



Why Olga Merediz Is Ready to Let It All Hang Out

She was a working actress for more than 20 years before her portrayal of Abuela Claudia in *In the Heights* on Broadway catapulted her to new levels of success. Now, with the *In the Heights*' film adaptation under her belt, and a role on the new Netflix sitcom *Blockbuster*, Olga has more opportunities than she ever dreamed of... at exactly the moment when she is considering doing less. Olga opens up about her complicated relationship with her own mother, the power of aging, and the necessity of telling her own stories.

- Alicia Menendez: I have been obsessed with Olga Merediz since I watched her perform the role of Abuela Claudia and *In the Heights* on Broadway, and then in the film adaptation. I also recognized her voice immediately as Alma Madrigal in *Encanto*. And I am so excited to see her shine as Connie in *Blockbuster* on Netflix.
- What I did not realize, what I could not have anticipated as we sat down for this conversation, is that we're catching Olga at an inflection point, where as a workaholic who is arguably at the heights of her career, she's now wondering what it all means and where she goes from here.
- Olga, thank you so much for doing this.
- Olga Merediz: I'm so delighted to be here.
- Menendez: I'm especially excited, Olga, because the last time you and I were together, we were in a room doing an interview for *In the Heights*, and I asked you a question. You gave me such a beautiful, profound answer that I remember being in that room and being like, "No, no, no, no, no, no. This is not right for cable. You and I need to sit down and have an entire conversation about this." Do you remember that exchange?
- Merediz: I can't remember it, no. What was it?
- Menendez: Okay. I asked you what preparing for the role of Abuela Claudia, a role you originated, what it had taught you about your own mother. And you actually have a really complicated relationship to your own mother, complicated enough for you to produce an entire documentary about. I want to start there, which I know is kind of diving in at the deep end of the pool, but I feel like you and I can do that.
- Merediz: Absolutely. Let's do it.
- Menendez: Which is, your mom, like a lot of moms, is complicated.
- Merediz: Yes. Well, my mom and I were not very close, but I'm so glad that she lived so long. She died at almost 97 years old so I was able to ... I became close to her basically her last years of life, we really bonded. And it was really me putting myself in her shoes, in the shoes of a woman that had left her homeland, left her friends, left her family, left everything, with this family with three kids. And she had a PhD from the University of Havana, and she had to start from scratch. And so what I did is I developed compassion for my mother.
- Menendez: You were five when you left Cuba, is that right?
- Merediz: Right.

Menendez: So same age as my Aunt Cacha. And it is a tender age because you are old enough to be developing memory, but you're not quite old enough to be keyed in on everything that's happening. How much did you understand at the age of five about that departure?

Merediz: Alicia, it was so traumatic for me that ... You know when something's very traumatic, you just kind of go rrrrp.

Menendez: Yes.

Merediz: And you just lose that memory. That whole leaving Cuba is such a mishmash in my head. That's how traumatic it was for me, imagine my mother. So it was important for me to start piecing it together for myself because it's part of who I am. And so that's why I did this documentary and that's why I wrote this pilot, just to piece it together for myself to find out who I am.

Menendez: To add another element to your story, where it is a little bit different from the story we're accustomed to, is that you are ultimately raised in Puerto Rico, which then adds a complicated cultural layer onto your identity.

Merediz: Well, yes. We escaped through the island of Jamaica. We told everybody we'd be right back. We're just going for a few days, wink, wink. Of course we were leaving for good. And then we found our way to Florida, and then my father found a job in Puerto Rico. And so we went back to Puerto Rico, which was another trauma for me because I had just gotten used to Miami. And it was like, "Oh, okay, this is not bad. I like it here. I like this school." And then we're uprooted again, so that was really hard for me.

Menendez: I wanted to set that personal groundwork to then ask a question about your professional trajectory, which is that you got a mom who's double PhD, you grew up in a family that has sacrificed a lot just to get to a place of safety, of security, of freedom. And then you choose a life in the arts, which is never totally secure. And I wonder if that is in any way a reaction to everything you have been through. Was the arts a point of resistance or was it something that there was support for?

Merediz: There was absolutely no support for. No. I was supposed to be ... Well, I was going to be a international representative, United Nations. I was going to do something like that, or of course teach, because my mother taught. And I got my teaching degree and I started student teaching and I hated it. Absolutely hated it. The kids, they didn't want to be there. It was like I couldn't get control of the classroom. And I was too nice or something and I didn't ... Whatever. It just didn't work.

