

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

RITA MORENO INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Rita Moreno
Actor

Interviewed by
Total Running Time: 50 minutes and 3 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America
Kunhardt Film Foundation

Rita Moreno
Actor

00:00:10:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about your upbringing. What are your first memories of your childhood?

RITA MORENO:

My first memories of my childhood take place in Puerto Rico and they're mostly sensory, they're rather lovely. The fragrances, it's a fragrant island. It's a beautiful little island filled with trade wind breezes. And I used to know, for reasons that I never quite understood, I used to know the names of all the plants in the rain forest El Yunque. And in order to show me off, my mother would take me to the forest with friends and say, "What's this?" And she'd break off a little stick of something and I'd say Plumeria or whatever. That's a lovely memory.

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RITA MORENO:

Another memory of Puerto Rico, because I left when I was rather young, is I was sent to a kind of preschool and we learned to sing one song in English which was really to the tune of happy birthday to you, which is, (singing) Good morning to you, good morning to you, good morning to teacher, good morning to you. And I remember nothing but the most wonderful happiness until we arrived in New York in the dead of winter.

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about the journey.

00:01:25:00

RITA MORENO:

The journey... There was a... We came to the United States by ship and we ran into a violent storm, which delayed us by many days, believe it or not. Probably because it was a very old ship and it couldn't withstand all of that tossing up and down. And it took us, I think, about five days, five days to get to New York city from Puerto Rico. And that was bad enough, but then we landed and it was freezing and the city seemed forbidding. It was all gray and concrete and I kept asking my mom, where's the bougainvillea? Where are the flowers? It was a very difficult beginning, actually. I didn't like it very much, I wasn't happy to be here. And as I grew a little older, specifically when I went to kindergarten here, I didn't know any English and I was treated rather badly by the other children because I couldn't speak English and because I came from another country, which is a very ancient story.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you have any idea why you'd come?

00:02:34:00

RITA MORENO:

Did I have any idea why I came? My mom... I knew that my mom told me that we were coming to have a better life and it sure as hell didn't seem so. It was anything but a better life for a very, very long time. She knew what she was talking about, but there was a huge cost. There was unhappiness, there was the bias that we both ran into, particularly myself, and, you know, being a child makes you very vulnerable. When people imply that you don't have much value, it doesn't take much to convince you of that. And when you're five years old and four years old and six years old, I really was shaped by what I experienced as a child. So it was not the happiest childhood.

INTERVIEWER:

It seems like when you're thinking about that period, there's two big parts of your life. Your mother is just this huge figure in your life and then, increasingly, dance, just a way of expressing yourself. Is that right?

RITA MORENO:

Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER:

Let's start with your mother. How would you describe your mother and what she meant to you?

00:03:48:00

RITA MORENO:

My mom was very young when she gave birth to me, she was I believe all of 17, maybe even 16. And she was adventurous beyond belief for that time. When she divorced my father in a Catholic island, Puerto Rico, it shocked the entire town where we lived. She left me with my father, Paco Alverio, and came to the United States by ship and worked as a seamstress, as many Hispanic women still do by the way, in a sweatshop. And by the time she had made enough money and learned enough English, she went back to Puerto Rico to retrieve me.

00:04:39:00

RITA MORENO:

Extraordinarily brave and courageous and spunky. She brought me back to the United States with the intention of giving myself and her a better life. She was quite pretty, actually as I look at her pictures now she kind of looks like, which is hilarious to me, a little bit like Chita Rivera's mother, not mine. She was more exotic looking than I am, by far. I think... it's funny to me because Chita Rivera and I are tied at the hip forever because of West Side Story. She did the play, I did the movie.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno and Her Mother

RITA MORENO:

She was, as I say in my play, Puerto Rican sexy. And in fact, I like to describe her this way. Her personality was a combination of cilantros and tomatoes and apple blossom cologne. And she was persistent. She never, ever gave up and I think it's where I learned how to hang on and pick myself up and dust myself off, as they

say, and just keep trying to go forward or keep moving, as she would say. She was a remarkable woman. She...I loved her dearly. I was very, very close to her but we had our problems.

INTERVIEWER:

And tell me about your father. Was he a big part of your life?

