



What In the Heights' Melissa Barrera Learned by Playing an Iconic Character

Roller coaster auditions left no room for self-doubt, and filming was magical. But the release was pushed back a year amid the pandemic. The whole process taught Melissa to cultivate patience, underscored the need to constantly reintroduce yourself, and confirmed why diving deep into her own heartbreak was the only way to play Vanessa on her own terms.

Alicia Menendez:

The first time I spoke with Melissa Barrera, she was getting a lot of buzz for her role in *Vida*, and I walked away from that interview certain that Melissa's star was only going to rise, and that one day I'd be able to say I had interviewed a mega talent when she was still sharing an apartment with a roommate and doing self-taped auditions in a corner. Well, that day has arrived sooner than I'd imagined. Melissa is now sparkling on the big screen as Vanessa in *In the Heights*, a role that has taken Melissa back to her musical theater roots and forced her to summon the confidence that is owed a legit triple threat.

Melissa, I am so excited to see you again!

Melissa Barrera: Oh my gosh, you remember that corner where I used to do self-tapes. Wow. Wow. That is crazy.

Menendez: It's two-and-a-half years.

Barrera: Two-and-a-half years? Wow. Okay. Okay.

Menendez: Blink of an eye, right?

Barrera: Blink of an eye. Legit.

Menendez: I loved *In the Heights*. I watched it two times back-to-back.

Barrera: You did? Oh, that makes me so happy.

Menendez: I cried sheets of tears. So fun. But let's start at the beginning. Tell me about your audition for the film.

Barrera: The first time that I auditioned for the movie, I had just booked *Vida*. I went back to Mexico City after shooting the pilot to get my visa stamped at the consulate and to close out my apartment in Mexico City, to pack all the stuff, because I was definitely now moving to L.A., and I got the self-tape request while I was in Mexico City, and I freaked out because I was like, "Who's gonna help me do this self-tape in English? Who's gonna help me play the piano for me?" So, I had a couple of my friends come and they helped me with the scenes, and then I had our orchestra director for when I did *Young Frankenstein* in Mexico helped me with the piano, and I must have sang *It Won't Be Long Now* like 70 times. Because I

just hated it. I hated the way I sounded. I hated everything about what I was doing. I was like, “This sucks! Let’s do it again.”

And my poor friend was like, “I can’t play anymore. This is a very difficult song to play.” I was like, “I know, I’m sorry, but I just need it one more time. One more time.” And then eventually-

Menendez: You’re like, “Channel your best Alex Lacamoire and just make it happen for me.”

Barrera: Yes. Just please. And then finally I was like, “Oh, whatever. I’ll just send something.” And I sent it and I felt horrible about it. I was like, “There’s no way that I’m getting this.” I was mad at myself too, because I didn’t feel that my voice was at a place where I could sing it. I hadn’t prepared myself. I hadn’t been singing in a while and my instrument was just not polished. So, I was mad. And then I was like, “This is never gonna happen to me ever again. I don’t want to ever have this feeling of an opportunity thrown away because I’m not prepared,” so I started taking regular voice lessons. I started doing my vocal warmups every day.

Then a year and like two months later, I get called back in to audition for *In the Heights* now in person in L.A. I went in and this time I was like, “I got this. I’ve been singing these songs for a year, and I have them in my body.” And I went in, and I remember Tiffany Little, the casting director, after I sang the songs, she was like, “Wow. You are so much better than that tape you sent last year.” And I was like, “Oh, thank God.” You know, this year actually was a gift. The delay of the preproduction, of getting the movie going, was actually great for me, because I got a chance to actually prepare and feel confident. And then after that audition, the callbacks just kind of came and I got switched between roles. They were like, “She looks too young to be Vanessa. Let’s put her in Nina, and I did the whole process as Nina up until the very end, where I went in, they tested me with a couple Bennys, and I saw Leslie there, and some other actresses, and then they let everyone go and they kept me there and I was like, “They forgot. They forgot that I’m out here.”

