

## Handout - Rita Moreno

Examine each of the materials below, and answer the associated questions. Once the answers are complete, share what you learned about Rita Moreno with your group.

### Biography

Rita Moreno, born Rosa Dolores Alverio, moved to New York from Puerto Rico with her mother at the age of 5. As a young girl, she was bullied because of her Puerto Rican heritage, and found a love of dancing as an escape.

At the age of 11, she started translating English speaking films into Spanish as her first steps into the film industry. She got her first role on Broadway at 13 and started receiving attention from Hollywood agents. She left school at the age of 15 to pursue a career in film and she started supporting her family financially. She began a contract with MGM studios and started using the stage name Rita Moreno.

For the first years of her career, Rita was only offered stereotypical ethnic roles because of her Puerto Rican roots. She was asked to play various ethnicities from Hawaiiin, Native American, Egyptian, Filipino and Burmese. Moreno felt alone during this time because she had no role models in the industry to help guide her. There were not many women of Hispanic heritage that experienced what she went through in film. She felt she had to take the parts so she could make a living.

Moreno's most memorable role came in 1961, when she played Anita in *West Side Story*. During the film, Moreno's features were darkened along with other cast members to seem more "Puerto Rican". Moreno won an Oscar for her performance but was still only offered ethnic roles, so she left Hollywood and acted in summer theater until the 1970s.

She returned to Hollywood in the 1970s and is still acting today with her most recent roles in 2023's *Fast X* (from the *Fast and Furious* franchise) and the 2021 remake of *West Side Story*. Rita Moreno is one of only eighteen people to achieve an EGOT (meaning winning an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony).



### Questions:

1. How does Rita Moreno challenge the role women were supposed to play in society in the 1950s?

2. What was Moreno's experience in Hollywood as a Puerto Rican woman in the 1950s?

3. Why did Moreno feel lost in the 1950s in Hollywood and accepted the "native" roles she was given?



***Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It***

Description of documentary *Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It*.

*Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It* explores the star’s rich, decades-long career using vérité footage of Moreno today, archival footage of her roles and appearances, reenactments of her childhood, animation and interviews with Moreno, those close to her and performers she influenced.

Film interviewees include Gloria Estefan, Morgan Freeman, Mitzi Gaynor, Whoopi Goldberg, Eva Longoria, Justina Machado, Terrence McNally, Karen Olivo, as well as Norman Lear and Lin-Manuel Miranda, who are also executive producers on the project.

American Masters — *Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It* premieres nationwide Tuesday, October 5 at 9 p.m. on PBS (check local listings) and the PBS Video app in honor of Hispanic Heritage Month.

**Watch the trailer for the documentary here: <https://rb.gy/kvptf>**

**Question:**

1. Even though Rita Moreno was type casted into stereotypical ethnic roles during her early career, how did she influence the future of Latin Americans in film and television?