And so on the side I was always singing and acting in some play, in some musical. I was always doing that on the side as a hobby. And then I did Man of La Mancha, I remember it, Tulane Summer Lyric, I was in New Orleans after college. And I did Aldonza in Man of La Mancha, and I said, "You know what? I have to give myself a chance. I need to figure out if this is going to be my career."

And so that propelled me to come to the Northeast, and it happened really, really fast for me. It was like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. I did a play the first two weeks in New York. I hadn't even moved there completely. It was one of the leading roles in a musical off Broadway that was going to Broadway. And it just, that's it. I got an agent, everybody was sending ... I started doing voiceovers. It happened really quickly. That was my sign that I was in the right field.

Nobody in my family was doing this, but my mother and her sisters were very talented singers. So they could have done this, but that generation, if you were a singer or an actress, you were equivalent to being a prostitute or something in that generation. So they

didn't understand it, but eventually they said, "Well, I guess she's going to be in this field so we'll come see her in her plays." And that's what happened.

Menendez: I want you to take me back to the first time you hear about, you get pitched, on In the Heights.

Merediz: Well, yeah. I mean, and Lin-Manuel Miranda knows the story. He always looks at me when I tell the story. I don't know if he likes it or he hates it, but I've told it so many times. Basically they approached me and they sent me the demo and the music and I told my reps, I said, "I don't know about this musical. It's a bunch of kids. They're rapping. It's a rap musical, on Broadway? I mean, come on, that's not going to go." But I said, "But you know what? It's got a lot of heart. Okay, so I'll do this workshop, but I'm telling you, this is not going to go." And I do the movie. It's surreal. I can't believe I'm in the movie, because usually theater actors do their part in the film. And had I said no to the workshop, who knows where I'd be.

Menendez: Well, here's the thing I want to underline here, Olga, which is, there's an initial resistance to doing the show because you're like, "This is a bunch of kid rapping. It's never going to fly." But then there's also, what I think is really interesting, I think there's something for all of us here, which is, even if you're not an actor, which is they come to you and they say, "We really want you to audition for Claudia," and you don't want to. You're happy in the role you're in, there's resistance on your part. You're like, "I'll do it to show you it's a terrible idea," but then you actually nail it.

Merediz: Yeah. I think it came from Quiara, the writer Quiara Alegría, who said, "Let's give Olga a try." Because they had auditioned so many older ladies, everywhere. In LA, New York, Miami. That song is a very difficult song, technically, vocally, emotionally, breath wise. [Clip of Olga singing on Broadway] So they wanted me to audition for Abuela Claudia, and I said ... I was insulted. I was thinking, "Oh, I don't want to play the old lady. I'm very happy playing the mom."

And then I was really afraid. I was afraid that I was not going to do it justice, that it wasn't going to be authentic. And that it was maybe going to come out as a caricature, that I wasn't going to be able to do it. And I didn't want the responsibility, I was a little afraid. But I really had to prepare this audition for everybody. And I think it was my background, this background as a Cuban refugee, exile, immigrant, whatever. And I gave it the depth. I gave it the stories. I gave it the women in my family. I gave it that, coupled with a powerful voice. And they said, "That's it. We found our Abuela." And I was happy, but I was like, "Really?"

Menendez: I've always felt, when I've heard you tell this story, that part of the subtext of that story ... Listen, I'm in television news, you're an entertainment. There is a real fear among women of getting older, being sent out to pasture once we get older. So no desire to speed that up, to be like, "Yes, let's have people think of me as a grandmother."

Merediz: Yeah, there is definitely that. And I had that. Now I have the opposite. I think maybe because I played Abuela Claudia and I was out there for everybody to see me as old, I had prosthetics on my face. I didn't have any glam makeup on or anything. I had a white wig. Now I feel like I just want to be authentic. You cannot beat aging, you just can't. I'm just giving myself ..., I have this series, Blockbuster, I'm ready to let everything hang out because it's just, it's futile. We're all heading in that direction. And how free, what a relief and a release to just accept yourself for who you are.

Menendez: I wonder what the commercial success of In the Heights, both as a stage production and as a film, layering onto that the success of Encanto, which everyone recognizes you as Alma Madrigal, the doors it opened for you. And also working with two auteurs, working

with Lin, working with Quiara, who really have called on so much of their own lives in their art, the way that has potentially changed your frame on your own career.

