

ACT ONE

(Curtain rises on Rita standing center, in silhouette. Sound of a ship's whistle as a picture of a ship comes up. Lights up)

You see that boat? That was our boat. The SS Cara Bobo. But do you know what Cara Bobo means in Spanish? Stupid Face. Yes, the name of the boat that we were about to board in June of 1936, the boat that would carry us away from Puerto Rico to our new life in America was called the SS Stupid Face. A boat with a name like that is not a good omen.

I was only five years old at the time but even I could sense it. As we walked up the rickety plank my little knees started to shake. (as Mom) "Rosita Dolores Alverio!" I knew my mother was serious because she addressed me by my full name. "Vamanos, hija". I can hear it in her voice. She's done with Puerto Rico. Done with the heat, done with the smell of other women on her no-good husband, done with not having enough money to buy even a lousy washboard to clean our clothes. We are leaving. Nos vamos.

(as Mom) "Un dia Rosita Dolores, el viaje toma solo un dia. One day. Veras. You'll see."

Okay, I thought, only one day on the SS Stupid Face. That's not so bad."

Of course, the best laid plans usually end up on the floor of God's very large editing room, and almost as soon as we took off we hit a violent storm that threw everyone into a state of collective panic. Now Latino people have many, many natural talents but one area in which we particularly excel is panicking. When it comes to panicking, we are the envy of the world. It's part of our worldview. We are profoundly passionate people.

Pathologically passionate. Everything in excess, nothing in moderation. Where other cultures believe in restraint and self-control, we believe in the principle of constant combustability. When in doubt, flip out.

And that group of Puerto Rican would-be immigrants who found themselves on that boat that day in 1936 in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean was no exception. When that storm hit.... (sound cue of a storm. Rita shrieks and panics) Ayyyyy! Madre de Dios! Etc.. (sound of huge wave crash).

We're all going to die! Right here, in the basement of the Stupid Face Cara Bobo! (thunder crack, boat creaks) In the same instant, everyone decides to move to the top deck, (She screams as more waves

crash, a railing on wheels slides out fast from the wings, Rita holds on for dear life)

One day, two days, three days! The storm rages on! (thunder) My mom and I find a little lounge area where we huddle against each other on these cold, sticky, leather seats.

I can't sleep, can't do anything except watch this one young woman with her tiny infant walking up and down the deck of the boat, up and down, singing and swaying (Rita watches the woman...the sound of the storm dies down...the railing and chair stop moving.) For five whole days I never hear that baby cry. Not once. Which makes me think the baby is probably not Puerto Rican.

When I finally doze off I dream about Puerto Rico. And that I'm running. Past my grandfather Justino's house and straight on through our village, past the beautiful young girls with flowers blooming in their long curly hair, past the old men in the cantina playing dominoes and banging on their ancient, upright pianos and the women gossiping on their way to the creek with their towers of laundry piled high on the top of their heads. I follow them to the big flat stones by the waters edge where I see them beating their clothes into cleanliness and laughing so loud that I think God must be able to hear them. Faster and faster I run, past our little town and into the heart

of the El Yunque rain forest. Sierra Palms and Bread Fruit Trees fly past me, and suddenly I can smell everything in the entire forest. Lily Ginger and Heliconia and Plumeria. The air so fragrant I swear I can see it. My younger brother Francisco is now there, smiling. “Don’t worry” I yell as I run past him. “We’ll come and get you once we get rich in Nueva York”. Finally a huge, brightly colored parrot flies up right in front of my face. Such a big, beautiful bird. It peers deep into my eyes and says, “Ay nina, what are you doing on this goddamned boat? You and your mami are gonna get yourselves killed.” Puerto Rican parrots are different from other parrots.

When I open my eyes it’s the morning of the sixth day of our voyage. Un milagro! The sea is calm and the sun is shining brightly. Suddenly the sky darkens and I look up to see this enormous green lady wearing some kind of crown on her head and holding out a huge, flaming ice cream cone. She shoots straight up from the middle of the ocean to the very top of the sky. “Mami, quien es esa Senora tan grande?” My mom tells me that the lady is a very special lady, that she is inviting everyone from around the world to come to America, to come and live here, to come and be citizens, of los Estados Unidos. “Especilamente people who are pobres,

cansados, sin hogar, y hambrientos”. Poor, tired, homeless and hungry. We are definitely overqualified! But when I look up at the big green lady’s face, all I can think is “oh my goodness, a lady is running this country.” (railing slides off)

When we get to New York we make a bee-line for the Bronx where we proceed to move into a four bedroom apartment. The only problem is that there are three other families living there as well. The hallways are lit with tiny light bulbs and the walls are all painted that dingy Off White color that with time and grime turns to Nasty Brown, which is the international color of all tenement apartments.

The good news is that we don’t stay in the four bedroom apartment for very long. The bad news is that our next apartment has only one room. I sleep in a tiny iron bed with my mom. The place is so small, even the cockroaches can’t move around. And these are New York cockroaches. You’d turn on the light and instead of seeing them scatter they’d all be standing up straight, just staring at you. “So, que quieres tu? Apaga la luz!”

We had to keep moving. When you’re that broke you move just to get the rent concession. Most of the time you just move across the street, and then a little

while later you move back again. It's like a poor people's version of alternate side of the street parking. But at least the new apartment would always be freshly painted and the walls weren't flaking.

When I started venturing outside it was to go to something called school. A big, scary place where millions of other kids knew everything I didn't know and absolutely nobody spoke Spanish. The only way my mother could get me to go was to drop me off and tell me she was going to buy me a packet of gum, and that "I'll be right back". She was very skilled at that kind of thing, my mother. I ran home from school almost every day. I got a lot of exercise because I never ran in a straight line...I had to criss-cross the street every half block to avoid the gangs of kids who owned the sidewalks. I couldn't get to our apartment building soon enough.

We were always on the top floor, which was hard on my asthma, but we had no choice because those apartments were always the cheapest. Every day I'd climb five flights of stairs, each landing filled with the smell of cooking from every poor part the world. cabbage, First floor: Boiled potatoes and Second floor: spicy yellow curry, Third floor: pierogies Fourth floor: moo shoo everything,

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and Fifth and finally: Arroz con Pollo. ...the building was literally one big melting pot.

(salsa music starts to play) One of the features of poverty? You live outside. Always. You eat, you play, you flirt, you fight... Sometimes you die right out there in the open. Because there is no room inside. Or it's too hot. Or too cold. Or your relatives are there. ALL the time. There is no such thing as privacy. Privacy is for rich people. And we're Puerto Ricans. The new kids on the block. Alla en el barrio. With everyone else.

(a stoop comes out from the wings...we hear the sounds of the street together with the salsa, over which Rita does the characters)

--(old Jewish lady on the stoop, fanning herself): Oy gevalt, if I wanted to live in hell I woulda stayed in Poland. Mendel! Throw me down a fan why don't ya! Mendel!

--(13 year old girl calling up to her Mom): Mommy, can I have fifteen cents for the movie. Pero es Judy Garland! Please, mommy! Plus, its Tuesday so we get a free dish!

