

Rita Moreno: Overcoming Racism and Sexism in the Golden Age of Hollywood

By Amanda McGrath

This week Amanda writes about the academy award winning actor, Rita Moreno. As a self-proclaimed “musical theater nerd,” Amanda was excited to dig deeper into the story of this beloved performer and activist for National Hispanic Heritage Month. Read on below to learn a few highlights about Moreno’s nearly 75 year career.

Best known for her iconic role as Anita in the original *West Side Story* film adaptation, Rita Moreno is also known as the first Latina to win an academy award for acting and one of the first actors ever to “EGOT” (that is, to win an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony). Moreno was born in Puerto Rico and immigrated to the Bronx, New York when she was five years old. While dancing at a Spanish dance studio as a teenager in New York City, she was discovered by a talent scout. By age 16, Moreno was the primary breadwinner for her family from her earnings as a performer. By age 18, she signed with MGM studios.

While working as a young, brown woman in the film industry, Moreno endured staggering sexual abuse and racism. In interviews, Moreno recounts instances of sexual harassment, stalking, and rape, all by men working in the film industry. Moreno also speaks of the racism she faced in the roles that were made available to her during much of her career - “illiterate, immoral characters,” “men’s little island girls” with “exotic accents.” During this time period, actors of color like Moreno were funneled into any ethnic minority role the Hollywood studios needed: Polynesian, Native American, Egyptian, and more. Moreno felt shame over accepting these roles, but she took the jobs to support herself and her family.

Despite the humiliating treatment, Moreno continued to build her career throughout the 1950s. Some of the pivotal, supporting roles she is known for include *Singin’ in the Rain* and *The King and I*. In 1961, Moreno landed a role in the first film adaptation of the Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim musical, *West Side Story*.

West Side Story is a Broadway musical inspired by the Shakespeare play, *Romeo and Juliet*. The story takes place in a multiracial, blue-collar neighborhood in New York City and follows a love story amidst the rivalry between a white gang, the “Jets,” and a Puerto Rican gang, the “Sharks.” The 1961 film adaptation was the highest grossing film that year and won 10 Academy Awards as well as recognition by the Library of Congress and the United States National Film Registry for its cultural significance. In short, *West Side Story* is regarded by many as one of the greatest musical films of all time. Moreno won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Anita.

Despite the acclaim of *West Side Story* – and despite Moreno’s Oscar recognition – the acting roles offered to Moreno by the film industry did not improve. Moreno continued only to be offered roles as “native girls” and “dusky maidens,” caked in brown makeup, all with a vaguely Spanish accent. (The issue of dark makeup was present in *West Side Story* as well – all actors portraying Puerto Rican characters were made to wear the same shade of darkening makeup, including Moreno, a Puerto Rican herself!) Fed up, Moreno didn’t make another movie for seven years. Instead she focused on theater, television, one-woman shows, and social activism. She fought for Latino and women’s rights and even sat within 15 feet of Martin Luther King when he made his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. Her focus on the smaller screen and the stage eventually led to her becoming the third person ever to “EGOT.”

Moreno recently came back into spotlight with Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of *West Side Story*, which came out in 2021. In the film she plays a new character that was created especially for her. Also, in 2021, a documentary was released which chronicled Moreno’s seven decade plus career.

While this article merely touches upon Moreno’s many achievements – and there are so many more enthralling details to Moreno’s history (not least her romantic relationships with Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley!), – it is plain that Moreno’s is a miraculous life story. In the face of great hardship and racism in the United States, she has become an icon and inspiration to many within the country and beyond.