And I was like, “I don’t want to ask,” because if they tell me like, “Oh, you’re still here? Oh no, you can go,” I’m gonna be heartbroken because that means that they don’t even remember me, like completely unmemorable audition. So, I just sat there and then all of a sudden Bernie Telsey comes out and he’s like, “Hey, Melissa. They’re changing their minds again. Do you still remember the Vanessa material?” And I was like, “Yes. I do.” And he was like, “Okay, come on in.” And it was like not even a second to remember, not even a second to go over the scenes, not even a second to get nervous, so I went in, and I sang, and I think that’s why I booked it, because I wasn’t even thinking. I was just going with it.

Menendez: I’m getting emotional like a proud stage mom, because I remember the first time I spoke with you that you talked about how when you’d been beginning your career in Mexico and you were on that reality show, that there was just sort of endless critique of you. And that was part of the reality show, right? They wanted to create drama, and tension, and it shook your confidence for a very long time, and so I wonder if you can tell me how you get from that moment to this moment where you’re in the audition room and they’re like, “Hey, we’re switching everything up, do you know that song? Okay, great. Go.”

Barrera: I feel like I’ve lived a thousand lives thinking back to my reality show years. It really did affect me, and I think I still work on that. I still get nervous. Like when people ask me to sing, I’m like, “Oh, no.” I get stage fright because I don’t feel like I’m a singer. I feel like I’m

an actor who can sing. But that has never stopped me from going for something that I love or from going after a role, because even though I know that I'm not the best singer, I know that I can act the hell out of it. And I know that I can bring other things to the character that other people can't. I use that confidence and that side of me to kind of overpower my doubts and take risks and audition for things that maybe if I let my doubts take over, I wouldn't even try.

Menendez: Did you chem test with Anthony Ramos?

Barrera: Because they switched me to Vanessa in the last second, he had already read with all the other Vanessas, and he was gone. And I didn't get to read with him. So, I just did the scenes on my own, and after New Year's, I got a call from my team and they were like, "They want to fly you back out to New York because they want to see you with Anthony Ramos to see if you guys have chemistry and if you look good together and all that good stuff." And I was like, "Okay. Is anyone else going?" They're like, "It's just you. They've seen everyone else. So, basically this is yours to win or lose."

And I was lucky that Anthony and I got to connect before the audition on the day. We had lunch and it was like we had known each other from ages. That made me feel a little bit more relaxed in the audition and that made me feel like the history that Vanessa and Usnavi share, these two characters that grew up together, that know each other from school, that know everything about each other was there.

Usnavi de la Vega:

Hey. [Laughs]

Vanessa: What?

Usnavi: I'm sorry, you just, you look amazing.

Vanessa: Thanks.

Usnavi: My favorite color.

Vanessa: Well I have a date tonight, so.

Barrera: It was like a beautiful one-hour session with John where we just got to play and do the scenes over and over again, and I got to sing over and over again, and Lin was on FaceTime in Puerto Rico because he was doing Hamilton in Puerto Rico at that time, and it was just amazing. It was a beautiful day.

And I remember coming out and walking 40 blocks to where my Airbnb was in the cold of January New York, and I was just like, "Whatever happens, this experience of being in that room, working with those people, was worth it. It was worth the year-and-a-half of waiting, and uncertainty, and preparing. I got to be in that room and if it's not this, it'll be something else."

Menendez: Tell me where you were when you found out that you'd booked it.

Barrera: I was in my old apartment, the one that you were at. So, I went to New York, I did the chemistry read with Anthony on a Friday. I flew back to L.A. on the Saturday and when I got off the plane, I had like 10 missed calls from my team, and I was like, "This is either good news or bad news." And they were like, "They want to have one last call with you

tomorrow.” I was like, “Is this never going to end?” And he’s like, “Bernie Telsey’s going to call you on FaceTime tomorrow and you’re just gonna chat for a little bit and then that’s it, and then they’re gonna make a decision.”

And I was so nervous. I didn’t sleep that night. I went to the gym at like 7:00 AM, like sweating the stress out. I showered. I asked my manager to call me 15 times on FaceTime just to make sure that it worked. And then all of a sudden, my phone rings at exactly the time that it was supposed to ring at 2:00 PM sharp, and I click answer, and Lin pops up, and I freak out. I just froze because I was not expecting to see him and he’s like, “Hey! Who were you expecting?”