--(white guy): Hey Garlic Mouth! Yeah you, I'm talkin' to you, you Greasball! What is this we got on the block now? a convention for greaseball Spics?

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--(little girl bouncing a ball to a rhyme in Spanish..a snippet of the Bridge Song)

--(Latina haggling with the produce man): Hey Mister, Jew call dis a tomato? You could not even feed this to your horse. Listen. Let me give you some advice. If jew wan to sell this thing, jew need to come up with a new name because dis is not a tomato. Mira, see? Even jour horse won't eat dis. What? No, no, jew don't tell me to go back. Dis is my country now. I am e-staying right here and growing my own tomatoes...pendejo!

--(bookie, seeing a beautiful woman on the street...he whistles) Oye Mami! You know why they call this the melting pot? Because you are melting my pot in that dress you are wearing! Whoo! (sirens) Mira, the cops! Largate!

(sirens get louder then softer as a taller step unit appears forming a fire escape that Rita climbs.) The only way to escape the street was the fire escape. I loved the fire escape. The fire escape at night. We had one of those old wooden radios shaped like a cathedral, you know? And I'd move it close to the window so I could hear the music outside. (music starts to play. Dream by Johnny Mercer) That

music! I let every note fill up my whole body. With my favorites, The Pied Pipers! I take my blanket and spread it over the steel rungs like it's a magic carpet. (she sings) And when I lay down and close my eyes, I can go anywhere. I can be anybody. (sings) I want so badly to be somebody. Somebody special. (she sings again) Suddenly, the starless sky was filled with every star in the universe.

(Before the song is completed, she is interrupted by her mother)

(as Mom) "Rosita Dolores, entre en este momento!" While I was dreaming my mother was scheming. She had two strategies for getting us out of the barrio. The first was to work night and day. Which we did. Embroidery. Cooking. The sweat shop. Together she and I we made paper flowers for Woolworth's for extra money. Anything. Her second strategy was to find a husband. Which she did. Then she found another one. Then another. Then another. And yet another. A Puerto Rican, a Cuban, a Mexican, and finally a couple of Americans, the last being a man who was undoubtedly a member of the John Birch society, which I regard as an entirely different ethnic category. My mother loved being married. She needed to be married. And once she decided you were marrying material?...

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(as Mom): “Hello handsome! Do you like Puerto Rican coffee? I make it beery good”. I am immediately dispatched to the local voodoo store to pick up “love” supplies. This always terrifies me. It smells like old dirt in there, and the woman behind the counter has a thick moustache and a glass eye that follows my every move as I make my way through the tall, narrow aisles. I can feel the shelves throbbing, alive with all manner of dead things. Big bloody chicken feathers, twisted tails of hardened newts and the skins of scaly snakes. (as the young Rita, pointing: “Excuse me, can I have some of those horse flies?” And I run straight home where my mother is preparing the altar.

I watch her make a love potion of 4 finely ground up flies and then, with the care of high priestess, stir them into the coffee grounds. (she chants) Later, I am standing in a corner of the room, in a state of shock and awe, watching my mother serve her fateful brew. Should I warn this man? Should I shout out something about the murderous concoction he is about to drink?

(to R) “Rosita! (she gestures her to go) “Fuera” (to the man) Bebe, Papi, bebe! Te gusta mi café?”
(flirtatious laugh)

The truth is, my mother didn’t need any dead flies to work her magic. Guys were smacked over her.

She was very pretty, Puerto Rican sexy with a personality that was a mixture of tomatoes and cilantro and apple blossom cologne. The men all thought she was a great catch... but they soon found out that it was hard to keep her caught. And once she decided to leave well... she never looked back. She couldn't. Keep Moving became her motto. Find someone to protect us from all that stuff that could send you into a panic. Keep Moving. Stay ahead. Even if it means you forget some things in the move. Like my brother, for one, still back in Puerto Rico. "Mami, Cuando viene Francisco ?" (as Mom) "Ay hija, pronto, pronto!" Soon...soon. I never saw my brother again. Ever again. Such was the price of my mothers' survival. And love for my mother was always a matter of survival.

I found a way to survive too. When I was 8 years old I fell in love with my Spanish dance teacher, Paco Cansino, (music. Spanish guitar) a fierce Spaniard with long sideburns and slicked back hair that he kept perfectly groomed, even under his Cordobes hat. He spoke with a Castilian accent (she does a little "Rosita, ven aca"...) that gave him an air of Spanish royalty.

To top it off, he was Margarita Cansio's uncle, Margarita Cansio who was now in Hollywood under

the alias of Rita Hayworth, which gave Paco an air of Hollywood royalty.

The man was all about “jesto”, that’s attitude with a capital A. (She strikes a pose like a matador)

Desire, anger, pride, danger...it was all there in the turn of his heel, the angle of his chin, the way he used his hands. Paco taught me the sevillanas, the national dance of Spain, with castanets and heel work (a stage hand enters and hands Rita some castanets. She puts them on). We worked and worked until finally, Paco thought I was ready. I put on a traditional Spanish dance costume and for the first time in my life I got to wear make-up. Lip stick and mascara and Mabelline rouge... Paco took me to a nightclub in a place called Greenwich Village. There was almost no light and the air was thick with cigars and perfume and whiskey... but I didn’t care, I was so excited.

Suddenly it was time. Paco led me onto a little raised platform and held out his arms. And then...

(music flourish, voice over) “Damas y Caballeros, ahora dirigida del gran Paco Cansino, aqui esta:

Rosita Alverio!”. (music breaks into the sevillana.

Rita performs a bit of one. Thunderous applause).

The applause was thunderous...(small applause) or

maybe it wasn’t. There may have only been thirty

drunks and my mother in that club but to my ears it

felt thunderous. I stood there beaming in the perfect

circle of that perfect spotlight, wrapped in the warmth and safety of its protective glow, with only one thought in my 6 year-old head: “Forget school, I want to do this for the rest of my life!”

My mother had less than no objection. She saw me up there prancing with Paco and she saw a way out of the barrio. Keep Moving! By age nine I was working the bar mitzvah circuit as a miniature version of Carmen Miranda. Remember Carmen Miranda? (a film clip of Carmen Miranda singing Tico Tico is shown). You see that fruit salad on the top of her head? My mom made one just like that for me.

But at the age of ten I make my first deal with the devil when I decide to trade in my pineapple headdress for a whole new identity: Betty Grable. (picture of Betty Grable appears). My new ideal! Dutch, Irish, English, and German...her stock was as pure as her skin... (screen splits showing Betty Grable and a slightly deranged Carmen Miranda.) I mean, which of those two would you rather be?

And so, armed with my new strategy for success, I tried desperately to get rid of my pelo malo, my bad, kinky, curly hair. And there was only one place to do it: Harlem. I tried to insulate my scalp with layers of Vaseline before the hench women of the Rose Meta

House of Beauty would pour lye on my hair and comb it straight out while my skull burst into flames. But the straighter version of my hair lasted only about a month before the treatment wore off. And then there I was: the world's homeliest girl with skin that was a full shade too dark. Again. I had to get out of this body!

(music intro) But performing always kicked me out of my doldrums. And when I saw Lena Horne in the movie Stormy Weather I had a vision for a new stage act. (the guys come on) For months, my friends cut hundreds of leaves out of red and orange crepe paper so I could have them blown by a fan at just the right moment of a particular song.

