



How Showrunner Dailyn Rodriguez Stays in High Demand

Her life story is the stuff of movies. She was a goth kid in private school while her dad ran an underground gambling syndicate. A teacher suggested she write about it. And today she's the executive producer of USA's hit drama *Queen of the South*. The plot points connecting the two eras are filled with derailed projects, hard choices, and moments of euphoric triumph. In this lucid interview, Alicia gets every detail.

Alicia Menendez:

Dailyn Rodriguez is considered a Hollywood unicorn: a Latina who has risen through the ranks to become a television showrunner. She has written for a lot of shows, including *The George Lopez Show* and *Ugly Betty*, and now *Queen of the South*, where she is also the executive producer. It was not a straight shot to get there, far from it, and Dailyn is really honest about what it took to make that rise, the disappointment she experienced when projects stalled out, and what it is like to finally be in high demand.

Dailyn, your Twitter bio says that you were born in Washington Heights, but you call yourself a New York/New Jersey girl. So, as a New Jersey Cuban, I need to know where in New Jersey.

Dailyn Rodriguez:

So, we moved to New Jersey when I was nine. We moved around in Bergen County, so we moved to Cliffside Park, then we moved to Fort Lee, and then we settled in Teaneck. And I went to high school in Englewood. I went to Dwight-Englewood.

Menendez: I went to Dwight-Englewood.

Rodriguez: Shut up!

Menendez: Yeah. So, I grew up in Union City, which is where all the Cubans that didn't go to Miami went, and then I would have graduated from Dwight in 2001.

Rodriguez: I'm a little bit older than you.

Menendez: You like to say that you grew up like Meadow Soprano, going to private school in Jersey while your dad ran an illegal underground gambling syndicate in the city. Is that writer's flourish or is that what it was?

Rodriguez: No, that's not writer's flourish. No. My dad was a bolitero. He's actually mentioned in this T.J. English book called *The Corporation* that's all about the Cuban mob and the entire bolita from the '80s, '90s. I grew up with a really unconventional life with my dad. It just got too dangerous to be in Washington Heights. People kind of knew where we lived. My sister was almost kidnapped. I had a bodyguard for a while. So, we moved to New Jersey. So, that's true, that story.

Menendez: When did you realize what it was that he was doing, and he was involved in?

Rodriguez: Well, I knew things weren't right by the time I was five, because my dad went to prison when I was five for tax evasion and racketeering. I knew that my dad didn't have a conventional job and it wasn't until sort of I was a little bit older, probably more like 9, 10, 11 that I started kind of understanding that he didn't have a job like everybody else's dad. And then by the time we got to New Jersey, there was a lot of conversations about like you can't really talk about what your dad does, and I started realizing, "Okay, this is really not something legal."

So, it was a weird, unconventional upbringing.

Menendez: You know, part of your mythology is that you share with this theater teacher that you do have this unconventional home life, which as I was reading that part of the story, I was like, "Dailyn, you're gonna get so much in trouble! Don't tell the theater teacher! The theater teacher can't be trusted!" But you take all of this and you're told, "Put it into art," which is kind of the most productive thing I imagine one could do.

Rodriguez: 100%. I was just going through a lot of stuff. I was a weird kid. I was a goth, which is part of me trying to figure out how I fit into Dwight, and I was Latina, and I didn't fit in in my family because I had weird taste, and I had this weird experience with my father. My dad left. After my dad got out of prison, he didn't come back. He still supported us, but he didn't come back, so I was being raised by my immigrant mother who never learned English. So, I had this weird upbringing, going to this private school, and I just was struggling a lot.

I confided in this teacher and he's like, "I think you should write. I think you should act. I think you should just put it into all of this and see what comes out." And a lot of really dark shit came out, and it was really cathartic, and I found that I had a talent for it, and he really pushed me towards it.

Menendez: I mean, to be in high school, to be writing plays, to be winning awards in high school, and then to take that and turn that into going to NYU Tisch School of the Arts, I think a lot of times when I talk with Latinas who write or produce in Hollywood, it is a second career. It is something they have come to later. It is very rare that I speak with someone like you, who identified it in themselves, who then had sort of the opportunity at that age and began pursuing it from the beginning of their career. As opposed to it being a transition into writing, a transition into producing.

Rodriguez: I mean, I did go through a period where I graduated from Tisch and they don't really teach you how to get into the business. So, I did a stint at ABC News. It was my first job out of college. I was a desk assistant on the 9:00 PM to 4:00 AM shift, which was awesome.

Menendez: Brutal.

