

Becoming Esmeralda: An Interview with Ana Maria Lagasca

Ana Maria Lagasca discusses her first major film role:

I play the role of Negi, Esmeralda Santiago. I like to think of myself as very similar to her. She's a very strong and passionate girl with a lot of courage. She has a passion to live life to the fullest and seek her own way.

Q: What happens to her in the story? What primary events transpire for her in the story?

A: For the most part, it's a coming-of-age story. She leaves her comfort zone, rural Puerto Rico, and her father, because her little brother gets hurt. His leg gets infected in Puerto Rico, and they want to amputate it. My mother says, "No way. We're going to America and seeking other assistance." So, we get there, and it's just a different transition. It's about a language barrier, as well as the different cultures. It was just her story during those five years she went through, growing from a child to a woman.

Q: So, you're playing a character that not only goes through a cultural transition but also goes through a personal, physical, even a sexual transition from childhood to womanhood.

A: Yes. On the surface, that's what it shows. But, it's an inner, more emotional transition that she goes through, one of discovering herself, her passions, her wants. Of looking at the world, as well, and trying to find herself. It's a difficult and very complicated world that she comes to--having her mother tell her one thing and then going to school and seeing another. It's just about finding herself, finally, and genuinely feeling comfortable and happy.

Q: What happens when they move from Puerto Rico to America? How does her role in the family change?

A: It was a very intense moment for her, a very confusing time, I believe. She leaves her father--she's very close to him. She, her mother, and Raymond leave to a new land with new opportunities. But, what she sees in that moment is painful. She sees that she's leaving, her mother's continuing in her life, and they're going somewhere else. It's even more painful when she gets there...she feel responsible for the family. She is the eldest...and...it's the first time she actually sees her mother vulnerable, for lack of better words. But, she's strong--she's always looked up to her mother, who's such a strong woman who knows what she wants. At that moment, she takes charge. Negi is young and willing to learn the language. She helps her mom out a lot through this transition. They get to New York and one event occurs and another and the mother seeks help, and Raymond gets better. Mother finds work... Negi goes to school and meets new friends. There are ups and downs...just what life is. It's a journey, and it's her beautiful story. In the end, there's lots of triumph.

Q: What are the stages, do you think, of her discovery of herself as an artist as it's told in the film?

A: Well, initially, there were so many things going on that she wasn't aware of it. Then, once it was presented to her by Mr. Burnett, she sort of opened up, saw the possibilities, and jumped at it. She said, "Okay, slowly but surely." Of course, the transition came slowly, but she saw the possibilities when she saw others putting so much trust in her. She goes to this middle school, and, there, Mr. Burnett encourages her to audition for this performing arts school. He sees a form of talent. Negi sort of mentions that she recited poems, then goes back in memory to her father. How they recited poems together in the cabin; how passionate she was; and how passionate he was about saying them and teaching them to her. It was just fun. So, Negi was there in Mr. Burnett's office, just looking off, remembering. She remembered the great memories she shared. Mr. Burnett sees something about Negi that she's not really aware of. He wants to see

her recite the poem right away. The poem is in Spanish. It just brought her back to Puerto Rico. It's a beautiful moment.

Q: Tell us about the poem that Negi recites. Where she learned it and what it is....

A: It's a very strong poem...one that seeks comfort within the world. When there are so many prejudices, there are so many people that are viewing you and expecting things. You have to take a stand. The poem speaks of the difficulties...the ups and downs, prejudices, and things that you will encounter. But, it's okay. In the end, it will be okay. You have to live up to what you believe. It's a very dramatic poem. But, it's also a moment of triumph for Negi.

Q: In what ways is she like you?

A: I like to think that I'm very close to Negi. It's very strange, because I feel a familiar essence. When I did audition for the role, I felt I didn't have to act. It was very strange. It was very subtle. I was really at ease with myself...very comfortable. I just looked at the lines and they just started flowing and they came. So, I like to think that I have the same courage and strength she possesses.

Q: In what ways is she different from you?

A: Maybe the fact that I am an only child? And, that I was raised with other siblings of sorts...but they were my cousins. I had a lot of people in my family, but not really a brother or a sister. Negi has seven, and in the end, there are nine of them altogether. That's what I think a major difference would be.

Q: What do you most admire about her?

A: I admire her courage, her humility, and her strength...the courage to go about, finally discovering herself and not settling for less.