(music morphs into the beginning of Stormy Weather. The guys work the fan and the leaves.)

(Rita starts to sing the song....the leaves blow wildly....) This is the kind of technical problem you have with a solo show...

My unhappy solo career was happily cut short when I was delivered to Hollywood heaven. A talent agent had seen me at a recital and whispered my name into the ear of Mister Louis B. Mayer himself. That's Mayer as in Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

Upon hearing that we had been summoned to meet the great and powerful wizard himself, my mother and I flew into a full-fledged Puerto Rican panic.

(she does so...) In an effort to look like my idol, Elizabeth Taylor, we bought a waist cincher and invested in a new set of “feminine enhancements” (she makes an adjustment to her bra/clothes). My dress, my hair, my nails, my shoes, my face, my gloves, my skin, every single last inch of my skin...everything was prepped and powdered and covered and uncovered until at last...

The hour of my deliverance had come. We rode the elevator up and up, and way way up to highest turret in the Waldorf Astoria.

When the doors finally opened, there he was, the Wizard himself. I shook from head to toe as he took my hand: Such soft hands. On a man! And a manicure?

He held my hand firmly in his while giving me a quick once over, an inspection that took all of thirty seconds before I heard him actually say the magic words “She looks like a Spanish Elizabeth Taylor! How does a 7 year contract sound to you, young lady?” I felt my feet lift off the floor as I flew around the room. I was 16 years old. Two months later we were on the studio MGM lot in Culver City.

The first day on the lot I met THAT MAN, Clark Gable. “Rosita,” he said, “I like that name”. I wet my knickers right there and then. Someone pulls me away and takes me to the commissary...the food, my

god! Mountains of exotic dishes like roast beef and mashed potatoes and Boston cream pie. I'm torn between staring at the food and keeping my eyes firmly glued to the door. Sure enough, in walks Lana Turner. In walks Ava Gardner, followed by yes, Elizabeth Taylor. My mouth is so open I can swallow myself. But I can't speak. Not a word. I just stand there smelling that food and gawking at the stars.

My first picture for MGM was a movie called The Toast of New Orleans starring the hot new tenor: Mario Lanza. I was playing the small but vitally important role of Tina, a little Cajun girl whose job was to ONE, sing two lines with Mario Lanza, TWO, perform a killer dance routine, and THREE, be tearfully sad. The singing and dancing were no problem, (flim clip plays of her singing and dancing)...

but the director was having trouble getting me to be tearfully sad, the kind of sad that a Puerto Rican girl playing a Cajun girl would appeal to everyone across America sad. But the problem was that I was just so happy to be there. I, Rosita Dolores, am making a movie! What is there to be sad about? I can't cry. I am practically beaming! And the more I beam the deeper his eyeballs sink into the hollows of his sockets. Another take. Then another. This is

starting to cost him a lot of money. He finally gets up, walks over to me, puts my hands in his, looks into my eyes and whispers, “Rosita. You have a little dog, and you sleep with him, and play fetch with him, and then he dies, now think about that”. (pause) My mind starts racing. I never had a dog. I’m from the ghetto. Who has a dog? A dog in the ghetto is just another mouth to feed. I can feel myself starting to freeze up. I am ruining the movie! They’re going to fire me! I will never work again! “Perfect!” he says “Print that. It’s a wrap!”

Now that I’ve got my first movie under my belt, I feel like I’m starting to make a name for myself. A week later, Billy Grady, *the* Billy Grady, the most famous and powerful casting agent at MGM, he calls me into his office and says “Listen, Rosita, we have to change your name. It’s too Italian. How about Renne Rolino? Mitzi Margharita. Maria Marigold. Orchid Montenegro.....I know, I know... How about Rita? Rita Moreeno. Think Rita Hayworth”. Rita Hayworth! Paco’s neice. Formerly Margarita Cansino. She had been a Latina at one time too. Before they raised her hairline and dyed her hair and lengthened her legs or whatever else they did for her extreme makeover. (she thinks) Rita Moreno....now does that sound like a movie star?...”okay”. I will work harder than anyone has

ever worked. I will learn more than anyone has ever learned.

I will become the biggest star in the history of MGM.
(clip of Rita in the center of the MGM logo appears)

Right after my triumph as Tina, I found myself playing the small but vitally important role of Terru, a little Polynesian girl dressed in a Tahitian serong. for a musical re-make of Pagan Love Song. I wore a very dark wig and very dark make-up, as did the very fair-skinned Esther Williams, the star of the movie. Different times, you know? It was during Pagan Love Song that I was confronted with my first real acting challenge: how does a Polynesian girl speak? I assumed I had to do the part with an accent, to lend authenticity to the character. And it surprised me that nobody else seemed to care about this. I mean, we had no dialect coaches and the director never even mentioned it. But I took it upon myself to address the issue and I hit upon what was to become a staple of my repertoire: The universal ethnic accent. (Rita does the accent) “It was a real breakthrough in the history of cinema”. (clip of Terru plays)

I loved being on the set. Any set. Every one a little village with it's own cast of characters. Directors and designers, gaffers and grips...hundreds of

people. All working together under the mantle of a great star.

The Humphrey Bogart set. The Judy Garland set. And there I was. On the Gene Kelly set. Mr. Gene Kelly taken a chance on me and cast me in the non-ethnic role of Zelda Zanders in *Singin' in the Rain*. And the other gift he gave me? He let me watch rehearsal anytime I wanted.

Just watching while he tried to figure out the complicated meter of a song called *Broadway Rhythm*... (Rita demonstrates...she breaks into *Broadway Rhythm*) I could see what he was doing! And I thought I can do this!
(she ends with a flourish)

Every profession has tell-tale signs of failure, right? signals from your employers that your talents may no longer be required. In the acting business, what happens is very simple: your phone goes dead. That ringtone that sings with happy possibilities is replaced by a growing, ominous.... silence. So when the phone stopped ringing three years into my MGM contract, I was filled with dread. A whole six months went by without my being in a movie. I was finally called back into Billy Grady's office. "Listen dear" he began. You know you're in trouble when they call you "dear". We're not picking up your option."

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I cried for two months. For Latinos, that is considered a very brief period of crying. We don't believe in stoicism. Stoicism? What is that? Holding in your feelings while putting on a mask of silent acceptance? Bearing the grim news with unshakable poise? What is the point of that? However... I *never* cried in front of my mother. How could I? I was the breadwinner: for me, for her, and my mom's fourth, was it her fourth? Yes, her fourth husband. If I don't work, we don't eat.

So I took any job I could get. (a long list of titles scrolls on the screens) The Fabulous Senorita. Fort Vengeance. Ma and Pa Kettle on Vacation. Such were my choices. B movies and guest spots on tv shows.

And in between jobs? My phone wasn't ringing frequently enough too keep me from hiding all the knives in the kitchen. (a phone is brought out from the wings) All I could do was wait...and wait....with nothing to fill the silence but the thoughts rattling around and around in my head: "Do I really look that exotic?" "Are my breasts not big enough?" "Did that white blouse make my skin look dark?" "Why on earth did they give her that part?" (Rita looks at the silent phone, pause). "They hate me." (She looks again, pause). "I will never work again." (the

phone rings, she runs to it, frantic, then calms herself before picking it up. During the call she takes us in, thumbs up, etc.)