I was like, “Uh, not you.” I was speechless, and I couldn’t, and he’s like, “I get to do all the good calls, you’re playing Vanessa in *In the Heights*.” And I started crying immediately. It was like the hydrants were open and I literally just started weeping. And I was so embarrassed that I was crying. I was like, “I’m sorry. I swear, I’m so happy.” He’s like, “No, it’s okay. You’re gonna be amazing.” I was like, “Thank you.” I was just like thanking him for the opportunity and assuring him that I was gonna pour my heart and soul into the role, and thanking him for trusting me, and he’s like in his dressing room. He’s like, “Okay, I gotta go because I got a show.” And I was like, “Thank you so much.” And I hung up and I literally just sat in that chair for a good 20 minutes thinking, “This cannot be real.”

I get emotional now talking about it. It was crazy. And it was just a day that I was like, “This is what I’ve been waiting for my entire life.”

Menendez: Yeah. It is definitely one of those stars align moments.

Barrera: For sure.

Menendez: So, the role of Vanessa, originally originated on Broadway by Karen Olivo, I think anyone who has listened to the soundtrack has Karen’s voice burned on their brain. Which parts of your Vanessa did you take from her performance and what of yourself did you want to bring to the role?

Barrera: I think it’s inevitable to grab some inspiration of the character that she created. She created this character. She gave so much to it. So, I listened to the soundtrack so many times with her voice. It was a conscious decision for me to say, “I’m not gonna listen to that anymore because I don’t want to copy that. I want to do my own version of her.” I think the Vanessa that I did in the movie is very different to the one in the show because I also got an extended story. I got the gift of a little bit more of Vanessa. We get to know a little bit more. We get to know her dreams, her ambitions. We get to see her pain a lot more. And I used that.

And I know that this is something that John told me way back, because they had an idea of what they wanted Vanessa to be, and when I came in and I did something completely different, they were like, “Uh, I guess that could be Vanessa. Doesn’t have to be our idea of this already constructed character that has been done so many times. It can be something completely different.” I played much more to the heartbreak than the fierceness. Even though she is a fierce woman, there’s a lot of pain down there, and I think that’s what I wanted people to connect with. I wanted people to get to know her through her struggle.

Menendez: There are a lot of Latino actors who don't have the experience of getting to be on set with a lot of other Latinos, and so for them, that is a very novel experience, where you had the experience of being on *Vida*.

Barrera: I had the experience on *Vida*, but it was a relatively small show, so coming to shoot *In the Heights* in New York and showing up to a rehearsal where there's 150 Latinx dancers of all shapes and sizes, and backgrounds, and ages, and being a part of that, and feeling the energy in that room, the feeling is indescribable. It feels monumental. It feels historic. We all would constantly say, "Just look around. Look at where we are. It's insane that we get to do this. We're singing, and dancing, and having fun with each other, and waving our flags around, and knowing that we're gonna shoot this incredible movie, this gigantic movie, and the world is gonna see it, and the world is gonna see us celebrate our people." It was one of the most beautiful feelings ever.

Menendez: Quiara always talks about how important it is for us to be able to celebrate our joy, to have portrayals of our joy in as much as there are portrayals of our struggle, and for so long it has been weighted in one direction. I as a musical theater nerd have a technical question for you, which is were you going into studio, recording all of the songs, and then lip syncing them on set?

Barrera: We went into the studio. We did pre-records because we needed to have a guide during the shoot. But we were always mic'd, and we were always singing because when you go into the studio and you do a certain performance, but once you're on set, once you have all the actors around you, once you have your clothes on, and the energy shifts, and you change the way that you deliver things because you're reacting to the scene that's happening. So, they never constricted us in that way of, "Oh, you recorded it and that's how you have to perform it." We always had the freedom of changing it.

Anthony and I sang all of *Champagne* live. They didn't touch it. And it was amazing, honestly. It was very theatrical.