Q: What was your response to her (Esmeralda Santiago)? How did she fit your sense of who the child had been? What was that experience?

A: It was an amazing experience. I feel I was blessed with just the opportunity to play Negi. But, it was almost like being presented a gift. Then, having Esmeralda, the actual source on the set, was like opening this gift and being able to enjoy it. It was beautiful. There were a lot of things going on, but from time to time, when I needed her, I'd just glimpse over at her...it really helped.

Q: What kind of a benefit was it to hear her actual voice? Did that help you at all?

A: Oh it did. It was...I think everything, for the most part, came together and was very helpful. Her voice was very important, as well. She's very genuine...I think it seeps through her. Verbally, when she speaks... she has this great laughter. One point that I recall was when we were waiting between takes and had a little conversation. We were both doing the same activity. Someone passed by and they said, "Oh my goodness!" They were shocked because we were both stretching. And, we seemed to—I mean, I also read the book to be more familiarized with everything. She loved to dance. She says that sometimes there aren't enough words to describe her love...I feel—I've always felt—the same way. So, she has this nice elegance to her. I like to think the same way, to see myself the same way.

Q: What do you think a 15 or 16 year old is going to get of Negi's story? Why will they like it? What do you think they'll take away from it?

A: I think she is a Puerto Rican girl and, yes, it's an immigrant's story. But, I also think it presents a universal theme of moving from childhood to adolescence. It's a journey that we all encounter—all of us.

So, I think that every child, every girl can sympathize what you go through. There are, maybe, different circumstances. It's an emotional roller coaster that you need to deal with in finding yourself and hopefully feeling that you have the courage to fulfill your passion. That's what I think that it's about. The people in her life are her blessing, her awareness. They make her come closer to who she is. It is a challenge. But life is a challenge.

Q: There are scenes in the film in which she writes...what actual words did you write when you were writing?

A: Actually, I wrote to my father about how I never told him the difficulties I encountered. I always told him the positive side. I always had hopes that he'd come and find us, as he usually did. It was different now. And, I needed to deal with it. So, in the book itself, in the journal, I wrote many things that came to mind. I can't pick them up right now, word for word, but they were to my father. And, many times I wrote to myself.

Q: What are the main things that you learned playing the part?

A: I learned so much. For the most part, I learned a lot through many of the other actors. I think they were incredible. It was amazing how it was so meant to be, how it all came together. It was an incredible ensemble. Everybody put his or her little pieces to this puzzle. And, this work turned out, hopefully, the best that it could be. I hope that the essence, if anything, the essence of Negi was transpired and her story will live on. Just to bring encouragement and courage to others that go through this in their own way, that go through life.

I think it will bring them closer to being encouraged, because once they see it, and it's possible, they'll jump at the possibilities. Ignorance is a very hurtful thing.... a very bad thing. Just a little bit of knowledge will bring about that encouragement. I think it's important that you surround yourself with positive energy. With positive people. With family members that love you and will encourage you. If you ever hear a negative remark, you should be strong enough to know that it's not true. If you have a passion to be creative, then I think something is there. You should open yourself up and allow it to show. It's a gift that you have. I think that it would be selfish to keep it to yourself and not share it with the world. We're here, and we learn from others. If you have something to share, I think it's beautiful to do your part and share. Fear is what tears us down. Knowledge is very important. Once you have that, it replaces fear. So, go full force.

Q: Great. What aspect of playing this part was most challenging?

A: Well, the most challenging point for me was the age transition from 13 to 18. Not only that, but not shooting the transition in sequence. So, from one moment to the other, I was 15, then 13. I needed to be in that state...in that state of mind and being. So, it was a little complicated here and there, but somehow or another, I felt it came together. I had help, as well. Also with the language, because there is a slight accent that we use: the Puerto Rican accent. I had Lilliana, who is the script supervisor, help me a little bit on that. And, it came through. She'd sort of yell out a few words...that sounded a bit too different, and I got back to my Puerto Rican self.

There's a lot of awareness that you need to have. You need to be very focused and aware, from one moment to the other, that you can be 18, and then suddenly have to shift gears and be 13. And, it's just being aware that during that time, it's an experience. You've lived more; you have, hopefully, a bigger smile on your face and more experience. So, it's very subtle.

Q: There are a lot of young men and women, boys and girls, who are going to be on this web site and see this movie, who would love to know what happened when you got the part. Physically, what happened, what the room looked like...