“Hello. Oh hi. Yes, oh really? Oh he’s terrific that sounds fantastic. Hawaii, oh how...What? Oh. Only one scene? Ok. So what exactly is the part?.. A runaway slave girl, oh, a runaway Indian slave girl who bumps into Tyrone Power on the beach. Yes. And she helps him find his lost pony. Oh, and she’s a mute? Yes, yes that does sound like an important scene. OK well that sounds great I’ll be at the screen test tomorrow. Nine? OK. And thank you so much for thinking of me” (she hangs up). UGHHH! Two years of this and I started thinking about secretarial school.

To break the monotony, I Occasionally I went out on a date. For reasons that are far too obvious, I was attracted to older men. With money. Men who I thought could protect me. Feed me. Keep me safe. When I was seventeen I dated a 56-year-old bassiere manufacturer who couldn’t have been much more than four feet tall. For six whole months I hung on that man’s arm. We’d go to Spanish dance clubs where I could get his heart rate going and he could put me on very public display. It wasn’t romantic. Oh God, no, It was the opposite of romance. It was boring. But boring felt okay to me at that time. When it came to sex and romance, boring was good.

Some of you may have had a similar experience during your lifetime. Some of you look like you're having that experience right now.

I was barely more than 20 years old but I was drifting into a low-grade depression when out of the blue, my picture is chosen to be on the cover of Life Magazine. It was pure happenstance. Life was doing a feature on the tv boom, and the idea was to follow a young actress around while she worked on one of the new fangled sets. I happened to be doing a photo shoot at the time and some young assistant pointed me out to the people at Life. Next thing I knew....

Darryl Zanuck of Twentieth Century Fox sees me on the cover and says "Who is that girl? Can she speak English? Get me that girl!" Who says things like that?

I didn't care. All I knew I was that I had a second chance and I was NOT going to blow it. This time around, the producers at Fox would see that I wasn't just some faceless Utility Ethnic, but that I could be a star in my own right. I signed a seven-year deal and right away started plotting how to become the next Big Thing. And lo and behold, I got my chance.

Almost immediately I was slated to do a screen test with a young, unknown actor named James Garner.

We were assigned to do a scene from a movie called *The Bridges of Toko-Ri*. Jimmy played the William Holden part and I took the role played by... Grace Kelly. I was ECSTATIC. I mean, Grace Kelly? *The* classy Americana.

Now what do you do if you want to transform yourself into a picture perfect goddess? (a picture of Rita from around that time appears on the screen) her complexion was just so perfect and fair. I applied this very pale make up to my face. I think I went a little overboard.

(the picture on the screen is whitened, eyes reddened, teeth yellowed)

For the full effect, I put on a blond wig (a big blonde wig is affixed to the face on the screen). I looked like Grace Kelly after a drug overdose.

Jimmy and I had this long, torrid, love scene...which Came across like *Maverick* making love to *Medea*.

Still, I thought they'd give me another scene with a different partner. But then the phone stopped ringing and when the phone stops ringing....

I realized from the experience that I needed to learn so much more about my craft. Before shooting a movie called *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts*, a send up of the *Seven Year Itch*, I set out to find a tough, demanding acting teacher.

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And I found her. Natasha Lytess.

Marilyn Monroe's famous acting coach. It was Natasha taught me how to comport myself with the highest degree of sexual allure without compromising my dignity. You know, like Marilyn Monroe. Since my first entrance was coming down a set of steep stairs, she focused on my walk.

(Rita does Natasha, heavy Russian accent): "Rita, everything comes from the vagina. From YOUR vagina. Everything. You have to think FROM HERE. It will make you do things differently.

Now, let's see you come down the steps. As you come down the steps try to think that you are holding a rose between your legs, that there is a rose in your vagina. Are you ready? Begin!

(Natasha watches the student Rita do the walk) NO NO NO, the rose just fell out! I can see the rose on the ground. Think! (she points to the loins) Let me show you how it's done. (she barks orders at an invisible someone in the booth) Roll the tape! Look at Marilyn. Not her face, not her face no (she puts her hands over her eyes and points to her vagina).

Down there! Where it counts!

I think the work with Natasha paid off. You be the judge. (Film clip of Rita in The Lieutenant Wore Skirts plays...her coming down the steps like Marilyn Monroe).

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I don't believe the rose fell out at all there, do you?
But the film wasn't all cheap visuals. There was
some real dialogue going on as well.

"Where is she your wife? Hawaii? She must be
having fun. I bet she's having a kinny poo poo.
Kinny poo. That means a ball. Wahini po-ol lina hua
kini poo poo. Hawaii, what a place for
women.....purrrrrrrrr".

They don't teach you that at Julliard, let me tell you.

(a phone is brought out on stage). In spite of my
brilliant imitation of Marilyn, it was one of those
times again. Time to hurry up and wait. My insides
started to corrode from worry. (she is handed the
receiver) But then I got a call from my agent, Bullets
Durgom. (as a studio rep) "Hello Riter? Listen, doll,
they're doing tests for The King and I this week and
they want you to come in....Agreed, the stage version
WAS great but baby wait til you see what they've got
in mind for the movie! Instant classic! You're
reading for Tuptim, the King's Siamese mistress.
("Oh I love Tuptim") Yeah, doll, I'm telling you.
Instant classic. Oh, by the way, you're up against
France Nuyen." (phone call ends, dial tone plays)
France Nuyen. Dear god, she's Vietnamese, she's
perfect for it! and so beautiful. (she hangs up the
phone) France Nuyen.

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I'd be lying to you if I told you I was rooting for her. Even though she was right for it. Even though she and I had been thrown into the same life raft together. I found myself actually praying that the studio would pick their resident utility ethnic, someone named Rita Moreno, over someone I knew was ideal for the part. I even lit a few dozen candles the night before the screen test. (picture of Rita as Tuptim appears, she looks at it... pause)

I loved *The King and I*. And they were right. It was an instant classic. The performances, the music, the look, the story. Everything about it was glorious.

But buried deep within me was the memory of France Nuyen. But buried within me was the memory of France Nuyen. My envy of her. My hoping and praying that she wouldn't get the part. I wanted to erase her from my mind. But I couldn't do it. She was a colleague who should have been an ally, a sister even. But in my mind, I did to her what had been done to me. And I never forgot that.

I started feeling increasingly jolly. When a person like me gets depressed, we turn positively, maniacally jolly. Which is not the same thing as happy. When you feel that kind of Jolly, all the darkness inside you pushes your smile out way beyond your face. It becomes obvious to everyone,

particularly at a bad photo shoot, or at a bad audition, or when you're on a fake date. The Studios would use big movie magazine spreads to test which one of their contract players might catch the public eye? so they sent you out with someone you hardly knew on these staged, fake dates: two pieces of hot young Hollywood eye candy decked to the nines, pretending to be as happy as uneaten clams, with a photographer and a writer in tow to chronicle every move. Here we are driving in the star-spangled Buick (Rita poses, flash goes off). Here we are dining at the Rainbow Bar and Grill (Rita poses, flash goes off). Here we are dancing at the oh so hot Macambo (again, flash).