00:06:01:00

RITA MORENO:

My father remained in Puerto Rico after I came here and I didn't see him again until I was about 19 years old. He never tried to stay in touch, he never made any attempts. So I had no feelings of closeness to him, whatever. I didn't miss having him because I had him for such a short time in my life. And when I was about 19 or 20, he showed up at a theater where a number of us from MGM Studios were appearing to promote some film of MGM's. And he showed up with a brood and mewling and carrying on about my little girl. And I said to him, "Your little girl has been around for a very long time, even before she got into the movies." I didn't put it that well because I was just so flustered and upset and embarrassed because he was just making a scene backstage of this theater, where we were all appearing.

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RITA MORENO:

And I asked him for an address and I wrote him a letter, which it took me about six months to mail to let him know that I was very disappointed in him, that he treated my mother badly and I couldn't ever forget that. And this was hard to do, and that I wasn't interested in seeing him again. As I say, it took me six months to do it because I thought God's going to strike me dead for talking this way to my

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father. But he didn't feel like he was related in any way. I didn't know him, I barely remembered his face. It was only because he announced himself to someone backstage as my father that he was let into the stage area. And he obviously understood because he didn't try to get in touch with me again.

INTERVIEWER:

And you had a brother?

00:08:05:00

RITA MORENO:

And I had a brother whom I never saw again. And this was not deliberate on my part, he was my younger brother that my mother never asked to come to America, never saw to his coming back to America. And when I kept asking her about him, because I was close to him, his name was Francisco. She just kept saying, "He'll be coming, he'll be coming." And years and years and years went by and I never got to see my brother again, ever, ever again. I've tried since then, of course, to find him. And what's interesting to me is that he never tried to find me. I have a very strange family background, very bizarre family background because my mother had five husbands. And it wasn't because she was an immoral lady, it was because of the time.

00:09:03:00

RITA MORENO:

You didn't sleep around or have a physical relationship with men, you married them, and in fairness, I really have to explain that about her. But she was also a very immature young woman when she married, and I think her evolution stopped at a certain point in her life. She was very childlike in some ways and in some ways I became the parent. I was the wage earner and I didn't like that. I wanted a

mommy and she loved me. She loved me dearly but she wasn't equipped, let's put it that way. But a child doesn't understand that. I understand it now.

INTERVIEWER:

And then dance soon becomes a very important to you.

00:09:51:00

RITA MORENO:

Dance began to consume me. When I first came to the United States, a friend saw me bopping around in the apartment, a girlfriend of my mom's. She was a Spanish dancer, Irene Lopez. And she saw me dancing around, which I always used to do for grandpa in Puerto Rico, and she said, "Rosita I think could be a dancer. Why don't you let me take her to my dance teacher, Paco Cancino," who it turned out was Rita Hayworth's uncle, "And see what he says." And sure enough he said, "Yeah, she is material. This is good." So I started to take Spanish dance lessons from him, flamenco and classical Spanish dance. And I loved it— with castanets and heel work, which I was always very good at. I could still do it. It's not as easy, but I can still do it.

00:10:45:00

RITA MORENO:

So that gave me a lot of... it brought a lot of happiness because it made me feel useful. It made me feel that I could— I had something to contribute to my life and the world at large. And then I decided that I wanted to be a movie star and with all that that implied, that meant big Cadillacs and fur coats and fancy homes. That's what I thought of stardom at that time.

INTERVIEWER:

Are these the crazy dreams of a 13, 14 year old? Place me in your life at this point.

00:11:21:00

RITA MORENO:

At that point, when I decided I wanted to be a movie star, I would guess I was about 7, 8 years old, very, very young. I was doing little concerts for bar mitzvahs and things like that, as a miniature version of Carmen Miranda. My mother made the costumes with the fruit salad hats and I did loads of those. I did weddings where I'd get \$10, wow, even \$20 to perform. You know, these were weddings where they didn't have much money, they said, "Let's get a kid to perform for us," and I was the one. I was booked very heavily at the time.

INTERVIEWER:

And who were the movie stars? Who was your inspiration? Who were the pinups?

00:12:09:00

RITA MORENO:

The movie stars that I worshiped, more than anyone else, when she came around was Elizabeth Taylor, she was my idol. But that was a little later. Early on, there's nobody...I didn't have a role model. I was too young for Lupe Vélez, who wasn't exactly a great role model anyway or Dolores del Río, who was beautiful and all that, but I didn't even know who she was. There was nobody in this country that I could look up to. So I grew up really model-less until I finally decided for a new identity, which was Lana Turner. This big, huge movie star, blonde as could be, sexy pinup lady. She became my role model for want of a Latina somewhere.

INTERVIEWER:

And when we come to New York, what are your happiest childhood memories there? It sounds like it was tough, poor...

