

SMFA Summit Interview with Amelia Rico, premiering 23 May 2021, 3pm PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone, I am so excited to bring to you actor, screenwriter, filmmaker Amelia Rico. Hi, Amelia.

Amelia Rico

Hello, everyone.

Bonnie Gillespie

Thank you so much for joining me and being a part of the SMFA Summit. I just adore you, and we were talking just before we started rolling -- yes, all the love, all the love -- about wearing all the hats, and I would love to dive right in on that because you are someone who is always working on something, but not always playing the same role in the work that you're doing. And I would love it if we could talk a little bit about how that came to be and and and how you manage all that without getting overwhelmed.

Amelia Rico

Sure, just diving right on, on into the beginning. I started off as an actor. I always knew I wanted to be an actor like, since, you know, first grade play and I played the sun of course. And I just knew it, like this was gonna be, and I had no backup plan, I had just, this was always gonna be my trajectory, you know. You know, and then I get to high school and you know I've been in some plays and, you know, I've talked to the counselor about what I want to be and I lose out on, you know, the what, whatever the most creative "that's going to be..." you know, "become something," I lose out that little poll. But, you know, I keep going. I go to college in Houston and it's just, there's no roles for me, you know, like for someone that looks like me in school, you know. This is of course a college you're paying to be in it, you should be... experience on stage should be part of the requisite, you know, because that's we're all paying to, you know, learn how to be an actor and if you're not getting experience, you know, in school, then what is the point of school? So, I, you know, I go to the, you know, the director slash, you know, main professor and I tell her, I plead my case, you know, "I know that you don't think that much of me; I know that I maybe haven't shown you what you want to see in classes but I really would like a chance to prove myself, would you please allow me to audition for you know this next play," or whatever and she just looked at me and said, "No."

And I had to just sort of sheepishly like back out of the room, my heart broken, my guts just spilling out. I, and I was just like, you know, mind blown, like no chances at all, would not even allow me to audition. And even when they did allow me to audition, it was just so obvious that I was not, you know, gonna get a role. Even outside of school when I would start, you know, "I'm just going to go and audition to you know this theatre, that theatre." It, it I always got like several several several times I got the directors like yelling out at me like, everybody was you know mad rushing leaving at the end of an audition. I would have the directors like running at

me and saying, "You did such a magnificent job. Oh, you did so beautiful. You did so great," and at first, I'd be like, "Oh, you know, that that means something good, I'll probably get the part." But it just so consistently became that I did not get the part that I realized, "Oh, they're telling me that because they know they're not going to give me the part, because I don't look the part, but they want to tell me that I did an amazing job and, you know, what other way would you tell someone, but, but by giving them the part? But since they're not giving me the part, they have to physically, tell me," you know. I literally got people like fall out of their seats, during one of my performances like I performed, I performed a really intense monologue once and like, I mean, granted they were a very dramatic group but they like literally fell out of their seat, they're like, "Oh my god," like, you know, and nothing.

You know I was, I was just not I was just consistently, you know, as you say booking the room, very obviously booking the room but not booking the parts. And I came to realize that nobody was going to hand me my success. Nobody was going to give me a leg up. Nobody was going to, you know, take a chance on me. So, me and my husband, my then boyfriend, we've been together since high school. We bought a camera, we started making our own films starring me of course. You know, it started off, it's just, you know, I'm doing this so that I can start getting myself, you know demo reel footage and you know that old adage you can't get work without demo reel you can't get a demo reel without footage, you can't get footage without getting a part. So, I started creating my and this was before, you know content creator was a thing. We were still using you know those little tapes.

Bonnie Gillespie

Oh yeah. Yes, yes, yes. I think we still have a bin of all those tapes. From the last shoot... oh, my gosh.