As boring as they were, these fake dates were better than the alternative. Right after Mr. Zanuck had signed me to be one of the foxes in the Fox stable, I was sent off to an afternoon cocktail party on the arm Harry Karl, the famous shoe tycoon and lover of all things young and beautiful, which he most definitely was not. Well, within minutes of meeting Mr. Karl inside the vast confines of his bright yellow Cadillac convertible, it's clear that he and I don't even have the weather in common, and by the time we enter the home of Alfred Hart, the famous whiskey tycoon and the butler has taken my wrap... I realize that I've been abandoned. Left to swim in a sea of powerfully rich men who are looking for any poor woman

willing to show some... gratitude. The head of Columbia pictures comes over to where I'm sitting and says "I want to fuck you." I try to laugh and when I move to get away, another man grabs me from behind.

Seeing my distress, the host of the party pulls me aside and comforts me by squeezing my body up against a wall until I feel I am going to throw up, I am throwing up and I rush out of the house and I stumble right into the gardeners, the Mexican gardeners, and I see them and they see me, they don't know my name and they don't know who I am but they completely see me... they place a jacket over my shoulders and they carefully fold me into the front seat of their pick up truck, and they take me home. I don't go to another party for years.

Four years into my contract with Fox, right after *The King and I*, my contract is terminated.

Have you ever felt like you're disappearing? That your insides have somehow vanished and the only thing left is this enormous feeling of emptiness? I felt that way, that I was teetering on the verge of evaporating... when I met someone. It was 1954. In the glorious month of October. I was all of 23 years old when my entire universe became defined by the figure of a man.

.....

I was visiting the set of *Desiree* when I coincidentally stuck my head into the make up room... And there he was.

Marlon Brando. well...(music sting) In that single moment I learned that the eyes are windows to more than just the soul. The room got so hot even the walls started to sweat. (she begins to sing *The Way He Makes Me Feel* by Michele Legrand and Alan Bergman)

I was gone. Head over heels and heels over head. Have you ever been so obsessed with someone that you feel like you can't breathe without them?

Marlon felt that way about himself.... and I agreed with him. You know that phrase "I thought I would die"? When he walked into a room I could feel the pores on my skin expanding. And when he left the room my hands would actually turn cold. (She sings the second verse....the music gradually becomes disjointed and then fades under the following)

I was in a fever. For five years. A happy prisoner of my own desire. To please him. To impress him. To fill myself up with him. I wasn't in love so much as in a state of arrested development.

Marlon, though, wasn't even at that stage. The man was outrageously funny, impossibly charming, with a voracious intelligence that could devour the world.

But personal development? In a romantic

relationship? He never believed in it. He believed in Marlon Brando. Not the person. The persona.

We soon became stock characters in our own dark little passion play. Who could out fox the other? How far could we push each others' buttons? Who would be the first one to crack? When I inevitably found some other woman's clothes in the house I finally decided to get back at him. By doing the unspeakable. Dating another man. This one guy had seen me on the lot at Fox and asked for my number. He was a tall, sexy guy who always wore these tight fitting jeans. Jet black hair with dreamy eyes and a wicked bad boy smile. Elvis Presley. That proved to be very effective. Dating Elvis. Sent Marlon round the bend. Elvis made him crazy.

Crazy, not loving.

"Don't you touch me!" I'd scream at him, until our wounds were so deep they could only be cauterized by fantastic, delusional make-up sex. Right up until the very, very end, I thought I could somehow break through to him.

(music)

That was right before I took a very, very large quantity of sleeping pills. Enough to end all manner of dreaming.

(she begins to sing the last tag from When October Goes by Johnny Mercer) But. I was young. And

gone. A stranger to the world. A stranger to myself. I looked in the mirror and didn't see anyone. I'd made myself up past all recognition. I hadn't even begun to touch my other self yet. I hadn't done a lot of things. Yet. And Yet. (she completes the song. END OF ACT ONE)

.....

ACT TWO

I started doing her as party trick. Someone to entertain the troops. Actors love to amuse each other while waiting to go on. It helps to ward off the tsunami of despair that you know is waiting for you at the end of your current gig. So, while all of us Latinas were sitting around on the set of West Side Story, I started playing with a new character.

You want to hear something strange and disturbing and true? She was a version of Rosita Lolita Conchita. Instead of discarding my fake persona, or declaring war on her, I re-invented her. I had grown up watching these Caribbean singers from my mom's generation, you know, women with big nails, and big hips and big wigs of every kind of

color. The bigger the better, was their motto, especially when it came to expressing their emotions. (she does a rendition, very melodramatic) “Ay! Mi corazon, Mi Corazon!
My mother would just be sitting there. (as Mom)
“Isn’t she wonderful!”

This was my mother, who learned to speak English without ever understanding the nature of vowels. On a really hot summer’s day, for example, she might suddenly announce: “It’s too hot to do any work today, for piss sake. Tell you gwat gwee are goin to thoo. We are going to make a picin’ lunch and go for a swing at the bitch.” Or when giving me an order to change the bedding, she would say something like “Rosita, today is Saturday and jew know what that means....it’s time to change the shits”. “It’s sheets,” I’d say to her. “Can’t you say sheets”? “NO.”
“Why, Mami?” “Because. I got trouble with my bowels.”

Between my mothers’ tortured bowels and the high melodrama of the Caribbean women singers, I had plenty of comic material to work with.
So I invented this character, a singer and a dancer, even a bit of an actress, serious, who couldn’t sing or dance or speak worth a lick. But she knew, even if

no one else did, she absolutely knew that she was brilliant.

For years this character lived in my handbag like some loose change or a party hat that I'd pull out whenever I'd need it. But then I went to a party at a friend's house and he begged me to do a bit of her and you know, who wants to be rude? And Terence McNally the playwright just happened to be there. Well, a year later, completely out of the blue, a script arrived in my mailbox. It was a farce set in The Tubs. A gay bathhouse in the lower east side of New York filled with chubby chasers and go-go boys. And among the cast of characters was a fast-talkin', Puerto Rican, Broadway wanna-be who performed for the special clientele that frequented the bathhouse. It was called The Ritz. (she exits)

(single spotlight....music...announcement. "Good evening gentlemen and to all the rest of you dressed up as ladies! Tonight, the management here at the Pits Lounge and Health Emporium is proud to present one of our most enduring acts: a legend in and out of the tubs, she scarcely needs an introduction! (two scantily clad men holding a ring of paper appear). Enabled by her two gorgeous assistants, Siegfried and Roy, and coming to us directly from her most recent triumphant performance at the Kiwanis Club in Bayonne, New

Jersey, please give a warm welcome to the one, the only, Miss Googi Gomez!”.....more music...Goggi enters, crashing through a ring of paper. Thick accent, she performs a slapstick version of Everything’s Coming Up Roses complete with wig falling off and shoes being thrown)

I had a dream, a dream about you, baby.
It’s gonna come true, baby.
They think that we’re through, but baby

You’ll be swell! You’ll be great!
Gonna have the whole world on a plate!
Starting here, starting now,
Honey, everything’s coming up roses!