00:13:06:00

RITA MORENO:

I don't have a lot of happy memories of New York when I came to New York. And as I got older, it became worse really because the gangs were really forming at that time and I would really have to avoid— when I— On the way back from school to home, I would have to avoid those gangs by criss-crossing the streets every half block or so. Because these guys, these kids were really, really mean kids. And that's where I began to get called terrible names like spick and pierced ear and grease ball. And those names really remained in my soul forever and ever.

00:13:51:00

RITA MORENO:

And sometimes, even now, I'm about to be 80 years old for Pete's sake, those things can bring tears to my eyes. I guess there are some hurts that just will not go away, or I guess in a way, the little child in you never really goes away. And I think that the way you can measure your evolution as an adult is how you deal with that child inside of you, a defeatist child who says, "Ha ha, told you you couldn't accomplish that." I finally learned to say to that child, "Go to your room!" Which is a big step and here I am at this age, still dealing with that. And I am convinced now that she's not going away.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno

Cattle Town, 1952

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INTERVIEWER:

And growing up, what was your expectation of an adult life? I know you dreamt of Hollywood, you dreamt of stardom. But was there a sense of, “I’m going to get married” or “I can have a career, I can be independent?” What was the culture that you were growing up?

00:14:55:00

RITA MORENO:

One thing I knew for sure, with respect to goals and objectives, I never even thought about marriage. I'd seen marriages, I'd seen five of them and I was not happy about that. The other decision I made at the time was I was never going to marry a Latino man because they left you. The truth is that my mother left them, but I wasn't aware of that. So I had a very poor perception of Latino men. My objective in life was really to be successful in the movies. I wanted the movies. And I suppose I wanted the movies because that's what gave you world fame. Theater I didn't even think about because I didn't know anything about theater. I didn't attend my first play till I was about 21 and that was in California. I'd never been to a play, which is why it's so hard now to get Latino people to come to see my play because it's not in our culture. We don't do theater as a cultural thing.

INTERVIEWER:

When you get spotted, Hollywood, the break comes. Tell me about that.

00:16:03:00

RITA MORENO:

I was discovered by an MGM talent scout at a dance school recital and I'll never forget him. He's the one who sent me to Hollywood heaven. His name was Dudley Wilkinson, which I think is a swell name for a guardian angel. And the

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angel, Wilkinson, came backstage, gave my mother his card and MGM was the studio of my dreams, of any young child's dreams of a musical place where they made great musicals, that was MGM. And it was the home of Gene Kelly and Ann Miller. All the great dancers were at MGM.

00:16:43:00

RITA MORENO:

And he told my mother that it was too soon, at that point, to do anything about this MGM connection, but that he would let me know when it was time. And about six months later he called my mom and said, "L.B. Mayer's in town", that's Louis B. Mayer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, "And I'd like Rosita to meet him." And that's how it all started. And as I said before, Elizabeth Taylor was my icon so I tried very hard during those years to look like her. The hair, the eyebrows, –

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno

1954

RITA MORENO:

– the tiny waist, because I got a waist cincher to give me that hourglass shape that she had, feminine enhancements up here. And when I went to see Louis B. Mayer at his penthouse apartment at the Waldorf Astoria, the first thing he said was, "Why, she looks like a young Spanish Elizabeth Taylor." And of course my heart leapt up into my throat. And within... unbelievably, within 16, 15 minutes, he said, "How does a seven year contract sound to you, young lady?" I couldn't believe it. After all that work, all that hard work, this suddenly came to me. It came to me. And a few months later I was at MGM, standing on the MGM lot

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with my mom in Culver City. And there I was, ensconced at the studio of my dreams. It was... it was a dream come— There were no words for it, really. I was beyond crazed with happiness.

INTERVIEWER:

And how old were you at this point?

00:18:26:00

RITA MORENO:

The time I got to MGM, I was 17 years old. So I had to have a chaperone at that time until I was 18 and I smoked and she really frowned on that. She just said, "Put that away young lady." It was one of those prim ladies, you know, like you see in the movies with little pursed lips and wire rim glasses and very, very modest little outfit. I hated her. When I was 18, I was so thrilled to get rid of her. And I spent the first three years of my California life at MGM.

INTERVIEWER:

And tell me, what's the most vivid memory? I'd love for you to take me, whether it's first walking on the lot or your first scene in your first film. Just some moment that really still stands out, because it must be... You're 17, from Puerto Rico, from...

RITA MORENO:

Right. It's just the reach. The reach.