Amelia Rico

This was early 2000. So, yeah, started creating my own films and writing them just out of necessity. And then we started just realizing, you know, this was really something that a lot of people needed. And then we started creating, you know, films or I started writing films, you know, female and BIPOC-centric films. And just being able to cast other BIPOC-women was just an amazing experience. So just out of pure necessity, I became a screenwriter, director, editor. I taught myself how to edit, you know, first with Adobe Premiere now I'm moving on to DaVinci Resolve, and I'm learning, you know, more and more about color grading. And so just out of pure necessity we started this and it's become to where, you know, thankfully, we've been able to constantly stay busy. Either because now I'm acting and, or because you know we were creating something for somebody else or we're promoting, you know, doing little promo videos for theatres around town or archiving for schools or this and that. So, we're always constantly working in one, you know, aspect or another. So that's that's been an exciting thing.

Bonnie Gillespie

How do you manage that just from a logistical perspective, like that that's a lot. And I'm just curious, like in the day to day, how do you shift from, "Right now I'm, I'm actor Amelia. No, right now I've got to go be producer Amelia," how do you...?

Amelia Rico

And then there's mother Amelia, and wife Ameila. Yeah, this all the things, all the things. It is a challenge, because, you know, there. I work from home. So, working from home already, you know, there's a boundary there and it's been a discussion, a topic of discussion between me my husband quite a few times of me setting those boundaries, you know. Clocking out at six, you know, doing family things, you know, taking the Saturdays and Sundays off, you know, for the majority of the times. I know sometimes it's just impossible but... so, those are definitely boundaries that I've been in the process of making and still you know having a hard time with, but, but definitely a topic of discussion in our in our households.

This, I'm telling you, 2020 was ridiculous. Not just because of how ridiculous it was for the world. Um, but because, you know, it all came to light about... two things happened, it all came to light, of, you know, how, you know BIPOC creatives were being, you know, shunted aside. Two: Everything became digital. So, theatres, schools, all that became digital. So, in my two lives or two of my many lives, things blew up. So, at the same time. So, you know at the beginning of 2020, when everything shut down, we lost you know, all the schools that we worked at, we lost all the theatres that we worked at. Everything shut down so we had nothing, right? And then slowly, you know, in June, I got "Madres" which is going to be streaming on Amazon, and produced by Blumhouse. I had auditioned for that in February and I got it in June. And so then, I started filming that in September, so I was out in New Orleans for a month, because we had to quarantine for two weeks, film one day. Then I got to come back home, quarantine for another two weeks, film another day, finally get back home. So, for two... two times for two weeks I was in New Orleans. But during that same time, everything started coming back digital. So, all the theatres that we work for were wanting us to, to come in and film their productions, so that it could be, you know, streaming, or so it could be streaming live or so that it could be ready for streaming or ready to be produced and, you know, seen visually but edited and all that, like, refined.

And so, at the same time all these things were happening. So, I had literally no time to breathe, just no time to be above water at all. It was an amazing time but also just a very scary, you know, like was I going to get all the things done? So, and and, you know, juggling family and, you know, setting boundaries for myself. So yeah, between September and still, really, it has been it has been crazy. It has been crazy with for all the hats because of those two very big, you know, social issues that have happened. Not only BIPOC creatives kind of being lifted up, and showcased more, but also because everything's digital and my company deals with that so, ah, things are happening. Yeah.

Bonnie Gillespie

And I think that that speaks to a really important point for, for everyone who shifts in more opportunity right now that it's like you want to...

Amelia Rico

I still don't hear you Bonnie.

Bonnie Gillespie

Oh gosh, really. Okay, hold up. Let's see if we can. Can we reconnect, are you able to hear me now? Oh, 'cause now, now that I am seeing your, your side looking frozen as well.

Amelia Rico

I hear you now, but you're still frozen.

Bonnie Gillespie

Am I? Oh gosh. Okay, are we good? Okay, good. I think that maybe we synced back up speaking just as everything's going digital, right, okay. What I had said was, I think it's such a unique opportunity that's happening right now where people are feeling like, "Whoa, this is my time." Especially, you know underrepresented people who are suddenly like now all the stories are showing me an opportunity rather than, "No no no, there's no role for you." And wanting to be able to step into that and say, "Yes, let's... I'm going to not only crash through that door, I'm going to bring everybody along with me. We're going to really make some change here." But at the same time going, "I don't know that I have the, the boundaries to use the word you're using about how to just navigate my, my life at this volume." Because it's just such a drastic turn, and part of our self-care is, I think self-care is so vitally important to the creative process. Can you talk a little bit about what that balance feels like?