We’re just beginning and there’s no one to stop at this time!

Clear the decks, Clear the tracks
You’ve got nothing to do but relax.
Blow a kiss, take a bow.
Honey, everything’s coming up roses!

You can do it, all you need is a hand.
We can do it, Mama is gonna see to it!
Curtain up! Light the lights!
We got nothing to hit but the heights!
I can tell, wait and see.

.....

There's the bell. Follow me!
And nothing's gonna stop us til we're through!
Honey everything's coming up roses and daffodils!
Everything's coming up sunshine and Santa Claus!
Everything's gonna be bright lights and lollipops!
Everything's coming up roses for me and for you!

(many, many phones start ringing as someone helps
R out of her Googi outfit)

Googi was a smash. With everyone. I won a Tony
Award and just being back on Broadway!
Great...There's nothing like it. It feels like the
whole world knows you and you know the whole
world. (phones end) What a fantastic illusion.
A few years before I was starring in a Lorraine
Hansberry play called The Sign in Sydney Brustein's
Window when my best friend Leah asked me if I
wanted to meet, quote, the most wonderful man in the
entire world. (she does her neighbor) "You've just
got to meet Lenny Gordon, Rita, he's so smart, and
so sensitive. Plus, he's Jewish. They don't panic, the
Jews. They get depressed but they don't panic.
Believe me, this guy is wonderful!"
I knew she meant well, but after years of therapy I
was leary of another bout with pathological passion.
I mean, after having endured the abuses of
Hollywood and the romantic sinkhole that was

Marlon Brando, I had had it with “the most wonderful man in the world” routine. It seemed to me that if he was out there he certainly wasn’t looking for me.

But Leah kept badgering me, so finally I agreed to come to dinner at her house where I could meet this Mr. Wonderful.

Turns out he’s a doctor. Very bright. Soft spoken. Seems extremely kind. So we talk and talk and it’s good, you know. I don’t have much experience with kind men so I’m not sure what to do with him or if I even like kind men, but....what the heck? At the end of the night while Lenny is walking me home he asks me if I want to go out on New Year’s Eve. I say yes. I tell him to pick me up at the Henry Miller Theater around 10:45 just after the show. “After the show?” he asks me. “Yes, after the show” I say to him.

Well, New Year’s Eve arrives and at precisely 10:45 Lenny is standing in the lobby of the Henry Miller Theater. People come out and there’s no sign of Rita, and then more people come out and still no Rita. At 11 o’clock he peeks his head in the auditorium and sees that all the paying customers have left. He finally asks one of the ushers to check and see if there’s a petite brunette in the ladies room. She comes back and says “no, there’s nobody there”. Well Lenny is dumbfounded. “I can’t believe it” he

says, “I’m being stood up on New Year’s Eve”. He is not panicking, but he is flirting with depression. Meanwhile, I’m sitting in my dressing room with my hairdresser, Antoinette DeCarnia, strictly from Queens, whose talent as a hairdresser is surpassed only by her astonishing ability to massacre the English language. When I say to her “I can’t believe I’m being stood up on New Year’s Eve”, she says to me (heavy accent) “Listen Honey, you can’t trust men. They are all men are bolivious.”

At that point Lenny decides to check the marquee thinking that he might be at the wrong theater. He looks up and in bold letters, there it is: Rita Moreno, starring in The Sign in Sydney Brustein’s Window. He rushes to the stage door entrance, past the guard, runs up to me and says “Are you THE Rita Moreno?” (pause, Rita holds it, turns to the audience as if to say “can you believe this?”...turns back to look at Lenny. Pause. She turns back to us. She smiles) Six months later we were married.

You want to test your marriage? Have your husband read the script for Carnal Knowledge and picture you having sex with Jack Nicholson. You’re playing the part of a hooker named Louise who has to talk Jack Nicholson into getting aroused. This is the same Jack Nicholson who once said, “I only take Viagra when I’m with more than one woman”. So you

bring the script of Carnal Knowledge home. Your nice jewish doctor husband reads it and what is he going to say? “This looks terrific honey, when do you start working with Jack?” No, that is not what he is going to say. That is not what my husband Lenny said. “I really really really don’t want you to do this Rita.” That is what he said. “But it’s Jack Nicholson” I say to him. “And Jules Fieffer wrote it. And Mike Nichols. He’s a Major Major Director. I should at least go and talk to him, shouldn’t I?”

So I went to see Mike Nichols at his apartment, fully determined to say “I’m so sorry I can’t do this. My husband will kill me”.

However, I didn’t realize it at the time but Mike Nichols was a fantastically successful used car salesman in a former life. I went to see him at his apartment and before I could say boo he sits me down and he calmly tells me that Carnal Knowledge is going to rip the covers off of every bedroom in the country. That he and Jules are on a mission to expose the venality of American malehood and do I want to be part of it. That after watching this film people will never be able to think about sex in the same way again, and that he needs actors who are brave enough to tap into guilt and self-loathing and lust, and that my character Louise is key to the whole thing. “So whatdaya say, Rita?”.....

.....

(picture of Garfunkel, Bergen, Margaret and Nicholson on the screen)

When I fly to Vancouver for the shoot I step onto what feels like the most depressing film set in the entire universe. I don't know what was I expecting. They'd been shooting for weeks and weeks on end so by the time I arrive they're all living inside this toxic bubble and practically choking on the very air they had created.

And waiting for me, is none other than himself, Jack Nicholson. (picture of Nicholson laying back on the bed). For the infamous scene where I am supposed to coax a rise out of Jack's nether parts?, they put the two of us on a hydraulic platform. In Mike and Jules' grand scheme of things Louise is literally and figuratively going down. And let me tell you, down and down we went. Ten takes. Twenty takes. By the thirtieth take I am officially losing my mind. I am sure that I will die on this hydraulic lift while simulating depraved sexual activities with Happy Jack Nicholson, and that at my funeral that's all anyone will be talking about.

But in the end? Mike was right. About all of it. When the film is released in 1971 there is a massive uproar. Protests. Riots. Just the thought of seeing the partially naked bodies of Ann Margaret and Mr.

Nicholson, not to mention Art Garfunkel, just the *thought* of it was enough to send a lot of people into a frenzy. Including the judges of the Georgia Supreme Court, who declared that the movie was pornographic and banned it from being shown! But you know I could never figure if people were angry, or jealous, or just titillated. I'll never forget going to the Loew's movie theatre on the Upper West Side... Lenny and I were sitting right behind these two women who talked the whole time while stuffing their mouths with popcorn and coca cola. (R does them both)

1) Oh my god oh, did you see that?

2) Yes and I saw a lot of other things I don't care for

1) Good god, what is she doing on her knees?

2) Well, Rose I certainly hope she's praying

1) Oh god, that is so vile.

But they never left the theater. They sat there, glued to their seats, savoring every "disgusting" moment until the bitter end.