INTERVIEWER:

Even from your first plane ride.

00:19:30:00

RITA MORENO:

Yeah. Oh no, we went to New— We went to...my mom and I, went to California on the train because some terrible accidents had happened and MGM was protecting their new young charge, which made me feel terribly important. They don't want you to take a plane, they want you to take the train. "Oh, okay." And on the first day at MGM, I had already been assigned a movie. It was called *Toast of New Orleans* (1950). And then I was given a kind of screen test, which is kind of backwards. And the producer of that movie, the *Toast of New Orleans* with a hot tenor of the time Mario Lanza, which I was thrilled about too because my first film was to be a musical. The producer took me around the lot.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

MGM Studios

1943

RITA MORENO:

He put his arm around me and he said, 'Come on, kid. I'll show you around the MGM lot.' Can you imagine?

00:20:29:00

RITA MORENO:

The first person I met was Clark Gable. Clark Gable. He's the only one also who remembered me the next day, everyone else forgot. I go up to see my new friends, I don't know, Ann Miller, whomever. And I say, "Hi", and they say, "Hello." And Gable will just say, "Rosita, how are you?" Oh, wet my knickers. It was so exciting. And all I did was visit the sets. When I found out I could do that, I lived

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on all of the movie sets. I just would come in and shyly stand way in the back and watch all of these famous people that I'd seen all my life, being themselves, being their personas with the makeup people doing all this. You can't imagine what that's like for a child anywhere under any circumstances.

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RITA MORENO:

But this kid from the ghetto in the Bronx and Manhattan, Puerto Rican, whose name was still Rosita Delores Alverio. I had died and gone to movie heaven. It was thrilling. That part of my life was just... Truly, I don't think my feet ever touched the ground for three years. Did that give you a picture?

INTERVIEWER:

Perfect. And then? What happens, disillusionment or is it the grind, what?

00:21:57:00

RITA MORENO:

Then, with respect to my MGM career, three years into my contract I stopped doing movies for them, not by choice. And I was called in by the casting agent who said to me, "We are terminating your contract." And it was as though I had been abandoned again by all my fathers. Truly, because that's how I perceived men anyway and to me, Mr. Louis B. Mayer of MGM studios had become my father and my father was saying, "I don't want you anymore. I'm not interested. Bye. Good luck." And it took me months and months and months to get over that, that rejection. It was something too that I didn't feel free to share with my mother. I knew that she was heartbroken also and I didn't want to cry in front of her, so I was always going into a closet to cry or I would get in the car and drive away

somewhere and cry. And I just felt that I had to get over it on my own, which eventually I did. But oh, it took me years to get over that.

INTERVIEWER:

What's the next big break? The *Life Magazine*?

00:23:20:00

RITA MORENO:

The next big break that I had after MGM was the cover of *Life Magazine* in 1954, which came about in the craziest way. Because *Life Magazine* was doing a big, big spread on the new TV sitcom boom, where Desilu, particularly, was really making the four camera show a big deal. Doing a live show in front of real live people and then cutting all those pictures together to make a half hour situation comedy. And I was doing, in fact it was for Desilu, I had been offered the part of a girl who dances with Ray Bolger. And for those who were too young, Ray Bolger was the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). And Ray was going to do his own series, so I did a pilot with him and I danced with him. And the hilarious thing that I found out about him is that he was a dreadful dancer. He was known for his dancing, but actually he was known for his hoofing. There's a big chasm between the two. He could not dance and he kept stepping up my feet.

00:23:32:00

RITA MORENO:

Anyways, they were doing this spread, *Life Magazine*, on all these new things that were happening in Hollywood. And my picture came up quite frequently and the editors, someone in the office said, "Who's that girl?" Just like in the movies. And someone said, "I don't know. I don't even know her name." And they had to find out who I was and they said, "She looks interesting. Let's think of doing a story on

a young actress who's new and follow her around," that kind of thing. And they did, they took some test cover pictures and they liked those very much and they took some more. And we took some that would end up on the cover, if indeed it was decided that I was to be on the cover. And that's what happened. But I remember the very cynical fellow who was doing the story on me saying to me, his name was Philip Kaufman, he said—Eisenhower was president at the time, and he said, "Listen honey, if Eisenhower gets a cold or sniffles, you're off the cover."