Rodriguez: It's brutal. I temped at Condé Nast and then I got into the restaurant industry. I was a hostess, a bartender, a waitress at a jazz club on 27th Street, and then I was a barista for a while. That was like my last job that was not a writing job. I did do other things, but for sure I always knew I wanted to be a writer, and down in the pit of my stomach I knew that I wanted to write for television. And the story I always tell is that because my mom didn't speak English and my mom was going through a lot of stuff with her relationship with my father, and the danger involved in my dad... I mean, my dad was shot and almost killed.

This was a dangerous life. My mom did her best, but I think she was going through a lot of depression/anxiety when I was little, and I was plopped in front of the TV a lot.

And so, I grew up watching a lot of television and it was my babysitter. It actually helped me learn English. And I didn't realize that was a career until I got to NYU. I thought it was like, oh, you become a playwright, or you become a screenwriter, and then it was like, "Oh, wait a second. I can wait for television?" I've always had that in my heart and soul that I really wanted to write for TV because I think TV reaches more of the masses. There's something very soothing about television. Sometimes you come home, you've had a bad day, and you just turn on the TV and there's just something that can take you out of life for 30 minutes, an hour, and I wanted to be part of that.

Menendez: So, how'd you find your way from all of those jobs, which I appreciate the transparency, because I think sometimes, we miss that part of the journey because it doesn't fit neatly into a professional bio. How did you go from the PAing, the hostessing, to actually writing in television?

Rodriguez: I applied to a fellowship that the Walt Disney Studios does for television writers. I applied in 2000. I had kind of like this everything fit into place thing that happened to me. I applied. I was having a really hard time in New York. My dad had just gone to prison a second time and they were still kind of helping me a little bit living in Manhattan, because Manhattan was so expensive, and I wasn't making ends meet with my temping job, so then I had to take a second job. I was working seven days a week to try and pay my rent and live, and I basically was like, "I gotta get out of here."

I sent in a script to the Walt Disney Studios. I packed up my stuff. I moved to L.A. in August of 2000. And then in November, I got a call that I was being interviewed for the fellowship, and then I got into the fellowship. It was just one of these things that everything clicked. So, I got into the Disney fellowship and I was afforded an ability to get onto The George Lopez Show through the fellowship, and that was my first TV job. I've been working TV since then.

Menendez: What did you learn in that writer's room that you had not learned in college?

Rodriguez: I learned a lot about the business. I don't think I particularly learned that much more about the technique of writing. Really, what I learned was how to take notes from executives, what executives do, what is casting, how do TV shows get produced, marketing, what's marketing. I learned about the technical aspects and the business more. And it afforded ability, paid for me to be able to write more samples of my writing, which was great. And the best way to become a good writer is to keep writing. Writing, writing, writing.

And I think it was finally getting staffed on shows and writing on shows, I just became a better writer through practice.

Menendez: And then how did you make the jump from writer to showrunner?

Rodriguez: It's taken me a really long time. I'm sure you know that it's very difficult for people of color to rise in the ranks in this business. I saw other people that were assistants just become showrunners before me and it just took me a really long time, because it's just... Latinos are just not afforded the same chances. The problem that we're having in the industry right now is that we are repeating lower-level positions in writing staffs because we get hired as diversity hires on shows, so you end up being a staff writer like three times, and so you get

stuck in what I call the diversity ghetto, and you can't move up. And it happens with Black writers, Asian writers. It happens with all kinds of diverse writers.

And that happened to me. And it took a really long time to rise through the ranks. And the way I finally became a showrunner is that the showrunner of Queen of the South after season three decided that she didn't want to come back, and I was the number two on the show. I was right below her, helping her, and they asked me if I wanted to run the show. I started writing in 2001 and I didn't become a showrunner until I guess 2018, 2019. Yeah. 2019-

Menendez: Long time.

Rodriguez: Yeah. It was a really long time. I've literally seen the assistant to a showrunner on a show that I worked on in 2004 become a showrunner five years later. It's just like... Some of it is bad luck. Some of it is the business and how it works. And I'm trying not to dwell on it too much and sort of move forward, because I look at the positives of it and the positives of it were that I got to sort of be under the radar for a really long time learning what not to do, and what to do, and good practices, and bad practices, so by the time I became a showrunner I felt like I was really prepared for the job. I just try and find that silver lining in that experience.

Menendez: Can you share some of that with me? What you learned about what it looks like to be a good showrunner and the things that you try to avoid doing?

Rodriguez: I think it's a very strange job because you're asking creative people to be managers. And nobody teaches creative people to be that. You're basically kind of like the chief creative officer of a small company. That's basically what you are. And I never took business classes in school. It's a weird thing to ask of people, so now you are a creative person who now has to manage people, and you have to manage other creative people who are... By our nature, we're neurotic, we're sensitive, we have really fragile egos, and I have all these things, so I'm being asked to be like, "How do you manage those people?"