Merediz: I feel like now doors are opening for me, whereas before ... I don't know if it's my age, could be my age, and this business is very youth oriented. But now that I'm embracing who I am, I'm embracing my age, things are finally opening up for me, and I do have some better choices. The key is to do your own thing, your own work, to write your own story, kind of like what Quiara and Lin have done, and that's what I'm hoping to do. It was hard in the business when I started out. I always tell people, "Yes, I am definitely Latina," but I always just said, "I'm an actress. I'm an American. I'm a human being that happens to be Latina." I didn't say, "Well, let's see what Latina roles are available to me." I wanted to do everything, but not so much in the theater. In the theater you do get offered a wide range of roles. In TV and film I would get pigeonholed. And so that got very tiring. Except for the Law & Orders. The Law & Orders, I got to be a judge. That whole franchise is very open to everyone. But it's so funny because things are finally opening up to me now. I wish that those doors opened for me 20 years ago when I had the time, the energy, the everything. Now I'm in a different place in my life in general. I'm thinking about more balance in my life. Can I do my own projects? But I am very, very happy that doors are opening for other Latinas. A lot of Latinas have their own production companies and they're getting fantastic roles. And so I'm happy, I'm happy for my sisters, finally.

Menendez: I also like that you and I are having this conversation about your thinking about taking a different path in your career, when your career is in many ways at its apex.

Merediz: Yes, it is.

Menendez: I was reading this parenting thing, which I thought was really helpful, which is, your kid comes to you and they've had a bad day at their sport or ballet rehearsal and they say, "I want to quit". And you say, "You can quit, but if you're going to quit you have to quit on a good day. Can't quit on a hard day. Things are going to get hard. And that's not when we make our decisions. We make our decisions on the best days." And so in some ways I feel like there's a parallel here, which is if you are going to choose to walk away, you don't do it when there are no jobs, when it's all dried up, when nobody wants to employ you. It's like, no, everybody wants you right now. You're working on one of the most commercial projects you've ever worked on. You can now come to that decision to make a pivot from a place of power.

Merediz: That's right. That's right. I am working a lot, but I've always worked a lot. Yeah. My career is in a different place now for sure. And I am picking and choosing, but I'm coming from a very Cuban workaholic ... I'm searching for my place in my life, not just in my career, but in my life, where I never really asked that question before. I was always about the work. I'm always kind of levelheaded and just, I know anything can happen in this business. I've done a million pilots that never got made. It can't go to your head too much. You have to stay grounded, or that's how I feel.

Menendez: What I struggle with is the space between what you just said, which I identify with and believe, and then also, will I ever enjoy the things I have while I have them. Finding the space to be able to honor, this is the thing I fought for and this thing happened, and people are here to feed me. And in the back of my mind always, I'm like, "Don't get too comfortable. This could all go away at a moment's notice."

Merediz: Yeah, well, I definitely have that, but I also have survivor's guilt from just being Cuban. I can't shake that. It's hard for me to enjoy what I have because it feels like those poor people back home, they're just suffering.
I have family there that I'm still trying to get out. Me, with all this career and all, I'm doing paperwork to get people out of Cuba still. Can you believe it? That would give me such satisfaction to be able to accomplish that. It's not easy and it's almost impossible, but I'm going to try. I'm going to try.

Menendez: Olga, I feel like I have known you my entire life. You are so familiar to me. Let's talk about the new big show that you were doing, Blockbuster on Netflix.

Merediz: Thank God for Blockbuster and comedy. That's all I have to say. We need comedy.

Menendez: We need comedy. And I love the idea of comedy that celebrates the working class and is actually a window into working class life, because I feel like that is missing in media. And I wonder what you have learned about yourself, being part of a big TV show. It's a different cadence than what you're used to.

Merediz: Well, television is very fast. The faster, the better. And comedy's hard. But I feel like the saying of that comedy comes from pain, and I have plenty of that, so I can be really funny. This is right up my alley. It's hard work, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. I think people are going to love it. We need it. We need it with this world that we living in, everything that's happening. It's just going to make you forget your troubles.
And my mom had just passed away, we talked about her earlier. And so it was exactly what I needed to forget about the grieving that I was doing. And there's three Latinos in the show, Melissa Fumero, Tyler Alvarez, and myself. And it's great being part of a team when you depend on each other, it's very close. It's very much like a family.

Menendez: Olga, thank you so much for doing this.

Merediz: You're very welcome. My pleasure. Anytime, 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. Florence Barrau-Adams mixed this episode.
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