



How Melissa Fumero Learned That She Was Funny

The star of Netflix's *Blockbuster* and *Brooklyn-99* once doubted that she was built for comedy. Melissa shares how she grew her confidence, the experience that taught her that ease can lead to success, and the tradeoffs required to have a big career and a happy family.

Alicia Menendez: Melissa Fumero decided early that she wanted to be a performer. And at first it seemed like success was all but guaranteed mission to NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, a role on the iconic soap opera, *One Life to Live*. But when it was time to make the next jump, that proved more challenging than Melissa anticipated. Until a fateful audition for a sitcom opposite Andy Samberg, a role Melissa was convinced she would never get until she did. Melissa's portrayal of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s Amy Santiago captured the hearts of viewers, myself included, who loved watching a Type A, teacher's pet Latina, mixed up in wild hijinks. We talk about life during *Nine-Nine*, including a surprise pregnancy, and life after, especially the choice to do another workplace sitcom, Netflix's *Blockbuster*. Full disclosure, I was nervous about this conversation because I am a Melissa Fumero stan, and she is every bit as warm and charming, and dare I say normal, as I hoped she would be.

Melissa, thank you so much for doing this.

Melissa Fumero: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: So I live in your birthplace. I live in West New York, New Jersey.

Fumero: Oh my God.

Menendez: I feel like the town needs to erect a sign to you.

Fumero: Thank you.

Menendez: You have this very special upbringing, because I can't tell you the number of Latinas I interview who were raised with the, "You become a lawyer, you become a doctor, there is no option C." And the number of them that wanted to pursue a life in the arts, or a creative life, and when they told their parents, their parents for reasons that I think you and I would both agree are really understandable, coming from a place of safety and security, say, "No, that's just not an option for you."

And you, somehow, have these parents who not only are like, they're not just saying, "Okay, you have our permission." They're really, they make it possible for you to do this.

Fumero: Yeah, it's really something that hit me late into adulthood, how extraordinary it was. My mother's side of the family does have a lot of artists, painters and sculptors and fine arts. I wonder if that was a little bit part of it, just being a little bit used to that world. And my parents loved to go to theater and so they would take me to see a Broadway show once a year. And once they saw I was so into it, they kept doing it. I think once they saw that I was getting really serious about it, they got scared.

When I was in college, there were a couple conversations with my dad where he was like, "Maybe you could minor in business."

And I was like, "Dad, there's literally no room in the schedule when you're a drama major. I'm in studio all day, every day. How?"

And he was like, "Okay, okay, okay." I think getting into NYU also, that was a turning point, and getting talent scholarships.

I think they were like, "Oh, maybe she is good? Maybe we don't just think she's good because she's our daughter." It was little by little, they got less scared. I think they just very much had that immigrant outlook, which is, now I realize, very rare of, "This is the reason we came here. This is the reason we gave everything up so that you could literally pursue your dreams and pursue your passions. As scary as they may be to us, that was the whole point."

Menendez: Well, it also helps you get your first job 10 minutes after taking your final exam.

Fumero: Oh, that helped a lot. Yeah. And they were adamant about me going to college, too. That was not an option. They were like, "No, you will go to college. Fine, if you want to go to college for drama, but you will go to college." And I booked my first job pretty much on my last day of college, so that helped a lot.

Menendez: To be that young and to be on a show that is beloved as *One Life to Live*. What was it like to then watch yourself back?

Fumero: Oh, awful. The hardest thing about working on a soap opera is the format of that particular genre is that you do a lot, a lot of pages, a lot, a lot of scenes in one day. Everything is one or two takes. So if you don't nail it, they just kind of move on.

Menendez: Explains a lot.

Fumero: Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. So there were a lot of days where I would cry on my walk home feeling like I just did the worst acting ever and it's going to be on television. And that to me was the hardest part about that job.

Menendez: I think sometimes your career gets flattened into, you were on this major soap and then you were on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, but there's actually space between those two things. What did it require of you to get yourself into a position where people could start to see you as a comedic actress?

Fumero: There was six years in between those two big jobs. I was getting a lot of comedy auditions and a lot of callbacks, but I wasn't booking. And so I felt like there was a disconnect. And so I did have to go seek out some more guidance, try to hone my skills, try to figure out, for me, it was figuring out in the beginning, where am I funny and in what kind of characters am I funny? What's my wheelhouse? Just to start there.

I did a session at Groundlings. I found a comedy coach. I think because I was coming from a drama background, I also tended to play things a little too small sometimes. And so it was learning how to just go big and have them pull you back. There was one job, *Important Things with Demetri Martin*, I booked a guest star on that. And Beth McCarthy-Miller was a producer on that show, and she came up to me while we were shooting and she was like, "You're really funny and you have a very natural comedic timing." And she was like, "You should do this. This should be your focus."