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RITA MORENO:

And I thought wow, that's all it takes. But I landed on the cover in 1954 and Darryl Zanuck, the head of 20th Century Fox, saw the cover and literally said, because I found this out much later, "Who's that girl?" It's really just out of some bad movie. "Who's that girl? Can she speak English? Get me that girl." And who talks that way except in movies? And I was signed by Fox, really on the strength of that cover. Isn't it odd how things are done that way sometimes in this business? And I lasted there about four years. I did *The King and I* (1956) there, I did a movie called *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts* (1956), which was a send up of *Seven Year Itch* (1955) and did an imitation of Marilyn Monroe, that was quite funny.

INTERVIEWER:

And then let's step forward to *West Side Story* (1961). How did that come about?

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RITA MORENO:

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West Side Story came about in a very fortuitous way. I was doing *The King and I* and Jerome Robbins, the genius choreographer, was doing the staging for *The King and I*. He wasn't directing it, but he was doing all the moves. He did the wonderful ballet, This Small House of Uncle Thomas, the Uncle Tom story. And we worked together a lot, obviously. And at the end of the shoot he said to me, "I'm going to do a play next year, a musical called West Side Story, which is the story of Romeo and Juliet set in the west side. And I think you'd be a marvelous Maria, which would be Juliet." And he said, "I'd like you to audition for us. Would you be willing to do that?" And I said, "Oh, absolutely."

00:27:30:00

RITA MORENO:

And when the time came, I got cold feet. I had done too many movies where you can do it over and over again and you have a director right there. And my experiences from theater were cold and mean and nasty. And I was scared to death of auditioning to that dark auditorium with three faces, just looking at you. So I didn't go. And I saw the play a few years later and it was gorgeous. By the time the film came to be, Jerome Robbins was co-directing with Robert Wise. And the first name that came up was mine. And at that point I didn't look like a Maria anymore. He said, "I think we should try her out for Anita who sings America." Which was really a great thing because she's kind of a scene stealer, that part. And that's what I did, I auditioned.

INTERVIEWER:

But tell me about the—Let's do the experience and then coming out of it because it's huge. But the experience on that.

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RITA MORENO:

The experience on *West Side Story* was really amazing. Jerome Robbins was known for being kind of harsh with his people, with his dancers. And he would just as soon work you to death as not. I mean, he would have you do a step 50 times, maybe more, to the point where you just–

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno

West Side Story, 1961

RITA MORENO:

– couldn't even remember why he was doing this or what was wrong with the way you were doing this step in the first place. But it served me very well. He was a perfectionist, I hadn't danced for a very long time and even worse, I hadn't danced that kind of dance ever in my life, which is called jazz. Even though it doesn't look like people's idea of jazz, that's what it was. And he just absolutely tormented me and made me do things over and over and over and over till my feet were bleeding.

00:29:27:00

RITA MORENO:

But he got the best out of me and I will always, always be grateful for that. And the experience was extraordinary. As long as he was with us and directing us, he was a co-director on that film, everybody was really up to the mark and beyond what they ever thought they could accomplish as performers. When he left, it was very difficult because Bob Wise was a very mild and dear man, but he didn't have

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that fire. He didn't have that meanness, which could very often get the best out of people. So finally the film was over and I won an Oscar. And-

INTERVIEWER:

Did you know it was going to be big?

00:30:10:00

RITA MORENO:

Did I know it was going to be big? None of us had any idea that *West Side Story* was going to do what it has done to this date, this very date. It's a classic. And I realize now that I've been in a number of classics, *King and I* being one and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) being another. And no, we had no idea. And we are, to this day, absolutely amazed. Soon we're going to go to Grauman's Chinese Theater and we're going to get our feet, our shoes, into the cement. I can't believe that. I wish my mom were here to see that.

INTERVIEWER:

And what was it like? Was it Oscar night where it brought it home? Was it opening night and packed houses? What brought it home that this was mega?

00:30:54:00

RITA MORENO:

This is regarding the Oscar night.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno

The Academy Awards, 1962

RITA MORENO:

I was told by a friend that on Oscar night, everybody in the Hispanic ghetto had their sets on. It was summer, so all the windows were open. And she said that normally the ghetto, as I well know, is a very noisy place. And she said when the names were announced for the nominations, "So and so, so and so, Rita Moreno, so and so, so and so." She said the place got absolutely dead quiet. And when my name was called out as the winner of the Oscar, she said the place went up in smoke, the yelling out the window. "She did it! She did it! Ganó el Oscar! Ganó el Oscar!"