Amelia Rico

Yeah, definitely. I do have to set days where I can just breathe. And sometimes you know those days get bulldozed over, but I, you know, I, I'm just still in the process of that. Of like, "Okay I need a day where I can, you know, take a shower." Now actually I'm doing horse-riding lessons. I mean it's for, so that I can do, like, put that on my resume because I know a lot of things that are coming to Texas that may need me to learn how to horse-ride. But it's really like kind of therapeutic and kind of, it's just me like I get to go in the car by myself. Driving myself to to horse-riding and, you know, be on the horse and then drive myself back. So that to me is also... feels a lot like self-care because I'm doing something that's not, you know, technically it's not really a job yet you know it's kind of in the process of being for the job. But, but because, you know, brushing the horse's hair, all that all that maintenance of the horse is sort of therapeutic and feels like time for me as well. And I love caring, you know, for the horse that that has actually become kind of a self-care moment for me. And I'm taking, I'm taking it as a self-care moment. Even though I'm carrying another animal.

But yes, definitely, you know, sleeping late, that's one of the things I do for self-care also that my husband loves. You know, he gets up with the kids and he watches them and make sure that my daughter goes to school or, you know, does the online school stuff and feeds them and everything so I get to sleep in late. And that's you know very, very helpful for the rest of the day. Just like, yeah, these are these are the these are the small little wins that I get to have. And I'll take them when I can and, you know, my husband's very good about you know, he's, he's the one that keeps the house clean, I'll be honest, I'm super messy. You know you know my chart.

Bonnie Gillespie

I do! I do!

Amelia Rico

You know my chart, Bonnie. I am a messy genius so... I am sorry. So, my husband, you know, is very, you know, amazing at you know keeping the house kinda together otherwise it would be, you know, too... all hell would break loose in this house. So, I'm just so grateful to him, of course, for, for having my back and for always, you know, just knowing this day was going to come in preparing helping me prepare for it throughout.

Bonnie Gillespie

So, so when you say knowing this day was going to come, I'm like flashing back to where you were in college and where you, you took a risk and went into the office of the department head or professor or someone specifically to say, "Where's my opportunity? How do I show you that this can be a role for me or that there aren't roles for me so you need to pick better pieces," or whatever it is? Did you know at that moment, "I'm going to have to be a leader? If I'm going to ever be seen on camera, like or if I'm ever going to get a role on stage?" Like did you just know leadership was a part of your journey?

Amelia Rico

I have never had an issue with being afraid of anybody with authority or anybody with any kind of, I don't know. I just don't... I'm not afraid to speak my mind. Like I'm very... you know my chart. I say things that are inappropriate to people that I shouldn't be saying them to, you know, and that's just, that's a part of me. How I met my husband, for instance, I wrote, I was, you know 15-year-old sophomore, he was a senior. I wrote him a letter. Got it sent to him. He called me... with my number, you know, he called me. This is this is me. I'm just... I'm not gonna... if I feel like I'm being slighted or if I feel like I need an opportunity that's not there, I'm going to, you know, speak up.

I used to work at... I used to do hair and makeup for the Houston Grand Opera, and I went into the ladies' room one day and they weren't getting dressed, they weren't you know they weren't prepared like the way they should be and I realized it was because the conductor was there talking to them, so they felt uncomfortable, you know, to get out of their clothes or whatever. I

was like what's going on and they're like, oh you know the conductor's here or whatever I'm like, "You want me to tell him to leave?" And they're like, "No, you can't tell that to the conductor." They're like freaking out at me like, I'm like, "What? He's not supposed to be in the ladies' room, he's a man." I just did not... I don't get... I don't get those boundaries. I don't know it, for better or worse, oftentimes.

So yeah, I just, I knew that I wanted an opportunity so I knew I had to... who I had to talk to to get that opportunity and I'm not used to... as much as I should be... I'm not used to being rejected. So, that was really a backlash for me. Like, "What? Like, I asked you for an opportunity and you didn't give it to me? I don't understand. I don't, I cannot compute," you know. So it took me for a ride and so it wasn't like, "Oh, now I guess I can't be anything," you know, I just found another in on my own. I just knew that, okay, that's not going to be my in. I'll find another one.

