's a frickin' scientist, for God's sakes.

Menendez: On Mother's Day, you posted this incredible photo of your mom working at a lab, examining the DNA of COVID-19. What does she do and what did you learn from her?

Carmona: Oh, wow. I learned so much from her. All the time. My mom is low key a genius and she's taught me so much about not only just like science, but about life. I'm constantly just trying to impress her. We've always had that kind of relationship, because she's so good at everything she does. It's so weird. My mom is a histologist, so she studies basically just like cancer cell and tissue, and she's been doing this my whole life, like way before I was born. This is just her passion. She loves it. But now, during COVID-19, the study of cancer cell and tissue has switched over to just examining the strains, the different strains, and just testing, and doing as much scientific research as she can on this pandemic, and she's on the front lines, man. She is working with the University of Miami right now. She's front and center. She sees all of it, all the time.

I've heard all kinds of crazy things, and it's amazing to have a mother that's like really just there day in and day out, like 14 to 18 hour days in this lab. Just like behind a microscope all day. She'll be the first to tell you it's very real. People are dying every single day. And it

has nothing to do with how old you are or underlying conditions. Recently, we lost an uncle to COVID-19 in Barranquilla, and he was... No underlying conditions, just very healthy, and it was even more confirmation for her to be like, "Do you understand what I'm saying? This is very real. Be very careful. And wear a damn mask." She's taught me so much about what's really happening, right? Behind the scenes. But she teaches me so much in life, man. She's a strong independent woman. She's that type of woman who's like, "If you want something for yourself, you better go out and get it. And if you're gonna do something, anything you want to do in your life, you have to be the best. Be the best at anything you want to do." And the best can be your version of the best, but just work as hard as you frickin' can at what you do.

Menendez: 2019, such a busy year for you. You also filmed Reefa, which is based on the real-life story of Israel "Reefa" Hernandez, an 18-year-old artist who was living in Miami when he died at the hands of the police. I was living in Miami in 2013 when that tragedy was unfolding.

Carmona: Oh, wow.

Menendez: And the community was just absolutely rocked by it. And Reefa seems very timely. It seems like a timely moment to be telling the story, because we're having a national conversation about police brutality, and as we are having that conversation, we have seen multiple young Latinos, Sean Monterrosa, Andres Guardado, be killed by police officers. How did being a part of Reefa shape your thinking on this moment?

Carmona: I have goosebumps, just because you were there, and I don't think I've spoken to anyone that has actually really been there outside from like the people that were filming with us on set, and my parents, for example. You know, Reefa lost his life in 2013, and yet we are here in 2020 and it seems more relevant than ever. But his family still didn't get the justice that they deserved. He didn't get the justice that he deserved. That story, just like thousands, like millions I'm sure, that just get brushed under the rug. It's just another tale. It's just another stereotype. It's just another case. And nothing happens, right? The police officer that killed Reefa is one of the heads of Miami PD at this current moment, and they were all exonerated of all charges. But this was an unarmed 18-year-old boy who was spray painting a wall at an abandoned McDonald's. Art isn't a crime.

And that's the message that we're trying to tell that's so important, and why doesn't the world know about it? It was so special to me on so many other levels. It was almost spiritual, but it was the message, of course, that was so incredibly important. It was like, "This is not about me. This is not about me as an actress. This is not about oh, I need to book this part. I need to work." No, this is like I need to do everything that I can to be a part of something greater, something that is going to do something that will change and impact the world in some way. These are the stories that need to be told. This can't continue.

Menendez: You are exactly who you say you are when you talk about your strength, and your passion, and how you are independent. And so, I want to loop back just to close us out.

Carmona: Yeah, I'm like all worked up.

Menendez: You are young. Your parents gave you an ultimatum. You leave and strike out on your own. It has worked out pretty well for you. Your start is ascendant, that is clear. At what point did you reconcile with your parents and did they get that this was not just a phase?

Carmona: I'm gonna cry. Is it okay? Well, my relationship with my parents hasn't always been great, and I didn't have the parents that moved to Los Angeles when I was six years old and drove me to every audition and paid for every class or were there at every play, you know? That didn't happen for me. And I admire and I applaud the parents that have done that for their children, because I see them. I work with these actors now who are killing it and have always had their parents' support. And for a long time, maybe I blamed my parents for not doing that for me. And again, it's what we talk about, the narrative. It's about that narrative of like, "My parents weren't there for me. My parents didn't support me. My parents stifled my growth." And it's a lot about what we talked about, that self-discovery. And especially this time, during quarantine, a lot of that has gotten easier for me to process. Both of my parents, especially my mother, even though she was extremely tough on me, they may not have supported my dreams, but I realize now that it's because they were afraid. It's because when you leave everything that you know to provide your kids with a better future in America, as immigrants, you're afraid, and you want them to choose the safe route, right? You attach yourself to the idea of what safe is. Not knowing. They just didn't know.

And it was very recent. I think it was very recent. I hate to say that, but I have to be honest, right? I've had some wonderful successes in my career, and they've always been very supportive later in life, for sure, like after a few series, after people at work have come up to them and been like, "Oh my God, I've watched your daughter's shows. Wow!" And they're like, "Oh, okay. This is cool. This is interesting." And then when they come and they tell me, it's like, "Oh, wow. It took someone else to tell you that I was on TV for you to accept that I am really doing this and have been doing this by myself for a very long time? Thanks, mom."

But I think recently, when I started just dissecting that narrative, right? When I started really sitting down with myself and telling myself who am I, I started realizing that who I am, and the reason why I've been able to go as far as I have, and continue to fight, and have this fire, and this strength, is because of my mother, is because of my father, who... What they instilled in me, number one was education, and hard work. It's the immigrant story. Work as hard as you can. Work harder than the person next to you. And now I realize that if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be in Los Angeles. I wouldn't be in New York. I wouldn't be sitting down having this conversation with you about the last 10 years of my career. It's definitely been a healing process. It's really been recent where I've really sat down and been so grateful for the fact that I still have my parents that are healthy, and alive, and my mother, who's out there risking her life every single day for all of us, that I've really realized like... They did what they had to do. They did what they had to do for me, and they've passed that responsibility on to me now, for me to move forward and for me to work as hard as I can, and just pay it forward. Take care of them as they took care of me all of my life.

With their mistakes and all, you know what? Parents are just trying their hardest to just give their kids a better life. I'm not blaming them. I probably blamed them very, very much when I first started acting, but I'm definitely in a better place now, where they're my everything. And they're proud of me, which for a kid... I mean, I'm not sure if you've experienced that, but just constantly trying to fight for the approval of your parents is tough. It's tough on a human and we'll carry that on for the rest of our lives. Ay, my parents, los quiero mucho.

Menendez: Cinthya, thank you so much for this.

Carmona: Thank you! Oh my God. You are so lovely. So lovely.

Menendez: You're a gem.

Carmona: Seriously.

Menendez: I look forward to... This will be one of many times we'll do this and then-

Carmona: I hope so.

Menendez: I'll be like, "Oh, remember when you were so young, and such a little chickadee?"

Carmona: I know.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Kojin Tashiro mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. We really do. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you are listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why The Tax Collector's Cinthya Carmona Defied Religion to Pursue Acting and Find Herself" *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., August 17, 2020. LatinaToLatina.com

Produced by:

