



## How Justina Machado Became Undeniable

The star of *The Horror of Dolores Roach* shares the ways her childhood in Chicago prepared her for the ups and downs of Hollywood, how the decision to focus on what was within her control reshaped her career, and why she encourages everyone to go to therapy.

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**Alicia Menendez:** Justina Machado had been a working actress for 26 years with big roles on *Six Feet Under*, *ER* and *Queen of the South* when she came to terms with the fact that she might never jump to the next level. And then, of course, she did, running the lead role in the reboot of *One Day at a Time*. We talk about the decision Justina made that led to that inflection point, and her new role as the title character on *The Horror of Dolores Roach*. A comedy horror series about a woman returning from prison trying to build a new life only to end up with blood on her hand. Justina shares the well of pain that allows her to act from her gut, an undeniable fortitude that has made her a star.

**Menendez:** Justina, thank you so much for doing this.

**Justina Machado:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Menendez:** It seems to me in the retelling of your story that you moved to LA without a really clear plan of what it is you're going to do in LA. Tell me if I'm wrong. Tell me-

**Machado:** I moved to New York first.

**Menendez:** And what was it you thought New York was going to offer you?

**Machado:** I wanted to be a star. I wanted to be a Broadway star. I was single-minded when I was young, I just wanted to be a star.

**Menendez:** And did New York pan out for you?

**Machado:** It did, but then I got a job in LA. I got a pilot in Los Angeles, and then I never went back to New York City. I just kept working in LA.

**Menendez:** What was that pilot?

**Machado:** It was called *Second Noah*, and I was actually fired from the series. When it went to series, I got fired and it was my first big job and my first huge disappointment. But, because I came from such a tough background, you just keep going. That's what I'm grateful for, is the background that I have has helped me a lot in Hollywood, because it's not easy.

**Menendez:** You have what is in some ways a pretty unusual experience in Hollywood, which is that you have been, you're a working actor for a very long period of time for about 26 years, which like one, just that survival is incredible. And then, to also have been a working actress for 26 years before you finally get the opportunity to play the lead in a television show. What was fundamentally different when you got *One Day at a Time* about being the first person on the call sheet?

**Machado:** Well, before I got *One Day at a Time*, the show that I was on was *Queen of the South*, and I remember that I said to myself, I don't think it's ever going to happen. I don't think I'm ever

going to be the star of a show. I have to make peace with that, and I have to just do the best job, just be grateful and do the best job. And then, One Day at a Time came along.

Menendez: Did you say to yourself, this is not going to happen for me because about things you thought were true about you intrinsically or about the system that you were operating in?

Machado: Both. Both because of things I thought about myself. I started to think that I've aged out, what is there out there? And also, I never considered myself an unattractive girl. I always thought I was a pretty girl. Hollywood does a number on you, you know what I mean? All of a sudden you're like, oh, wait a second, what? What they find attractive. I know I don't fall under that. The Eva Longorias, the Roselyn Sánchezs both dear friends of mine that are gorgeous women. I don't fall under that category to Hollywood, so those things were in my mind. Because, I've been in this business for a long time and it's changed only because you can't say a lot of the stuff that used to be said, but the thinking is still there. They just can't say it out loud anymore. So, those things, the system, and because I felt like I'd aged out, what else could I possibly do?

What I can do is be a really great actress, because that's what I know I can do. I was like, let me just go there. Let's just be grateful for that. You're always going to be a working actress. I had to reconcile and say, maybe I won't get that starring role. That's not a bad thing. I'm a working actor, and I'm putting my art into the world, and I'm just going to do the best job I can possibly do. That was it. It took many years to get to that point, and I was already in my mid-forties when I got to that decision. So, it took a long time for me to reconcile. And once I did One Day at a Time came along, which is, isn't that the story we always hear? Once you let it go, something comes along. I'm just stubborn. It took me a whole long time to figure that out.

Menendez: Did you and Gloria Calderón Kellett have a relationship prior to One Day at a Time?

Machado: No. Everybody thinks we knew each other and we had this great relationship. I think we were waiting for each other, because really it was a come up for the both of us. A come up for her and a come up for me, One Day at a Time.

Menendez: And I'm glad to hear that that is what it was, because that is what I think it looks like to the rest of us in the sense that, since that time you have developed what seems to be a pretty symbiotic relationship, and those relationships are so rare and so special. And to see that type of creative relationship between two Latinas, I struggle to think of many other examples where that is true.