Bonnie Gillespie

Let's talk about finding "your in" because I really like that. For someone who's watching who maybe doesn't feel confident writing their own vehicle like becoming a filmmaker, they just don't have those muscles for storytelling, they just identify as an actor but they want to find that "in", what would you recommend that they do or how they partner up or what they look for in order to find those opportunities?

Amelia Rico

Yeah, definitely. I mean, we created these opportunities for other actors. So, we have, you know, our indie film workshops or monologue film workshops where we create, you know, these opportunities for, or you know we just produce, if someone wants to come in with a script we will produce their script or whatever, so we have, you know our, you know list of actor services that we do for actors that are in need of these kinds of services. Because you, I mean, if you're just starting out or if you just haven't been able to get "your in", your foot in the door, you have to sometimes, you know fudge it a little, sometimes. You know, talk yourself up, you know, give yourself a little, you know, a little more padding on that resume. And that's really the only option a lot of people have. It was the only option I had so...

Bonnie Gillespie

Isn't it great that that's been an option just generationally, if we look back to, you know 30 years ago, 40 years ago, if you wanted to create your own content you are out tens of thousands of dollars to even have the shortest little something that might be worth looking at and you know obviously today the budget is nowhere near that high. I mean it certainly can be. But it doesn't have to be. And just, I am so grateful for where we are in terms of technology and platform diversity. That there are now so many places that material can be seen. And so, you can really align your storytelling with the the space that most wants, wants to or attracts that kind of storytelling. Can you speak a little bit...

Amelia Rico

iPhones can do amazing things.

Bonnie Gillespie

Right right right. Yeah. Can you speak a little bit about the, the process of knowing what your voice is as a creative? And, and also I want to make sure we touch on being in a non-LA or New York market. Because I find that your, your voice as a storyteller really does connect with where you live and and who you are there, but I also know you have a fancy career that expands beyond Texas. So how does that work for you?

Amelia Rico

Sorry, what was the first questions...? I got sidetracked on the second.

Bonnie Gillespie

No, it's totally fine, I took it in two directions simultaneously. I shouldn't do that. I was concerned about our connection and so I was like, "Let me say all the things at once." What I'm looking at is how you, how you navigate being in a non-LA, non-New York market but still having those opportunities and also your voice as a storyteller, being identified with where you, where you live, how you grew up all that.

Amelia Rico

So, enter: Bonnie Gillespie. One of my high -- oh my earrings fell... okay I'll just take the other one -- one of my college friends actually introduced me to "Self-Management for Actors" and I just devoured you. And, you know, in chunks you know I took my time I, as you say, what would you say, I lurked for quite a while.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes. Lurk then lead. Yeah, yeah.

Amelia Rico

Lurk then lead. And I, I, you know, saw your, your branding information and, and I did the, you know, Get in Gear for the New Year. And that just, I mean it was things that I kind of understood about myself but just seeing it all laid out in, you know, full color like with other people's opinions in there and everything just, just really helped out on on getting that branding, for me, just perfectly laid out. So that I wasn't going into the wrong rooms and getting massive rejection over here when I could just, you know, hop skip over here to this side where, you know, I'd have a better chance at what it is my goals were at booking the role, not just the room. So here I was booking the room, you know, but over here, you know, I was able to start booking roles. So that was definitely an eye-opener when I started realizing, "Okay, so this is how I'm perceived by other people." Because it adds -- as a Native, like an Indigenous-looking, you know, Hispanic, Latinx, you know all the words -- that have come towards me. Um, you know, seeing people from other, you know, seeing myself from other people's lenses

has been definitely a, an eye-opener because I realized, "Okay, so this is how people see me" rather than, you know, how I feel, necessarily.

