



Author Leo (born Rodríguez) is making a race-blind film based on her experiences breaking into TV and film. Above right, Leo's headshot.



Viviana Leo

Playing Against TYPE

A PUERTO RICAN ASPIRING ACTRESS DISCOVERS THAT SHE IS "TOO WHITE" FOR SOME ROLES AND "TOO LATINA" FOR OTHERS. **By Viviana Leo**

I was at the Manhattan offices of a major network, waiting to audition for one of TV's most popular shows. The role was for a maid. Her entire part consisted of three words: *Buenos días, señora*. To my left was a plump, balding Salvadorean woman in her 60s, to my right, a recent émigré from the Dominican Republic who brought her daughter to translate. Facing me was an actual cleaning lady I think they had just dragged from the bathroom. And then there was me. I had recently graduated from Columbia University and I was already discouraged.

I am a white Puerto Rican actor. This has allowed me to learn firsthand about the persistence of racial

and ethnic stereotyping in the entertainment industry. See, if I was dark-skinned and Puerto Rican, there would be no problem: I could be considered for "Hispanic" roles. And if I was white skinned and not Latina, the sky would be the limit: I could theoretically become the next Nicole Kidman. But that, my friends, was not how the chromosomes lined up.

Coming out of college, I was full of hope, dedicated to my craft and ready to make it in New York. I landed an agent, but found that my auditions were rarely in English. My agents saw "Rodríguez" on my résumé and literally placed me in the Hispanic file. (I saw the folder.) That meant I was only sent out for

explicitly Latina roles—which too often means dark-skinned maids or strippers. While that was bad enough, what was the point of even showing up when producers couldn't imagine a light-skinned woman as a Latina? One manager even suggested that I wear darker foundation.

Still, I answered casting calls for Latina roles. One was for a beautiful and graceful boricua. The casting director asked me to "play it more Hispanic," which I realized just meant angry. Does anyone ever get asked to play a role "more American"?

Finally, as I sat in the television network's office, it hit me: the only reason I was there was my last name. I had no chance of booking a stereotypical role, so why try? I looked at the middle-aged women around me and made a decision. I arrived at that audition Viviana Rodríguez and left Viviana Leo (derived from my middle name, Leonor). That's the only way I could escape the limbo I was in.

And it's working. Suddenly, my agency is sending me out for "white" soap opera roles. I nearly got cast on Broadway as a Polish Holocaust survivor. I auditioned for a lead on *Pan Am*. I even made it to the final few for a lead in an HBO/Cinemax series. These are big steps for a rookie actor, and I would never have gotten that exposure as Rodríguez.

So why am I blowing my cover? Simply this: there are many others who don't fit into these boxes, and they need a trailblazer. When audiences see minorities playing roles that have nothing to do with their ethnicity, it won't just be Hollywood that has changed. We will have all changed.

PHOTOGRAPHS: FROM LEFT: STUART LUTHE; COURTESY OF SUBJECT.