



## Why Jessica Castro Knows That Late is Better Than Never

She was 18 years-old when she began dancing, but her talent and commitment was so undeniable that she quickly made her way from the Alvin Ailey Dance Program to the Knicks City Dancers to sharing the stage with Beyonce, Rihanna and Jennifer Lopez. Now the professional dancer and choreographer shares how to turbo-charge your start when others tell you you're late to the game.

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**Alicia Menendez:** When I watched In The Heights, there was one dancer who was so mesmerizing that it actually felt as though the camera bent toward her in every scene. Her name is Ilia Jessica Castro and her story is amazing. She did not start dancing until she was 18 years old, virtually unheard of for a professional dancer. She came up through Alvin Ailey, got her first big professional dance job as a Knicks City Dancer, where she also got a crash course in the business of dance and she has toured with a ton of artists, including Beyonce, Jennifer Lopez, and Rihanna. She has danced in The Wiz Live, The Greatest Showman and Honey, where she was Jessica Alba's dance double. This episode is about dance, yes, but it is also about believing that it is never too late to start. Jessica, thank you so much for doing this.

**Jessica Castro:** Thanks for having me.

**Menendez:** It is incredible to me, given that I have caught you now in the place where you are, where you have made this your profession. You are extremely successful. You have found various ways to pursue this love. You did not start dancing in a real way until you were 19, which for those of you who are not dancers, that is unheard of. I mean, were you dancing around your house in Hartford, Connecticut?

**Castro:** Yes. I've always... I say this, I had a late start and I think when you're a dancer, you kind of know you're a dancer in a way. I would put little performances on for my family. They would always ask me to dance. I would do the local talent shows in town. I'd gather my friends in the neighborhood and make up routines. I was that kid who would, back in the day when we had VHS, would record all the music videos and learn all the dance steps from all the videos.

**Menendez:** And so, I started taking classes here and there in Hartford, but when I moved to New York- To go to FIT.

**Castro:** Yeah, to go to FIT, I started... Okay. So I came to New York because I knew I wanted to be in New York. I honestly didn't know why, I just knew that New York was calling me. I applied to FIT and I started on my journey to get my associates at textile development marketing.

At the time I was working at Banana Republic and a friend of mine who, we became friends, we met at Banana Republic. She used to dance for Dance Theater of Harlem and I

asked her where I could take dance classes and she told me, "You should try Broadway Dance Center and there are other studios in New York."

And so I started taking classes at Broadway Dance Center. I started taking all these beginner classes, beginner ballet, beginner jazz, beginner hip hop and one day we crossed paths at PDC and she saw me in this beginner ballet class and she waited for me after class and she was like, "Jessica, you have really natural lines." I didn't understand what she meant at the time and she said, "I think you should audition for the Alvin Ailey Summer Intensive."

And I looked at her and I thought, "Lisa, no way. I mean, that's Alvin Ailey. Like who in their right mind just auditions for the Summer Intensive at Alvin Ailey and she said, "Trust me, Jessica, you should audition. I promise you they'll put you in the level that you need to be in."

So I did. I got accepted and it was that summer where I fell in love truly and for the first time with dance and I realized that this is what I wanted to do.

Menendez: One of the first jobs you have as a professional dancer is as a Knicks dancer and I wonder, I mean, I think we've all seen these women perform. Can you give us a sense of what a day is like, what a week is like, in the life of one of those dancers?

Castro: Before this even starts, you learn a certain amount of numbers. We would go in eight hour rehearsal days and learn two to three numbers a day. These numbers about a minute and a half and I know for those that don't understand dance or aren't dancers don't really understand. You think to yourself, "A minute and a half, that's nothing." But a minute and a half of choreography is a lot of information to absorb in a matter of minutes, hours. The New York Knicks City Dancer was probably, for me, someone who was starting so late, the best bootcamp I could have ever asked for as a professional dancer. It allowed me to understand how to dance in front of a crowd of 20,000 people a night, formations, how to put makeup on, how to network. How to just almost dive into this professional working environment.