A: Okay. Going back...it was very exciting. My agent first calls me in and tells me about this role, so I was already—I saw the script, and it was about 10 pages. Different scenes throughout the movie. I said, "This is for me!" I had so much courage. I felt it. I walked in, it was Dan's office, and I was the first one on the list. It was quite intimidating, mind you. I said, "Oh no, I'm the first to read. Well, that's not going to bother me." So, I went in, met with Dan, and said hello, how are you doing. Cut to the chase, let's read. So, we did. It was a very different feeling from my other auditions. I was very at ease. I felt very secure and familiar with Negi, with this character. Suddenly, he said, because we were sitting down, and he said, well, "Hold on for a moment." He just stopped. "I'm going to put this on tape. Do you mind standing?" I said, "No, of course not." So, we did the same audition on tape.

A few days later, he got back to me. I met with a few wonderful people, as well, who saw me audition, helped me go through that process. I was called back again, then again...and I was told that I won something. I got a gift.

Q: Was there ever a scene that you read once, then said, "I'd like to do that again?" If so, what was the scene?

A: I believe so. I believe there was a scene where I'm with this boy, Nestor, whom I like. It's a very strong scene, actually. I remember, too, we had different boys come in when we did the scenes, when we were auditioning boys. And, everyone read differently. It's so beautiful how different words have different meaning. Just the same sentence, can mean something different with each perspective. And, it's quite interesting working around that. But, the scene itself is when he's leaving to war. He's going to be recruited into the army. So, he tells me that he's going to tell my mother that he's going to marry me. He took charge. Then, I looked within myself, and I said, "No. I'm going to take charge. This is not what I want. You don't know what I want. What I want is to go to school. I want to learn. I want to have an education. I want to focus on me. Who are you to tell me what's going on?" I did like this boy. But, I finally stand up for myself and confront myself. You see this innocent girl sort of transitioning, becoming this woman, this strong woman that decides, yes. I decide to be here. I want to. And if I don't, you're not going to tell me. It's a beautiful scene.

Q: What was it like to work with Wanda (De Jesus)?

A: Wanda's a very strong woman. She'd get me for using that word "strong"--she didn't like that word. But for lack of better words, that's what I use. It was quite a challenge. She plays my mother, and we worked well together even though we worked differently. But, I learned so much from her because she's very passionate. She's very determined. She knows what she wants when she goes through and looks through the scene. She has a point where she wants to make her mark. She's quite focused and professional. I learned a lot from Wanda.

There's this very challenging scene that was very delicate--when she actually catches me wearing make-up. I don't want to give it away, but there is this moment that she fears her mother. There's a fear coupled with respect. She goes about, and there's a movement on the street where she wants to catch me and she grabs me by the hair. That was very delicate. Because it could have come through very ugly and very abrupt. But it was very...a beautiful charm to this part, and a total contradiction because she's very upset at me. But it's an intention of respect. Of love. She demonstrated it in that sort of way. So, that scene was quite challenging, getting the movement down right.

Q: What about working with Miriam?

A: Miriam Colon? She's a very funny character. I think she's great. She's "Tata" in the film. She's my grandmother. I look up to her very much...she's very gentle with me. When I cry out, I go to her, because I don't want to put more pain or burden on Mom, because I know she's been through a lot. So, when I don't know where to go, when I'm confused--you'll see it in the film--I run to Tata. I lay my head on her

shoulder, and she's there to comfort me. Miriam is quite charming and funny. So, I think we worked very well together.

Q: Was there a scene that you felt particularly insecure about?

A: Insecure? There's the kissing scene, of course. That can make anyone at the age of 15 insecure. And, it was relieved. I was there and the actor, Alex Cruz, played the role of Nestor. It's a nervous moment. I don't know what to expect. Well, I do know what to expect, but I don't. I don't know if I want to but I do. So it's beautiful. We come together, we kiss, we get caught, and it's all a bunch of commotion going on, but it's nice. I think anyone that's seen the picture can relate to that moment of insecurity, or course.

Q: Is there a scene in the picture that you most looked forward to doing? Is there one scene that you just couldn't wait to get into?

A: I was ready to get into very scene. It was just different each time. It was beautiful, and I didn't have a special scene that I enjoyed most. Of course, when the family was reunited and we were in our home. That's when the other sisters and other siblings come. That was exciting. It was one big family. But, I felt that way throughout the whole film.