I was like, "Oh." And sometimes it just takes someone-

Menendez: Seeing it in you.

Fumero: ... seeing it in you, and really pointing it out. And I think it was after that job that I started to direct more of my focus towards it. And then *Brooklyn* happened.

Menendez: As someone who personally has big Amy Santiago energy, like perfectionist, holds a little too tight onto things-

Fumero: Yes!

Menendez: ... I love that. Part of the success of your Brooklyn Nine-Nine audition is the fact that you weren't holding it so tight, that you didn't think you were going to get it, and that that allowed you to show up. I think there's a lesson there for all of us.

Fumero: A hundred percent. And I often think of that audition so much when I feel myself getting in my head with auditions or anything because yeah, I just got out of my own way. I showed up to that thing, and I had the most, "This is ridiculous. I can't even believe I'm here. There's no world in which I book this job. It's going to go to some standup comedian or just a bigger comedic name." Yeah, I just was so in the moment, I was so in what I like to call flow, just very present and listening, and my brain was having ideas. It was just all, but it was mostly just that I didn't psych myself out before I went into the room.

Menendez: No, but then you get the job and you psych yourself out.

Fumero: And then I totally psyched myself out. And then I spent the entire week of the pilot shoot almost having a panic attack every day.

Menendez: To me, Brooklyn sort of had a Miami Heat vibe to it, where it was everyone here is playing at an exceptional level and there is no weak link here. I imagine that just having the bar set so high just allowed you to continually lift that bar for yourself. I wonder what it took for you to level up in that experience?

Fumero: Yeah, it definitely took a while. I mean, I felt the whole first season I was just trying to keep up, which now I realize was a good thing, but I would just try things all the time. But it came out of an insecurity of, "I don't know what's funny, so I'm just going to try five different things. And I'm just going to trust that they know what's funny and they're going to pick the funniest one," but that's also how you shoot comedy. But I was like, "I don't know, I just don't want to get fired."

And then it really just took time to build my confidence and also my very generous and loving castmates being like, "Dude, you're funny. Stop." You just start with what you're good at, and then you just keep trying to build it. And that never stops. There's no, I mean, maybe Meryl Streep, but there's no masters of acting, in my opinion, you're just constantly evolving and getting better. It's a practice more than anything.

Menendez: Melissa, I think you had, did you have your first son March 2016? Is that right?

Fumero: Yeah.

Menendez: Am I remembering that? Okay. So you had your first son right around the time that I got pregnant with my first child. And I remember watching you and being like, "Okay, Melissa's on air. Melissa figured this out. This is figure outable." And so I love the fact that you actually did not plan this. This was a surprise. And then you were forced to figure it out.

Fumero: Yes.

Menendez: Because you were also the first one on that show to take the plunge. And then it felt, again, watching it outside, that all of a sudden everyone else was like, "Okay, I can get pregnant and not lose my job."

Fumero: Totally. Yes. And I, thank God, worked for the best people. One thing that helped also was so much of our crew and our producers were Parks and Rec folks. So they went through two pregnancies with Amy Poehler on that show. So wardrobe was like, "We got you, here's what we do. We do longer jackets, we do bigger pants." They put me at ease right

away. They were like, "As soon as something feels tight, you just let us know. We've got bigger shirts waiting."

And my bosses Dan Goor and Mike Schur were like, "Yeah, you're having a baby. That's so much bigger and more important than the comedy show we're making." So it was really great. And it's funny that you say that you were pregnant at that time and looking towards me, because right before I got pregnant, I read Amy Poehler's memoir and she gave birth on a Saturday that she was supposed to be doing Weekend Update and was calling Seth from the delivery room. It's like this crazy, incredible story.

So while I was shooting that season, especially at the very end when I was nine full months pregnant, I was like, "Amy Poehler worked on Saturday Night Live, literally up until the day that she gave birth. So you've got this girl."

Menendez: You have to know that it's possible.

Fumero: You just have to know that it's possible.

Menendez: I imagine that being on a show as iconic as Brooklyn Nine-Nine, that when it ends, you kind of want to sit with what you do next to make sure that what you do next is the right thing. And I also imagine that there is pressure from people who care about you to strike while the iron is hot, and that those exist as sort of counter tensions. And I wonder, which pulled you more firmly?

Fumero: I think doing something that felt right pulled me more. I think especially given the pandemic and everything that happened, and I had another baby during the pandemic, and then we shot our final season during the pandemic. It was all this craziness. I sort of felt like, no, no, no, I have time. It has to feel like the right thing and it has to be something that I really want to do and feel passionate about.