And so, like for me, that's how I manage those people. Because I remind myself constantly that I am dealing with a group of creative people who have all of these intense personality traits that I am aware of because I have them. And I sort of start the room every season saying, "So, this is a job where we all desperately need to leave our egos out the front door and come in here and just be collaborative. Everything is about the show. Please don't take things personally. And sometimes we will, and we'll have our feelings hurt, but we should have an open room and talk about it. But at the end of the day, everybody's job in this room is to help me do my job better. That's all it's about."

And I wish I could go back to my staff writer self and tell myself that. It's all about how do I help the showrunner. How do I make her or his job easier? That's really key. And once you sort of explain that to writers, I feel like they feel like a little bit of a burden is taken off. And you always have to recheck in and stuff like that.

I remember my first day in post with one of our editors and I turned to him and I said, "So, look. I don't have a lot of post experience. I have some. So, you're gonna teach me. And I'm gonna ask you questions. And I may not have the right vocabulary, or I may say something that doesn't make sense, or something that doesn't work, and you just have to explain to me why, and I'm just gonna learn and hopefully I get better." That man looked at

me like he couldn't believe what I had just said to him. And I did the same thing with our composer. And what happens is that now those people are invested in your success.

Menendez: And you've given them permission to teach you.

Rodriguez: Yeah. And they don't want you to fail now, because if you fail, they've failed with you. So, instead of like ruling by fear is one way you could do it, the other way is like, "Oh yeah, I know that." And then you don't know shit and you're making drastic mistakes and not listening to the people that you've hired because they're good at their job. You hired those people because they know how to do their job, so trust that they know how to do their job, and that you can learn something from them. That's really what I brought to the table as a showrunner. And I think because of that, I think that I created a family with the cast, the crew, the writers, like that's really important.

Menendez: Most of our listeners aren't showrunners. They're not getting notes from executives. But I do think the experience of being asked to constantly process feedback is a pretty common one. What have you learned about how to give notes and to take notes in this environment?

Rodriguez: I always remind myself that the executives that are giving me notes are also the audience, so if they are lost, if there's something they don't understand, perhaps they don't articulate it in the best way, but there's a saying in Hollywood, what is the note behind the note? So, sometimes you realize there actually is a problem here, but maybe it's not on page 10 where they said the problem is. It's actually on page one with the setup. I see what they're talking about.

It's really trying to understand what the note behind the note is. And then there's sometimes that there's a creative conflict a little bit, like a disagreement, where you're like, "I really don't want to do that." And you sort of explain why and you know, 9 times out of 10, the executives are fine with it. It's a give and take. I feel like you give people about a good portion of what they want and then you get what you want.

Menendez: You know, when you talk about executives being the audience and not understanding something, or needing to resolve something, that part of the art and technique of television is that you're also being asked to do it in about half a page, right? The brevity is often what leads to the possibility of confusion because you need to accomplish so much so quickly.

Rodriguez: It's 42 minutes of content. At least on USA, it's 42 minutes. And we have to put... There's so much plot, and there's so much stuff we have to do, that yeah, a lot of times things... We get asked to overexplain a lot from the executives. But you know, a lot of times we end up removing a lot of that in post. When you see the cut, it doesn't really work, and it just feels like too much exposition and too much. And at some point, you have to trust your audience that they're on the journey and they get what's going on. That's my experience.

Menendez: I do want to ask you about this, this moment in your career which sort of feels like a foil to some of the earlier pieces of your career, which is... and so, there's this moment where you're already showrunning on Queen of the South, and all of a sudden clearly like an edict goes out through Hollywood, like, "Find us Latinas." And you find yourself in very high demand. And I wonder what it felt like after all those years of saying, "See me. Invest in me. I can do this," to then have this moment where all of a sudden everyone swarms at the same time.

Rodriguez: I mean, it doesn't feel bad.

Menendez: Didn't hate it. Didn't hate it.

Rodriguez: I didn't. I didn't hate it. I don't hate it. I'm hoping it's not another round of tokenism. I mean, that's what I'm hoping it isn't. My concern is that some of the projects that are still being developed and some of the stuff that's kind of coming my way is still the same Latinx tropes that we've been seeing over and over and over again. I personally don't want to do another Narcos show. I want to stay away from writing crime in the Latino space, just because I feel like if we have 20 shows on TV and two of them are about Latino criminals, that's fine. But we don't have 20 shows on TV.