And I remember being surrounded by... On the team, there was sisterhood that happens and I just remember these women kind of... I was so green. This was my first job, I didn't know anything. I didn't know anything, about anything, about anything and these women just took me in under their wings and really mentored me and really fully almost gave me the cliff notes of what I should expect and what was expected of me in this environment. So I'm grateful for the years that I was able to be a part of such an amazing team.

Menendez: How do you then make the leap to performing with Rihanna? Performing with Beyonce? I mean, what did that require of you?

Castro: I took everything that I learned from being on the Knicks with me to every other platform. Again, when I started on the Knicks, it was a time where there weren't dance agencies representing dancers so for me, my story is kind of rare. This was at a time where it was these auditions were happening word of mouth and because this sisterhood that kind of took me in, we all had each other's backs. So when these auditions came into town, when High Hat came into town, Tina Landon, I mean, Tina Landon's worked with Prince, Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson.

When Fatima Robinson would come into town, these were all auditions that were word of mouth. So it was like telephone. It was like someone would call me and then I would call someone else to tell them about this audition and then we would end up at this audition. I was very blessed very early on in my career to work with all these names that are so iconic

in the dance world, in the choreography world. They opened the doors for me and so many others to be able to work with artists like Rihanna, Beyonce, Jennifer Lopez, Black Eyed Peas, along with the other films that I've worked on in TV shows and live award shows.

And then going back what really prepared me, honestly, was the women that were able to mentor me and almost guide me in a way where they were like, "Okay, you want to do this, but you don't want to do this."

Menendez: Wait, give me an example of what one of these, "Do this, not that," was?

Castro: So it was my first time working with Tina Landon, 1999. 1999 she hired me. She was a choreographer, creative director with Jamie King and she hired me for the 1999 MTV Music Awards with Ricky Martin. And this was the time where Livin' La Vida Loca was out and it was the biggest, probably one of the biggest hits that year. Again, this was honestly my first job after leaving the New York Knicks and at that time I still felt very green and being able to be in a room with Tina Landon was just mind blowing.

So I remember being in rehearsal and I was just full out, just big and full out, and I remember we were rehearsing Shake Your Bon-Bon, and that whole routine is literally you're shaking your hips throughout the entire routine. And so I remember once we were done rehearsing and learning the choreography, she pulled me inside and she looked me in the face and she said, "Jessica, you're working too hard." And I looked at her, confused and also sad and mortified and just thinking that I literally disappointed this amazing artist. And she said, "You have to remember when you're performing, you have to find your moment in the performance to breathe and to bring dynamic to your performance." She was like, "It's not always about being full out, it's about understanding how to pace yourself."

Literally that little seed, that little gem, has carried. I've carried that with me throughout my years and it's something now that I literally verbatim say to my students and anyone who is in the rehearsal room with me. It's not just about being full out, it's about really understanding the craft. It's about really understanding who you are as a performer. It's about really understanding the frame you've been given and how to insert yourself in that frame without disrespecting or remixing the choreography, but still allowing your true artistry to shine within that frame that you've been given. And that's the difference between a student and a real working professional dancer.

Menendez: I also love that because I think it is really applicable to anyone, anywhere, in any environment, which is that if you work in a professional setting, you do need to know how to pace yourself and that's hard.

Castro: You're right. No, that's a very... and it's something right now where I find myself saying exactly what you just said, a lot, because with the growth of social media I feel like we're all stars in our own right. And social media is such a beautiful thing and then there are other things about social media that obviously I could do without. But I think right now, as an artist, being able to understand how to work as a unit is extremely important. Understanding the importance of being a part of the ensemble, being part of the team, is important. And then understanding who you are as an artist and as a star is also important. So there are so many roles that you have to understand how to play, how to put your... Once you're put in the spotlight, how to take ownership of that and then how to understand how to be a part of the bigger vision.