Because I'm also an '80s baby, latch-key kid, you know. I have a hard time socializing, doing social things, a lot of the times, and I have... it's just always been kind of a balancing act for me as far as like... and I'm an, I'm a Gemini, I'm a mimic, so I mimic what people do around me. So how people are around me so I can just sort of blend into any circle and be anyone, depending on who I'm talking to, which is not helpful, you know, as an actor. Because I need to know, "How do people see me and perceive me right away?" Right. So, that has definitely been, you know, a godsend to being able to just list out all those adjectives and all the, you know, jobs and things that I could, characters I can play and and just being able to just see that for face value and seeing, "Okay, so this, these are the parts that I need to start really focusing and putting all my time and attention on." And then, you know, as I said, 2020 came in and, you know, everyone wants to do Latinx projects. We're doing tons of Indigenous, not only film but shows like comedies and things. Like things that you've never seen like a Native American comedy. And and even just like, like, just recently, or, you know, by the time this plays I'm not sure but I'm gonna be on "Grey's Anatomy" playing an Indigenous character and, you know, so even guest star roles are coming in for you know long-standing shows.

So having that already set, having all my demo reels, all my footage, all my own self-created experience already set, had me right there on the, you know, on the precipice, just ready for the picking. For when all of this blew up and everybody needed Indigenous actors, needed Latinx actors, needed... you know, I was right there, waiting in line. Always waiting in line; never getting out of line. You know that's the important part, that's one of the things that a friend, another actor friend of mine says: "Stay in line," you know, "Stay in line; you never know when it's going to be your turn." So, definitely, you know. Her name's Amelia too. It's an Amelia thing. Um, yeah, so definitely that has helped me to, to just be there ready for when it was my time. And, and I mean, as I told my husband and as I'm telling you, you know, I always knew it was gonna come. I always told him, "You know, I think when I turn 40, or when I can pass for 40, I think that'll be, you know, probably when people will start casting me." Because I always knew I wasn't the ingenue. I wasn't you know if you're young and Latinx they want to, you know...

Bonnie Gillespie

It's a very particular look.

Amelia Rico

It's very particular kind of person. I knew I wasn't that person. I knew that wasn't my branding at all. I was always the caregiver, you know, when I was younger. Even like a nurse, you know, that kind of thing. But, you know, as an older woman, then I can be mother. I can be you know all just opens up a little bit more. So, yeah, so I always knew that it was gonna come then. It's come a little bit early but you know I'm not at my peak yet.

Bonnie Gillespie

You're just getting started, baby...

Amelia Rico

I'm just getting started. I'm revving up right there. Right on time, I think, um, and and yeah. The second question which was...

Bonnie Gillespie

As for the geography of it all. Because a lot of people feel like, "I have to pick up and move to LA, there are only opportunities if I'm in a major market." I would love for you to speak to how you get opportunities when you don't live in LA or New York.

Amelia Rico

Yeah, so, as I've said before, I owe... 2020 just changed everything. Oh, so first of all, in 2018 I did an indie film that was created by an LA producer who used... who was born in Houston and so she came to Houston to produce this play because it was very personal to her and it was about, you know, kind of a childhood experience of her own and she had a lot of Latinx... it was, you know, completely based, a full Latinx cast. And I had missed out on the first, you know, casting opportunity for that. And then she recast it, my character and another. The two parents. So, me and and and the male that pays the father. And so, she when she recast I was pregnant at the time. So, I'm not sure if my agent hadn't submitted me because I was pregnant, the character wasn't supposed to be pregnant or wasn't, you know, said to be pregnant but I submitted myself because I always do that. And so, I got, you know, an audition for that and I, you know, let her know I'm pregnant, so by the time that this would film I would be five months pregnant if that's a problem, you know, just to let you know. She said, "Oh, you know, it doesn't matter to me, that's fine, perfectly okay."

Bonnie Gillespie

Cool.

Amelia Rico

So, I got the role, right? And it paid nothing like a, you know, very ultra-low budget. But I knew this was, you know, first of all, not many films come to Houston then and you know LA producer I just, you know, you never know. Yeah, so, and it's an all you know Latinx cast, you know, how, how often do you get that? So, I took that opportunity. So, a lot of the things that I do is just show up, you know, that's one of my big things is, you know, you have to show up. You have to show up to your self-tapes. You have to show up to yourself, you know, to have to show up to these little opportunities that you think, you know, maybe or maybe not, it might be something. You know when you're just starting out you have to show up. So, I did this, it became a festival darling. So, 2019, no sorry that was filmed in 2017. So, 2018, we were all over

New York, LA, we were going everywhere. It won, you know, Best Ensemble in a bunch of places and won Best Film and...