00:31:36:00

RITA MORENO:

And she said it was, she started to cry, a lot of people were crying. This is something I didn't know at the time. If only I had known that I had the Hispanic community behind me, it would've been so wonderful. It would've been an added plus to that evening. But it was... You know, everybody says this and it's absolutely true, that it's hard to fathom that experience. It takes months. You keep looking at the statuette and you keep looking at the plaque on it that says Rita Moreno, best featured actress, blah, blah. And it's very hard to absorb. You just keep thinking, it's not going to be there tomorrow morning. It's a dream. I'm going to wake up and it's gone. But it's not, it's here in my living room right now and it will be here forever. My daughter will inherit it. It was an amazing experience.

INTERVIEWER:

That's wonderful. And yet it seems that there's this undercurrent, maybe not even undercurrent, this current of frustration. The Conchita, the Handmaidens, just

reading old quotes from you, the Indian squaws, the Mexican dancers, just this constant...

00:32:50:00

RITA MORENO:

I was haunted by the roles I constantly was offered in movies for many, many years. I have played every nationality. For years, I didn't do one single role without an accent, which brings to mind my universal ethnic accent. Because half the time, I didn't know what an Indian girl, an American-Indian girl, how she would sound. I didn't know how an east Indian girl would sound. I played all of these ethnic roles, so I invented my own accent. The universal ethnic accent, which was a breakthrough in the history of cinema. It was sort of a very neutral quasi sort of, kind of accent.

00:33:33:00

RITA MORENO:

And as amusing as that is now, the fact is that I was stuck with all that. Whenever I didn't work for a while, maybe a couple of months perhaps or three months, more, I would be in such despair. And then when I'd finally get offered a job, I would leap at it and my agent would send the script to my home. And there it was, somebody else with an accent and very, very dark makeup. And I would despair all over again in a completely different way. It was really difficult. It was not just difficult, I think it was very damaging to my very frail feelings of self, anyway.

INTERVIEWER:

And with the Oscar, did that change?

00:34:20:00

RITA MORENO:

The roles I was offered after the Oscar were more of the same. Now I could speak without too much of an accent, but it had to be a gang girl in very bad gang movies. And I thought, I'm not going to do that anymore. So I showed them, I didn't do a movie for seven years, ha ha. And my first movie after those seven years was a film with Alan Arkin called *Popi* (1969), where he played a Puerto Rican and I played his girlfriend without an accent. Show business is crazy, really crazy. But that took seven years. And then I did a film with Marlon Brando and after that I started to do some films again, seven years. And during the seven years, I just did what I could. I did television guest spots and I did quite a bit of summer theater, which was my real acting school. I did Shakespeare, I did regional theater, I did musicals, *The Rose Tattoo*, all kinds of stuff. And that was my school.

INTERVIEWER:

But Hollywood, you just, for that period you didn't have that.

00:35:29:00

RITA MORENO:

For the period of seven years, there was no Hollywood. Whenever I'd get an offer, my agent would call me wherever I was, in Ohio or something doing *Damn Yankees* and he'd say, "Well, you know, it's the same kind of role." I'd say, "No. I will not do any more of those." And there was a real cost because I disappeared from the national scene. And that's why, by the way, a lot of people will do films that really are not very good, because they need to stay and they need to be present so that people will remember them.

INTERVIEWER:

Had Hollywood changed, do you think?

RITA MORENO:

Has Hollywood changed?

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah, in some ways?

00:36:10:00

RITA MORENO:

Oh yeah, Hollywood has changed to some extent. With respect to Latinos, the door is ajar, it's not open and you do have to push it. That's not my line, I love that line, it's Ricardo Montalban's. And we have some really terrific actors and actresses, but most people don't know who they are. I mean, we have Jimmy Smits and we have... Jimmy, for some reason, has been able to cross that boundary and so has Andy Garcia. The men more than the women. There aren't that many women who have gotten film attention, Hispanic women, for some reason that's harder. I was— been offered so many roles in the past of what I call the coffee pourer. The lady who pours Bustelo for her children or for her husband, but nothing that really meant a whole lot. And really the best roles I've gotten have been in television and not necessarily Hispanics. I have no objection to playing a Hispanic, I have every objection to playing a stereotype.

INTERVIEWER:

And do you think it's hard? I mean, it seems like Hollywood has a difficult relationship with women. It wants to make stars, it wants to make you starlets, it

brings them in as has happened to you, very young. But it doesn't really know how to nurture them or to treat them, especially after they get past their mid 20s.