Machado: I agree. I remember the first readthrough of One Day at a Time, and everybody was so on point, even Rita Moreno, because every single one of us knew how incredibly special the show was, and how these opportunities don't come around for people like us, unfortunately enough. So, from the beginning, we were set up for success.

Menendez: I am most familiar as a viewer with your work in One Day at a Time, which means that I think of you as a very happy, chipper, cheerful, comedic actress. And so, it is wild to see you in The Horror of Dolores Roach, because there actually is a lot of humor, but it is dark. This is fundamentally different than the most recent thing that you have done. What is the life experience? What is the darkness that you are tapping into as you tell a story of a woman who has been incarcerated on drug charges and trying to resume her life outside?

Machado: Well, I grew up with a lot of people that had drug problems and that were incarcerated, so I know that experience. I had a few cousins that were very close that all died of heroin overdoses. And I think Dolores is a survivor, that's what I've been in most of my life, in survival mode. I can tap into that and the loneliness that she has, because sometimes

growing up in an environment where you're like, what? From a little girl I was like, what the hell is this? I was like, really, I was like, what world am I in? Even from a little girl. So, that kind of feeling lonely and also never really feeling a part of anything.

I think you hear this a lot from people that are artists and actors, how you kind of always felt a little different. I'm first generation. My family's from the mountains of Puerto Rico. There wasn't a lot of education in my family. They were incredible people, but just not very educated and they were making their way, and I just happened to be a part of that, making their way. So, I think all of that is easy for me to tap into, because it's my early life. Until I found the theater and a community, it was pretty much my early life.

Menendez: Among the people who struggled with addiction was your own dad. What does that look like, and how does it then change your relationship to independence, to being alone, to having men in your life when your biological dad is not a part of the story?

Machado: I never had a father, so I don't know what that's like, do you know what I mean? I had a stepfather, but I never called anybody dad. And I think that does bleed into your personal life when you get older. I was so angry at him for so long, and I think that I just got over the anger because everybody was like, oh, you have to forgive. And I get it, but I wasn't ready to. And I think I had a breakthrough a few months ago, really, that's how recent it was, that I totally forgave him. It's a process. It's a process to not be angry, to not feel resentful. So, that's probably why I could tap into Dolores Roach, you know what I mean? I can tap into the happiness, because I think inherently I am a happy person. But also, I understand that part. Rita Moreno used to always say, we're so much alike. She'd tell me, you and I have such a well of hurt right here. And I think that's where Rita and I really connected, because she didn't have an easy situation growing up either.

Menendez: What I want to make sure to underscore is, I interview successful Latinas. That's what this whole thing is about, ambitious, successful Latinas and lots of people have struggle, but that level of struggle growing up in a place where there's not a ton of opportunity, even with inside that context feeling as though there's instability because you're always moving around and there's not something that is set. And then, in spite of all of that, still being willing to just take a series of risks over and over and over again in the pursuit of what you want. The fact that you were able to do it, I think is a reminder to a girl who is listening now who thinks maybe this isn't for me because I don't come from a place where this happens for people, and I don't come from a family where this happens for people is the magic in people sharing their stories.

Machado: That's why I do it, because it's like you don't really want to let people into those things. But, I do say it because the times I have gone to schools to speak to kids in inner cities, they don't think anything can happen for them. The only thing I would say to somebody who comes from the same kind of background that I come from and who wants more and wants to achieve more, is to honestly, seriously get into therapy immediately. Because, I think that that was something that I should have done when I was in my 20s. But, I'm also Latina, and you know what that's like in our community, they don't believe in it at all. The old generation, the newer generation does.

Menendez: When I prepare for these interviews, I do a deep dive and I go look at, I was watching videos of you on Dancing with the Stars. It's bananas land. Because, I'm trying to piece together and riddle out who you are and how you became who you are. And there's a story that you tell about your quinceañera, that to me kind of crystallized like, oh, it was like, not is just this girl a survivor. That's a story I've heard before. But, this is a girl who's a

producer in the context of being a survivor. You wanted a quinceañera, you did not have the resources to have a quinceañera, and you marshaled everyone-

Machado: I did

Menendez: ... to your service.