So, it's that, or it's always another undocumented story, another border crossing story, which those shows are also valid, but it's... I feel like we're more than our trauma and I feel like those are the stories that are easy go-tos for the industry. What I'm excited about is now I'm starting to see a little bit of a shift, where some of the projects coming my way are not that. It's a little bit different. Like I developed... It didn't go, unfortunately, but this pilot I developed for CW, which was a Latino superhero, Wonder Girl.

Menendez: You beat me to it.

Rodriguez: Yeah. It was not that. But there's a very few handful of Latinx showrunners, so it is nice to be in demand.

Menendez: As one executive called you, a unicorn. Let's talk about Wonder Girl, because I think so often, we celebrate people when everything is going perfectly, and I think what often people don't see about your industry is how many no's and near misses it takes before you get to a yes and a green light. You had written the pilot for Wonder Girl.

Rodriguez: Yeah.

Menendez: And then CW decided not to pick it up? Is that right?

Rodriguez: That's right. That's right.

Menendez: And I loved that in February when you announced it, you said you were disappointed. Like this is a disappointment. How do you process those losses?

Rodriguez: I did a Clubhouse room about this because I wanted to talk about development hell, but I really wanted to talk about exactly what you're talking about, is that often we don't share enough amongst ourselves and about the sadness of projects failing and how that feels psychologically, and I think writers starting out in the industry see higher level writers, like executive producers and showrunners, like, "Oh, they have it in the bag. Everything's great." And I think it's important for us to go, "We also experience the sadness of failure." And it's important for other writers to hear that.

I really got broken by that one. None of the pilots I've written have gone, which is par for the course. It happens with a lot of people. It's very hard to get a pilot picked up. It's very hard to go to series. It's very, very difficult. This one hurt really bad, and it hurt really bad because... and I try and explain this the best that I can is that when you're writing in the Latinx space and it's something like this, where this could be the first Latina superhero on television, what happened to my psychologically is that I took on the entire community

onto my shoulders. And I basically was like, “This has gotta go. I am gonna do this. I’m gonna do this for the Latinx community. I’m gonna do this. This is gonna happen.”

And then it didn’t happen, and I broke. I mean, I broke down in tears. I was destroyed for like two weeks. My husband said, “You were mean,” and I’m never mean. I’m not a mean person. But I just... I felt like I failed my community. And this is something that people that aren’t people of color, white people, don’t understand. They don’t get this part, that like your project could mean this to a community that feels underrepresented, and then when it fails, there’s a different level of psychology that goes into that failure. I mean, I’ve gotten past it now. I passed through it and I’m better about it. But it was tough. It was tough.

Menendez: I think a lot of us feel that in every meeting, in every room we walk into. I think for those of us who are creators, we’re always looking for I think a duality of helping other people see us the way we see ourselves, that for outsiders, and then for us on the inside, to change the way we see ourselves. To celebrate our joys, and our victories, and our win, and our power, and it did feel like this project was set up to do that, right? Like a Latina superhero, I might let my little kid who’s too little to watch that watch that.

Rodriguez: I know, I know. Hopefully, it comes around with another character someday and somebody else gets the chance to do it.

Menendez: You reference the fact that you have sold multiple pilots, though none of them have gone to series. What have you learned in the process about selling a pilot?

Rodriguez: What I’ve learned in the process is that nothing is a slam dunk. You think that it’s gonna go and it doesn’t. I’ve also learned that a lot of it has nothing to do with your script at all. It has to do with does it fit in the schedule. I’ve had a couple times where there’s been a regime change in the middle of my development, so the new person that comes in is like, “Well, I didn’t develop that, so I don’t want to move forward with it.” So, your project gets screwed because of that. There’s a shift in the network. “Oh, now we’re dark. We’re doing dark stuff now, so that thing that you sold six months ago, that’s not dark, so that doesn’t go.” There’s so many things that are completely out of your control, but the most frustrating thing is that like all the pilots I’ve written are in the Latinx space, so it starts getting frustrating because it’s like they keep developing stuff, but they don’t pick it up.

I’m the first to be critical of my shit. I’ll tell you that. These are not bad scripts. So, it’s not the scripts. It’s whatever metrics decide that it doesn’t go, you know? I know I want to continue working in the Latinx space, so I keep hoping that I’m gonna get something on the air.

Menendez: Dailyn, thank you so much for this. This was so generous.

Rodriguez: Oh, you’re very welcome. You know, I’m a big fan of yours. You’re awesome.

Menendez: Thank you.

Rodriguez: Thanks very much, fellow Dwighty.

Menendez: Yes.

Thank you for joining us. 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

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