Menendez: I'm impressed by that. By the confidence.

Fumero: I mean, listen, there were definitely days where I was like, "Oh God!" It wasn't, I'm saying 75-80% of the time, I held pretty strong to my convictions, said no to a couple things and then would freak out about saying no for a week. So it wasn't like I wasn't standing like an oak tree in my, it was more like a, I don't know, something more flimsy.

Menendez: A palm tree. Something that sways.

Fumero: Yeah, like a palm tree. Yeah.

Menendez: It's a good homage to your cultural heritage as well. So how did you know that this was it? Did you read the script for Blockbuster? What sold you?

Fumero: I read it and I loved it. I loved the world. It made me laugh. I felt like I connected to Eliza so quickly. She just was one of those characters, after I read it, I was like, "I know how to play her. Yes, this will be challenging, but I know how to play her."

Menendez: I do think Eliza's a complex character in the way that I think a lot of us have that experience of thinking our life is going to be one thing and finding ourselves back at square one. Even thinking of you, the fact that it's like, yes, you got to go at NYU, you got to go to the dream school, but you had to live at home, and that I think we can all kind of hook into.

Fumero: Yeah, I agree. I loved her story and her history. It's just really relatable to me and interesting to see a woman who's already raised a kid and kind of already had this one huge chapter of her life and is starting over in a weird time in her life.

Menendez: Because you sort of are too.

Fumero: Yeah, because I sort of am too. And I think that is what I connected to right away. It did feel a little bit of post Brooklyn life.

Menendez: I want to ask you two things about your parents. One is you often tell this really beautiful story about getting into NYU and then this conversation that so many of us have had with our parents where they're like, "We can't afford it, but we're going to figure out how we afford it." And I wonder, now that you have had so much success, what your relationship to them and to that moment is? When your parents step out for you in that way, what then you feel you owe to them or what the responsibility is once that success has been realized?

Fumero: Yeah, I mean, I'm always fighting with my dad because I want to pay for things for them. You do feel a huge sense of obligation. I felt, not pressure, but I wanted to make sure I paid off my student loans and that I was always really good with my money, and that I was always saving and conscious. And I think because, yeah, they made this huge sacrifice. I mean, they emptied their savings and helped me take out loans to pay for college. And my dad is just very also traditional that way. I remember after he insisted on paying for our wedding as well, which was another, I was working at the time. I was like, "I can," he paid for the venue and we paid for everything else was the compromise we finally came to after so much arguing.

And then after the wedding, my husband wanted to give him all the money we got his gifts and it was the one and only time my husband got scared by my dad. He was like, I saw, they were outside. I wasn't even there for the conversation. It was like I watched it through a window and my dad is 6'1. He has a very booming voice. My friend once said, "He kind of sounds like a Cuban Count Chocula," and I kind of saw my husband start to shrink as they're a few minutes into the conversation.

I was like, "Oh yeah, it's not going his way."

And my husband just walked in. He was like, "All those stories that you told of your dad and how scary he could get when he yelled that I never believed, I now believe."

Menendez: I also love that you always refer to your parents as being sort of high school sweethearts who are still so in love. But I hate to break it to you, you've also been with your husband for forever.

Fumero: I know.

Menendez: I wonder how you two have navigated the fact that you have two big careers happening in tandem?

Fumero: We joke that we feel like we have really big guardian angels because our careers have ebbed and flowed in this really yin and yang way when one of us has been extremely busy, the other one's been not as much. There's always these little gifts we kind of get with time and availability. It's gotten much more complicated now with kids. So when I, we shot Blockbuster in Vancouver and my husband stayed in LA with the kids, so he had to pass on out of town work for those two months. And that's a new thing for us. But we have kids now and it is what it is. You just kind of-

Menendez: It is if you want to raise your kids.

Fumero: It is what if you want to raise your kids. Yeah. Yeah. And we've talked about, we've established sort of lengths of time that we can do, two months felt doable to do that.

Menendez: It just requires, I think, more juggling than people realize, and having to say... Sometimes it not being your moment and you being the one who has to say no to things.

Fumero: Yeah, and I think that we've both had up moments, we've both had really down moments, and so we're both very understanding of whatever the other person's going through. I think the last couple years with my career kind of going up another notch on the ladder

has been a new element for us that we're both experiencing together. And I think we also, we just see it very much as a team thing. We see our careers as like this is our small business. And so any win is good for the business, especially now that we have kids. But yeah, it's a lot of juggling. It's a lot of juggling.

Menendez: I like that though, a team business. Melissa, thank you so much for doing this.

Fumero: Yeah, thanks for having me.

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. Kojin Tashiro mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. Remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

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