Bonnie Gillespie

And you you physically went to those festivals. You were budgeted to be there. Yeah...

Amelia Rico

...yeah, so I had to pay my own way. I physically went to the Downtown LA Festival in LA. I went to the HBO Latino Film Festival in New York. So, I could you know get pictures of myself on that red carpet. I went to Dallas, I went to, I think Corpus. So yeah, there was, they were, we were all over and were kind of winning, and a very, quite a few of them. We didn't do any, we didn't get to do any of the big ones, you know, TriBeCa, any of those but, but these, you know, medium-level ones were big enough that, you know, people I think started to notice. Especially my agent started to notice here in Texas. Now I have a big-box here in Texas, I have a big-box agency, so, they have like 900, you know. So, it's hard to, you know, you have to get yourself noticed. Like I said, I would submit myself because I'm not going to take the chance that they weren't submitting me, you know. And so, since then, they've started, I don't know if it's because they've been... they always said they submitted me so I don't know. So maybe they just started submitting, or maybe it's just because I have that on my resume. I started getting other opportunities.

So, "Madres" came. I had gotten, you know, in the past two years, I would say I've gotten like three times as many auditions and opportunities as I have since I've been with them in 2005 to 2018, you know? Like, I would get something maybe something big, once every five years maybe. But some, you know, small little commercials and things maybe once every, you know, maybe twice a year, I would say two or three times a year. But since then, it's been like constant almost every week, or you know at least, quite a few times a month, I would have an audition for something, you know, big, big budget things like big things. And I think it's because of "Rich Kids" you know it all started with "Rich Kids". So, I want to say that was definitely my big break because I because of getting noticed. And getting more push from my agents, you know, you know, or maybe just because people saw that on my resume. I started getting more opportunities, and then once I got, you know, "Yellowstone," that was another, you know, because of that I was able to get "Yellowstone". And because of "Yellowstone", I was able to get "Madres", because, you know all these things, then now I'm on "Grey's Anatomy" which, you know, I did "Walker" earlier in the year but, but also "Grey's Anatomy" and that's like huge. That's a guest star, and my very first guest star. So, I'm like, you know, just, just blowing this has just been an amazing year for me since and it's horrible to say 'cause it's been a horrible year, and 2020, but, um, but the past six months has just been a whirlwind for me. And and it's been. Yeah, very unique. It's a good time.

Bonnie Gillespie

One of the takeaways that I want people to have from this is just that you're, you're not.. you're never waiting for anything. It's it's yes stay in that line to go back to the the other Amelia's advice. Yes, don't leave the line. But meanwhile, be producing your own content. Be working your own projects. Be, you know, you're never having to get ready, because you're always ready. Because if you just get in the mindset of we'll stay in line and eventually they'll pick me you're gonna be so rusty by the time they pick you. That, "Uh, oh wait, hang on, I gotta remember how to act." So, it's like you've got to constantly keep working out and I think that's really the beautiful part of your journey is that you've just never waited for permission.

Amelia Rico

No, no, no, I don't know I don't have that in my...

Bonnie Gillespie

I know your chart, you don't have that, yes. So, Amelia please if anybody would like to stalk you, stay in touch with you, keep up with all of your amazing things, hire you to help them with their storytelling career, where can people find you?

Amelia Rico

I am Amelia Rico Films, so if you just Google Amelia Rico or not Google but, you know, put me on any of your social media you'll either find Amelia Rico Films or Amelia underscore Rico underscore Films. In one of the variations of of Amelia Rico Films you'll, you'll find me on Twitter, Instagram, I'm mostly on Instagram. Facebook, so I'm going to create a Facebook actor page, very soon, so that will probably be up by the time... 'cause I don't have one and I should probably have one. So, I'm that'll probably be up but by the time this is up as well. And I have a website AmeliaRico.com.

Bonnie Gillespie

Awesome, Amelia, thank you so much for being a part of this. You are SO creating Hollywood we want and I love getting to have this time with you. Thank you.

Amelia Rico

Yes.