00:37:44:00

RITA MORENO:

Hollywood doesn't nurture young actors anymore, they used to. When I joined MGM, I had to attend dancing class. They really, really took care of their kids. I had to go to singing class, at that time I'd never had a singing class in my whole life. I had to go to their— their acting teacher who was dreadful, it so happens, because she was married to a director who was under contract there so she got the job. Wow.

INTERVIEWER:

But I guess my point was that they don't really know what to do with a lot of women after a certain age. It's incredibly hard for them to get roles later and for Latino women, even more so.

00:38:30:00

RITA MORENO:

Hollywood does not know, still, what to do with women, but particularly mature women. If you're going to get a role in TV even, and they're the most egalitarian of all the disciplines, you're somebody's mother almost always. You will always be somebody's mother, unless you have a really big star reputation. I guess someone like Ellen Burstyn and a few people like that but very few. They don't know what to do with you, but they don't realize that they don't have to do anything, just give me that role, try me out, audition me. It's very hard to get in even to audition for something. They say "Oh, well that's not what we had in

mind." And you want to say, "Well give it a shot. What do you say? Let me come in and audition for you."

00:39:21:00

RITA MORENO:

Which is what I did with the series that I'm doing presently with Fran Drescher, the *Happily Divorced* sitcom. I auditioned like everybody else and that surprised them because they were expecting— they were auditioning lots of old ladies.

Well, it happens that I am an old lady, but I look good and I'm very energetic and I have a hip haircut and all that kind of stuff. And as one of the writers said to me, "They kept bringing in these old boobies."

INTERVIEWER:

You are at the height of your renown and the women's movement is taking off, are you aware of it or are you are totally absorbed in Hollywood and your career? I'm interested in what was happening in the mid '60s, *The Feminine Mystique* comes out by Betty Friedan and there's marches in New York, there's stuff in LA. Is that part of your consciousness at the time?

00:40:22:00

RITA MORENO:

At the time that I was still a young woman in Hollywood, *The Feminine Mystique* was a total mystery to me. You have to remember that I was raised in a certain way. You're raised to be a good girl, you're raised to please. This is very much the Catholic young woman upbringing. So I thought they were a bit wacky, that's really what I thought. I thought Betty Friedan was an embarrassment. Oh boy, did I have a lot to learn. And I began to get it, I think, when Gloria Steinem came into the picture, she's a remarkable woman, as was Betty Friedan, by the way, I just

didn't know it. And I became very interested and it would have been difficult for me at that time, though I was interested in the movement, to act on it because the way I was raised really kept getting in the way.

00:41:18:00

RITA MORENO:

I just couldn't imagine my speaking up and saying, "Well, that's bull," or "What do you think I am? How dare you treat me this way?" That was way beyond my ken at the time. I knew it, I knew I should have but I just couldn't do that. Took me a long, long time to evolve to a woman now who just yesterday addressed the Women's Conference with Nancy Pelosi and Congresswoman Jackie Speier and it's great. It's a real sisterhood and I love women, I think women are extraordinary creatures. I think they've, I don't think I know they've had a very hard time in life and they're very brave and bold and I just have nothing but the deepest admiration for women in this era.

INTERVIEWER:

And so what inspired you to find your voice then?

00:42:12:00

RITA MORENO:

I think what inspired me to get my voice had very little to do with the Women's Movement as it had to do with a deepening feeling of awakening with respect to my own value. My husband was, rather, the most loving man in the world and also a very controlling person. It's no accident that I married someone like that. But a really devoted family man, the best grandpa that ever happened. But I began to talk back to him at a certain point and he was taken aback. He'd say, "What? What did you just say?" It's almost a comedy in a way, but it was very hard for

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him. And it was even harder for me to do that because he was always far more cunning than I. I was really very, in that way, ingenuous, but that's really where it started. It started to work on me at home and from then on, and when I saw the effect it could have and that I could change things, it gave me an enormous feeling of self-satisfaction and power.

INTERVIEWER:

And were there any Hispanic women, you mentioned Gloria Steinem, but were there any Hispanic women that you could look to that inspired you?

00:43:45:00

RITA MORENO:

I wasn't aware of any Hispanic women that could inspire me, not at the time. You know, nowadays, there are some astonishing people and I'm sure there were then I just didn't know who they were, mostly because you never heard about them.

INTERVIEWER:

And what about... and you have a daughter. I mean, does she—Are there marked differences between the way she was brought up or you've brought her up to the way that you were brought up?