Menendez: Jessica, I do follow you on social media and I love watching you dance. I also love watching you develop choreography and I wonder if you could take us through your process, from inspiration to execution of how you put a piece together.

Castro: So to be really honest with you, I've always been asked, "Jess, do you want to be a choreographer?" And I would always say, "No."

Menendez: Even though back in Hartford, Connecticut, you were in your own living room, putting together choreography to Like A Prayer.

Castro: But it's like, I had so much respect for the title, choreographer, that now when I think about, I allowed that fear of not being good enough to hold me back because, again, I've worked with so many amazing choreographers and it's that imposter syndrome that kind of peeks through at times, where you're like, "There's no way I could ever be as good as that person or that person."

So really my journey as a choreographer started when I was asked to be an assistant and then an associate because in order to see how other people work and how other artists create, being an artist is saying, "You know what? This is my heart and I'm going to put it out there and if you want to stomp on it, that's okay, and if you want to join me, that's okay as well."

It's being in a place where you're so vulnerable, you literally open yourself up to whatever it is that's going to come back to you and being okay with it. My process is very simple. Whenever I'm asked to choreograph, whether it's a film or a music video or a live performance, I have to ask myself, "All right, what's the story? What's the beginning, what's the middle and what's the end? And how do I tell this story through movement?"

I'm not one to create movement for movement's sake, it has to be rooted in something for me. And then once I develop what this story is, literally writing out what this story is to me, how I see it, I then listen to the music over a thousand times. I listen to everything. I listen to the melody. I listen to the beats, under the beat, under the beat, under the beat.

And I form these pictures in my head. First verse, I see this. Second verse, I see this. Or if it's a picture, maybe it's in a picture. It's a groove, maybe it's on a groove. Whatever it is that will carry me through. Once I have that, I start breaking up the choreography in sections and what I will do is once I start getting it up on its feet, I'll start with grooves, with just simple grooves. What is the music saying to me right now? Because the music never lies. The music will always dictate what the movement should be and then the moment that I feel it's right, I feel it. I feel it. I'm like, "Yeah, that's it. We're not changing it. That's it."

Menendez: Again though, it brings everything so full circle. I mean, it's the same as you being in that Broadway Dance Center class at 19, when anyone else could have said, "Your moment has passed." You just like... You knew. And in your life, you have to... When you know, you know, and you kind of have to trust your gut in those moments.

Castro: You do, and being an artist is a really scary thing. I always say it's like Russian roulette. It takes courage because there is no guarantee at the end of the day. 25, 26 years ago when I made that decision, it was very clear to me. However, there was an ignorance behind it because I didn't realize that you could actually make money doing this. And so for me, it started with the passion and this fire in me that kind of just said, "This is what I want to do." Did I know I would be able to make a living doing it? No.

So this was a risk. The arguments that I had with my mother, she just didn't understand. She was like, "You're so old, how are you going to make money?" And she was only saying that because of course, as any Puerto Rican mom, she just wanted to make sure that I was

going to be okay. She didn't understand the life of an artist. Honestly, neither did I. Everything I did was for the very first time.

But what I did know was that there was something in my spirit that literally was so strong that it led me and I was willing to take that risk and that's why I say, when you really do follow your dreams. And it's not necessarily in this realm, whether you're a singer actor, whatever it is when you really do decide to follow what it is that you are passionate about. It is risky because there are no guarantees. However, I'm a firm believer that if you work hard and you are consistent, that regardless of where the road may take you, it will take you exactly where you need to be.

There will be obstacles but as long as you're able to grow and learn from these obstacles, you'll get to where you need to be. And I also tell everyone to keep an open mind because sometimes we have this idea of how we're going to do it, when we're going to do it, and how it's going to end up, and that's never the case. That's literally never the case. Your only responsibility is to continue to harness your craft, whatever that is, and along the way you will be tested.

And so those who stand the test of time will be the ones that will relish in all of the work that they've put into it thus far.

Menendez: Jessica, you are so gifted and you are such a gift. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me.

Castro: Oh my God, thank you.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode.

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