Machado: I did. My mother, of course, said no, we didn't have the money for it. And I was like, I'm having a quinceañera. I called every family member and friends of the family. Really, it's kind of a sinvergüenza now that I think about it, and I asked them, would you buy the cake? Would you buy this? Would you be the madrina of this? Would you be the padrino of this? And then, my cousin Ralphie made my dress, and I produced the whole thing. And my cousin Willie paid for the hall, which by the way, the hall was underneath a motel where all the hookers were going up. So, we saw hookers up and down the stairs. It was so ghetto, but it didn't matter. I got my moment, but I did it all. I was like, I didn't want to listen to her. I was like, I don't care what you guys say. I want to quinceañera. I always loved that kind of stuff. So, there you go. I didn't know what the word was, but I love the theatrics of it. And I remember when we went in the priest was like, so what do you think the quinceañera is about? And I said, A party with a lot of gifts. And he was like, no. I was like, what, father? I was like, I swear to God, the priest was looking at me like... And I'm thinking, priest, what is a quinceañera anyway? What was he going to tell me? Really, a quinceañera is so crazy.

Menendez: I love this story though, because to me it captured--I know, sinvergüenza--but also you were just undeniable. And there is an element of like, you do just have to keep showing up over and over again for yourself, for your craft, for stupid self tape auditions, you just... But, that energy, once you lose that energy, the whole thing's gone. No one comes to people who want careers like you want and say, here it is. Here you go.

Machado: No, it doesn't happen. You have to keep going. You have to keep searching. Yes, you have to just keep moving forward, because truly everything is possible. And that is real, really. There's no reason from where I come from that this is happening to me except for the fact that I believed in myself and I had angels around me. Because, once you start believing in yourself and you ask whatever you believe in, God, the universe, whatever, or just in yourself, those things start to come to you. But, you just really have to believe in yourself. It doesn't matter what anybody says, because everyone's going to be in your head, and everyone's going to say something to you.

They're going to say, you're never going to make it. There's too many actors. There's too many this. It's not going to happen for you. You just cannot listen to all of the noise. And, of course, sometimes we do listen to it and we get caught up in it. But also, there was nothing else I could do, and I really mean that. So, either I was going to do this or I don't know what I was going to do. There was nothing else I could do, in my mind.

Menendez: In my full-on stalking of Justina Machado, I texted Gloria last night to be like, what do people not understand about Justina and how special she is? And she's like, I'll show you the thread that she sent, but the thing that jumped out at me was just one, that you are versatile, and two, that you act from your gut. And I wonder if there has ever been a time where your gut has failed you, or where you've not been able to tap into that like, I know exactly who I'm supposed to be and where I'm supposed to be in this moment in this scene?

Machado: For work or in life?

Menendez: For both.

Machado: It's never failed me in work, but in life it has. Do you know what I mean? In life, I second guess everything. In work, I don't second guess anything. And I think that's what's so freeing about when I work, because I just go for it. In real life I'm embarrassed about everything. In work, I'm not embarrassed about anything. I swear to God, in real life I'm watching a show and I'll be like, oh my God, I'm so embarrassed, and I got to walk out of the room, and I know that it's a television show. I know it's a movie, but I can't handle embarrassment in real life. But, as far as working, I'll make a fool out of myself. I'll go for it. I'll do whatever. So, it's very bizarre. I don't know why I lead two different lives, but I do.

Menendez: I love that. Justina, what did I miss about you, about this project, about what it is you want to do next?

Machado: I just want to say, I think this project is so interesting and important because first of all, our people love the whole horror genre. And the fact that we have comedy and horror, and also the fact that Dolores Roach is not a Latina story, a Latino story, it's just a story that happens to have two Latino leads, and Dolores Roach happens to be Latina. And I think that it enhances the story. And I love that it's not being marketed that way, the Latina Sweeney Todd or this or that, because that just puts us in boxes and all of a sudden people are like, well, I can't relate to that. I don't know what that is.

So, I think it's the first time I've ever done anything where my ethnicity has nothing to do with it. It just happens to be. So, that's really exciting. And also, that you never get to see a woman no matter what race, color, nationality, ethnicity play a part like this. Usually it goes to a White man. For so many reasons I think it's a really special show, and I love that people get to see a different side of me, how fun, how incredibly fun. I've had such a wild life that how fun that I get to bring that wildness to the screen.

Menendez: I love it. Justina, thank you so much for doing this.

Machado: You're welcome. Thank you, Alicia.

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](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise [@latinatolatina.com/shop](https://www.latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, 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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