Frankly, I don't think I was ready for Carnal Knowledge. I knew that the work itself was spectacular, even courageous, but it didn't feel good to me. Because even though I had accomplished one of my main objectives, to be seen as an actor with some depth of feeling and with something to say, to be a part of something serious that was might even be considered historically important?, the kicker was

that I was playing a hooker. A hooker who felt distinctly related to the Utility Ethnic No matter how essential she was to the story. She was there to be used. To put the behavior of white people into greater relief. And even though I felt truly honored to have been in this amazing movie, deep inside I felt....used.

And so it was no accident that right after Carnal Knowledge opened, that familiar feeling of entrapment started to creep into my bones, and I could feel a bout of the jollies coming on.

Fortunately, my daughter Fernanda came along to serve as an antidote to my despair. A child will do that for you. You know, I had no idea that I loved children so much until I had one. When I was pregnant I was so worried. “Will I be a good Mom”? “Can I handle this?” “Will I be able to love this little stranger in my stomach?” Especially after an endless 24 hour labor. But when Lenny put Fernanda Luisa in my arms for the first time, I instantly turned into this fierce lioness. I remember holding her and saying, loud enough for the whole room, “If anyone ever tries to harm you I will kill them.” I loved breast feeding that girl so much I developed a pinched nerve in my neck from looking down at her. From the day she was born I started working for her. To make her proud. It’s why I

wanted to do The Electric Company. (a picture of the first cast of The Electric Co. appears) My friends and my colleagues all said, “A children’s show? Don’t do it! You go on that show and you’ll never work as an adult again!” “Wait a minute” I said. “We’re talking about teaching here! This is a brilliant experiment...We’re trying to get kids to learn in a new way. Just because it’s tv doesn’t cheapen its value. Isn’t teaching kids to read a basic human service?

Of course, I was coming off Carnal Knowledge so was I ready for a healthy dose of anything. Actually I was petrified because I thought once the producers heard about Louise, that they might have second thoughts about hiring me. Maybe they never saw the movie, because nobody fired me...

And sometime during the five years I was on The Electric Company I learned how to play again. Play like I was back on the street in the barrio. (a very short clip of R shouting “hey you guys!” plays). Play with the Bill Cosby and Judy Graubert and Irene Cara and Morgan Freeman. The coolest, hippest kids on the block (picture of the cast of The Electric Co).

(the guys come out and help Rita on with her Pandora costume)

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There was a lot of joking on that set, but we all took our jobs very seriously. One time I was on the set of Sesame Street and Oscar the Grouch was there. He called me over and he says to me, “Hey Rita. I saw you in a movie and you were servicing Jack Nicholson. Can you service me?” I told him “Oscar, if you can find it, I’ll do it”. You see, sometimes you have to do things for the greater good.

But believe me, Children’s Burlesque, is very hard work. We’d start at six in the morning and go well into the night. -New sketches every day. New characters all the time. (slide appears of different characters) Pop queens and wicked stepmothers and every kind of clown... I’d change costumes a dozen times for a single episode. And these were no ordinary children’s tv characters. Take Pandora, for example. The girl brat of the century.

(Rita sings The Hate Song as Pandora).

2 4 6 8,
what do I appreciate
h a t e.....HATE!

Hooray for hate, it’s really great
When things are not so hot, hate really hits the spot

I hate my cousin Doris
I hate to go to bed

.....

I hate those little squishy things they stick in date nut bread

I hate to kiss my uncle

I hate these stupid shoes

I hate to play a game when there's a chance that I might lose

I hate to eat my vegetables

I hate to sit and wait

But mostly I hate grown-ups saying it's not nice to hate

Don't believe all those songs about love

What we really to have a lot more of

Is H A T E....hate.....

(as she exits) Oh I just love that song

(a clip of the Menu song from The Electric Co. is shown while Rita is offstage changing out of Pandora. She returns as the song finishes.)

If you think that was fun to do, you're absolutely right. I'm not saying it was easy. There were a ton of internal arguments over our teaching methods. But after a lot of hair pulling it was decided that the best way to keep the kids engaged was to make them

laugh and then slide in the lesson. The Electric Company took off and was a big success.

A success that nobody predicted.

Which suddenly made me aware of the one thing that's exactly the same about success and failure: they're both a shock to the system. Because as an artist, you're never sure how anything is going to turn out. People see you in a stinker of a movie or a terrible play and say "What was she thinking? How on earth could she work on something like that? Believe me, it's not easy. But even when you find yourself in Elmer Gantry, the musical, with a director whose never directed, and the actor singing the part of Gantry can't find any of his notes, and you are playing the role of a sexy evangelist named Sharon, and the first act ends with Gantry singing a song called "Hey Lord, We're Sharing Sharon", even with all these ominous signs of impending and obvious failure, it's still a shock when the show closes after one night. Because you cannot work that hard and invest that much of yourself and not find a way to believe in a show. It doesn't matter if you're doing Hamlet or The Fabulous Seniorita. You have to get rid of all your doubts and find a way to completely believe in what you're doing. Whatever the risk. Of failure or success.

.....

When West Side Story was being shot, none of us had any idea that the movie was going to do what it did. Really! The leading lady is singing in a high, operatic voice and these gangs of boys are doing dance numbers with really odd balletic steps (a picture of the gangs dancing in WSS appears as the guys cross the stage doing really odd balletic steps) dressed in these costumes that were intentionally, well...(a picture of the Jets appears)...there wasn't a sequin or a spangle to be found anywhere. And the book! I mean, God Bless Arthur Laurents but some that gang dialogue? I am from the ghetto, and I can assure that no one in their right mind was saying things like "Hey Daddy-O, cut the frabbajabba". My personal favorite is right after Tony has killed Bernardo in the rumble and he takes off running and the Jets are trying desperately to find him? It's a really, really dramatic scene. Loaded with tension. So the Jets are all shouting to each other about where they're going to look for Tony. "You guys cover the river. I'll take the park. Who's got the school yard?" Then one of the tough Jet girls suddenly bursts out with "I and Graziella will take to the streets"... I and Graziella will take to the streets? I was so grateful I didn't have to say that line.

And then when we heard they were going to charge Five Dollars for an opening night ticket!? And that

the seats were reserved? We all thought “well that’s it, no one’s going to come”.

We should have known. (finger snapping underscore) The way Jerome Robbins worked us? The man was a flat-out genius. We admired him so much we would have walked through the fires of hell for him. Which he then made us do, causing us to suffer all kinds of injuries. In a matter of weeks we turned into a small army of the walking wounded. There wasn’t a single member of the company who wasn’t covered in ace bandages. Tendons, ligaments, muscles, bones... scores of body parts pulled or torn. The guys in the Broadway production of West Side Story became so incensed at one point they took their knee pads and burnt them outside Jerry’s office. Our cast felt the same way.

It didn’t matter to Jerry. The dances were everything to him. (Mambo at the Gym starts to play) Each scene was a character dance where we were doing complex jazz routines with musical counts that were changing all the time (she dances Mambo sequence).