Menendez: The first time we spoke, we talked about how you had built this career in Mexico and one of the challenges of coming to the States was that no one in the United States was familiar with your body of work from Mexico. And so, I wonder, did *Vida* help you close that gap?

Barrera: I think it did obviously open a lot of doors for me, especially within the Latinx community, because a lot of Latino or Latina producers and execs knew about *Vida*. But a lot of other people didn't and still don't. But, I mean, still to this day, I'm still knocking on doors, and introducing myself to people, and telling them about what I've done, because not everyone knows.

Menendez: I just can't believe that this process has been going on since 2018. You finally get the role. You finally film. And then we end up in a pandemic and the entire film has to be pushed back a year.

Barrera: Listen. Listen. Because this has probably felt like the longest wait ever. And selfishly, I'm like, "I've been waiting for a project like this my entire life." And then in March of 2020 last year, when John was like, "Hey, guys. We're gonna push a year." I was like, "Are you kidding me?" Because weirdly in my brain, I'm like, "As soon as the movie comes out, doors will open, and I'll be able to work more." That's what I thought, you know, and I was like, "I cannot wait to get started." But now I'm like, "This was so perfect." There couldn't have been a better time for a movie to come out. Right when people need a movie that's

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all about joy, and celebration, and singing, and dancing, and community, and being like crowded dancing in a club together, or out on the streets together, hugging each other, like that's exactly what we need.

Menendez: I think back on the last two-and-a-half years. So much has transpired for you. I mean, you got married.

Barrera: Yep.

Menendez: Vida wrapped. You filmed *In the Heights*. It is about to be released. How is who you are today different than the woman I met two-and-a-half years ago?

Barrera: I think I'm much more in tune with myself. I know myself a lot better. I know the kinds of projects that I want to do. I am starting to produce because I understand that as an actor, sometimes you're just waiting for opportunities to come your way, and as a producer, I have the ability to create opportunities not just for me, but for more people. I feel like I'm a grownup. I feel like I'm much more sure of the direction that I want my career to go on.

Menendez: The last time I saw you, you were wearing a ringer t-shirt with three burgers on it, so I feel like if only sartorially, you have grown up.

Barrera: Oh my God. I still totally have that shirt, by the way. I still own it and I will wear it, so that... Maybe let's not say that I've evolved in that fashion sense a lot.

Menendez: Melissa, what did I miss?

Barrera: I'm excited. I'm excited about life right now. I feel so blessed and grateful to be living this moment and to be able to share it with people that I love and with the community. And I don't know, I feel like I'm just getting started. I probably told you this exact same thing two-and-a-half years ago. I was like, "I'm just getting started."

Menendez: Yeah. It's just it's also though my sort of entire way of being, which is I will just spend my life waiting for my life to begin.

Barrera: Yeah. Yeah.

Menendez: Convinced that there is more.

Barrera: Convinced that there's much more that I want to do. And every time that I do something, I'm like, "Okay, what's next? What's the next challenge? What's the next way that I can stretch myself, that I can grow as an artist and as a person?" That's what keeps me inspired. That's what keeps me going, knowing that there's much more exciting things ahead. You know, in the movie, in *In the Heights*, Usnavi says, "Best days of my life." And he refers to his past. He refers to his childhood. And for me, I'm like, "Best days of my life, I haven't even... I don't even know when they're coming yet." But it's important to also say that I am enjoying my life right now.

It's not like, "Oh, I'm just waiting for something better." I always think that life is only gonna get better but I'm fully, fully thriving right now and I'm fully enjoying every second and absorbing every second of the anticipation, of the secret that we have, this movie that we made two years ago that belongs to us still, but then on June 11th, it'll belong to the world, and then it's on to the next.

Menendez: Melissa, I can't wait to see you in two-and-a-half years.

Barrera: I'm so excited for two-and-a-half years. Oh my gosh! I cannot wait. I think it's gonna fly by.

Menendez: That's awesome.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. 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 Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, keep sliding into our DMs on Instagram, and tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe and follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now, and know that every time you share the podcast or leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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