00:44:12:00

RITA MORENO:

There are very marked differences between the way I was brought up and my husband and I brought up my daughter, our daughter. First of all she had to be—

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno with Her Daughter and Husband

L.A. Dodgers Benefit, 1982

RITA MORENO:

—reassured constantly, that love was something you gave freely. That it wasn't conditional. Because the way my mom loved me had loads of conditions attached to it, many strings attached. If you're a good girl, I will love you. If you're not, I will not love you. And my daughter understands that she is respected and admired and I feel it's a privilege to have had a child, first of all, because I had her late in life. She was the most wanted baby in the whole world. And I really made a very big effort to make her understand that she was worth everything, that she had value and that her opinion mattered. And that's how she is now. She's a pretty terrific girl, people just fall in love with her. She's very bright and she's a good mommy to her children.

INTERVIEWER:

Wonderful. We've got a set, now, of questions that we're asking everyone and I want us to come to that now as we wrap up. So what's the most meaningful piece of advice that you've ever received?

00:45:30:00

RITA MORENO:

The most meaningful piece of advice was you have value, you have worth, time to start treating yourself as such. That went beyond me for a while. I kind of understood it, but it took me a very long time and some therapy, but I understand that now. I can say it with no embarrassment, I know that I have value. I know that I'm a good person, I know that I have talent and I'm not at all embarrassed to say it.

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno

Untamed, 1955

INTERVIEWER:

What's the piece of advice would you give to a young woman? And you can choose between building a career, your work life balance, relationship and marriage, or so ever, or pursuing your dreams. But what's the piece of advice that you would give to a young woman on one of those?

00:46:15:00

RITA MORENO:

The most important advice I've given to young women is to value themselves. It has, again, to do with everything with me, because I know how much I suffered in not understanding any of that. And I say, you have to learn to appreciate yourself and your talent before you can go anywhere in your life.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Rita Moreno

1954

INTERVIEWER:

You know what you wound up doing, but what did you want to be when you grew up? I mean is this...

00:46:39:00

RITA MORENO:

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What I wanted to be when I grew up was to be a movie star with all that that implies. The cars and the furs and, you know, all that other stuff, the blingy stuff. That's what being a star meant to me and I thought that I could use my talent to help me achieve that particular objective.

INTERVIEWER:

So what was your first paying job?

00:47:01:00

RITA MORENO:

My first paying job was a bar mitzvah. I worked the bar mitzvah circuit as a young girl playing a miniature version of Carmen Miranda. I did a lot of those. I did weddings, all kinds of things. And I think I got paid \$20 which was just fabulous.

INTERVIEWER:

And the accomplishment you're most proud of?

00:47:26:00

RITA MORENO:

My biggest accomplishment in life, I think, is still being here. I'm 80 and I'm working. I'm 80 and I'm working and I'm working quite a bit. I'm beginning to feel like this year's Betty White. I am thrilled to pieces to be active and still have the ability to be active.

INTERVIEWER:

And three adjectives that best describe you?

00:47:51:00

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RITA MORENO:

Three adjectives to describe me, well, I would certainly say saucy. I am saucy and I'm sassy, but that's about the same thing. And then I think I'm very genuine. I think I'm very in touch with myself, so genuine would be one of those. And the other one, what would be the other one? I can't think of another one. Saucy, genuine and rowdy. I am a rowdy Hispanic.

INTERVIEWER:

Lightning round. iPad or notepad?

RITA MORENO:

iPad.

INTERVIEWER:

Early bird or night owl?

RITA MORENO:

Night owl.

INTERVIEWER:

Spontaneous or methodical?

RITA MORENO:

Spontaneous.

INTERVIEWER:

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Diplomatic or direct?

RITA MORENO:

Diplomatic.

INTERVIEWER:

Type A or easygoing?

RITA MORENO:

Oh, easygoing.

INTERVIEWER:

High math score or higher verbal?

00:48:50:00

RITA MORENO:

Verbal.

INTERVIEWER:

Patient or impatient?

RITA MORENO:

Patient.

INTERVIEWER:

Prada or Gap?

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RITA MORENO:

Gap.

INTERVIEWER:

Prepare or cram?

RITA MORENO:

Prepare.

INTERVIEWER:

Domestically skilled or domestically challenged?

RITA MORENO:

Domestically skilled.

INTERVIEWER:

10 minutes early or 10 minutes late?

RITA MORENO:

10 minutes early.

INTERVIEWER:

Book smart, street smart?

RITA MORENO:

Street smart.

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INTERVIEWER:

You're fantastic.

RITA MORENO:

I am?

END TC: 00:49:22:00