To be in a dance like that? Breath-taking. Amazing and terrifying and inspiring. All the dances. All with the same feverish commitment. So you know what? I didn’t care if Jerry was hard on us because it did make us better. It certainly made me better. And it

bonded us. No matter what Jerry threw at us, *because* of what he threw at us we had to believe in the story *completely*, every part of it, including the hatred the Jets and Sharks had for each other. We had no choice but to buy in. And we did. One day, Russ Tamblyn, who played Riff, the leader of the Jets, came in with t-shirts he had made for him and his boys emblazoned with the name Jets written on the front. Then George Chakiris, playing Bernardo, countered by heading off to this porn shop on Santa Monica Blvd. called The Pleasure Chest where he bought all the Sharks these black wristbands.

Jerry was in heaven.

And what was happening off the set was a double image of that very same fight. Jerry insisted that not only did all the Puerto Rican characters have accents, but that we had to have the exact same skin color.

The Jets had their own palate, very pale make up and a healthy amount of bleached hair, but they were at least different, they were individuals, while we were all simply lumped together.

We wore this make-up that was as thick as mud and the same color. At one point I asked the make-up man, “Why do we all have to be one color? Why can’t the make up match our individual skin tones?”

He thought that I didn’t want to be a Latina, that I was a racist. But there was no discussion about it. If you wanted to be in the movie you grabbed a batch of

that make-up started to lather up. It was like getting ready to go to war.

By the time we shot the candy store scene? When Anita tries to warn Tony but is thwarted by the Jets? Jerry had his boys rough and ready to go after me. They were practically spitting the words out of their mouths.

“Lyin’ Spic! Greaseball! Garlic Mouth! Tramp! Benardo’s Pig!”... and now I am back in the barrio. Back on the street. The boys surround me. I can feel my stomach begin to turn over. My hands are clammy and my throat is tight. They move in closer and begin to smell me. Try to touch my body. And as they close in I feel something start to boil from I don’t know where, some place in my body that’s buried so deep I didn’t know it was there until this very moment....and it bursts out of my throat “Don’t you touch me! Don’t any of you ever, ever touch me! “

When the scene was over I collapsed in a heap. I cried and cried for a very long time. Cried so hard I didn’t know why I was crying so hard.

But the shoot went on. And on. Jerry was fired for being an expensive perfectionist; Natalie Wood threatened to quit, and then refused to speak to her Tony; the remaining director-Robert Wise tried to

keep us from panicking, while the producers, all turned gray from the cost overruns.

Finally, after four months, it was over. And then, of course, none of us wanted to leave. We had become this crazy, motley.... family.

When I think about my entire experience on West Side Story? The dance audition I thought I would never pass, and the screen test I almost failed, Or that I couldn't hit the lowest notes in the song A Boy Like That so they had to bring in a woman named Betty Wand to sing the song? Betty, who since then has proceeded to take credit for singing all of my songs for the rest of her life may she rest in peace... even though she's still alive...

Or the fact that one of the Jets was played by Tony Mordente who was Chita Rivera's husband? Chita who had brilliantly starred in the play on Broadway but who was unhappily not cast in the movie, thereby marrying us at the hip for all eternity and making my attempts to befriend any of the Jets practically impossible...

Or the fact that one day I sidled up to Jerry Robbins and started babbling away about the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement only to learn later that he had named names at the McCarthy trials....

.....

When I think about all that, it doesn't diminish for one second the complete and utter joy I felt during the making of West Side Story.

(music: the claves at the beginning of America)

The music by Bernstein, the lyrics by Sondheim, the dances, the costumes, the special effects. It was all new.

Not to mention that for me, personally, it was the beginning. Of finding my own voice.

(She sings America)

When the movie wrapped, I asked if I could do the clapper for the last take. And I did. They let me do that. (she extends arms together, then brings them together in a clap)

After West Side Story I didn't make another movie for seven years. Even in Day-Player years, that's a very long time. I was offered some things, bad imitations of Anita in bad gangland movies, but I turned them down. And the television work I did was mostly forgettable, proven by the fact that I can't remember most of it. I was always grateful for the work and there were a few things I was proud of, but once you've seen the view from the mountaintop you have no desire to spend your time wandering through the Valley of Very Bad Movies.

.....

When I turned 60 years old, I went in to audition for a featured role in a new movie directed by, well, let's just say it was a Major Director. I hadn't worked for well over a year, which for an actor is the equivalent of being dead for a decade, and I was desperate to get back to work. I poured over the script for over weeks, every word, every nuance, making sure I had a great handle on the material. By the time of the audition, I felt so confident that I knew for certain that they would have to give me the job. I strode in to the room and said to this Major Director "I can't wait to do this for you because I think I really get this!" He glanced down at my script and an awkward silence fell over the room. "Oh no, no, no dear, that's not the role I want you to read for. We called you in for the part of the Mexican whorehouse madam."The Whorehouse Madam? He had brought me in to audition for two lines of dialogue. In Spanish.

My mind starts racing. What should I say to this, this man?

But then something happened. Right after Mr. Major Director figured out that I had been reading the wrong part, somewhere in the middle of that profoundly awkward moment we made eye contact, and I mustered up all my dignity from some part of me that I had willfully forgotten, I looked at him and said. "I'm sorry, but I don't do Whorehouse

Madams”. “Oh no darling, you don’t understand”
“Oh no”, I said, “You don’t understand.” And I
picked up my things and slowly walked out of the
room.

It sounds good, doesn’t it? The grand theatrical exit
with my pride now fully restored? Three days later
I fell apart. I tried to hide my hurt and shame, but
Lenny knew. He picked me up, brushed back my
hair, and enfolded me in his arms. He could do that
Lenny could. The man knew who I was. He knew
my deeper self. And he never let me forget. See,
that’s the great sin. That you forget yourself.
Forget who you can be.

Sometimes Lenny comes back to remind me of that.
I carry him with me. Along with everything I’ve ever
lost. My mother, my brother, my youth, Brando, the
smoothness of my skin, my first kiss, my good
knees....and my desire to be anyone other than
myself. You lose things, you know, but they never
completely leave you.

They show up in the oddest places. The lines in your
face, the way you move your mouth, what you find
yourself laughing at. I don’t know about you, but the
things I’ve lost are the things that make me feel most
alive.

.....

People say that when you get to a certain age that you start to mellow. They say as your bones start to calcify you have to slow way down. I have no idea what these people are talking about. Mellowing has never done much for me. I've tried meditating but every time I try I keep thinking of all the things there are to do. Keep Moving. As deeply flawed as my mom's strategy for survival was, and who amongst us does not think that their mother's strategy for survival is not deeply flawed? part of it was true. You need to Keep Moving. (This is all I ask...by Gordon Jenkins plays) Because the body frequently knows what the brain does not.

(she sings....This is All I Ask by Gordon Jenkins)
As I approach the prime of my life
I find I have the time of my life
Learning to explore at my leisure
All the simple pleasures
And so I happily concede
This is all I ask
This is all I need

Listen, I don't worry about my bones calcifying. I figure if I keep my spirit in shape, the bones will take care of themselves. It's all part of the Puerto Rican world view. Ninguna vida es disminuida por la

pasion del espiritu. No life is ever hurt by the
passion of the spirit. Verdad? And no spirit is ever
diminished by a passion for life. Right?.....
Right.

(she finishes This is all I Ask...
And let the music play
As long as there's a song to sing
And I will be younger than spring.
she bows, lights fade out)

THE END

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