



## What Vida's Mishel Prada Has Learned about Identity

On Starz's megahit *Vida* she plays a determined, smart and sensual woman. And Mishel Prada readily admits her character reflects part of who she is. She talks to Alicia about making it in showbiz as a Latina, growing up in a religious home, and refusing labels that limit with whom she can fall in love.

---

Alicia Menendez:

Hey, for those of you who follow us on Instagram or Twitter, you may already know this, but for those of you who don't, we have merch. We have a brand new mug. It is blue on the inside, has the logo on the outside, perfect for your morning café con leche, or matcha tea, or whatever it is you're into.

We've got these canvas pouches, that you can use to organize your bag, put in your headphones, your lipstick, and then we have these sticker sets, that you can put wherever you want. I have mine on my laptop. I love it. My laptop feels so much cooler. We'd be so grateful if you headed over to [LatinaToLatina.com/Shop](https://LatinaToLatina.com/Shop). Check it out, buy on for yourself, for your friend, for your favorite listener. When you do, we'll throw in a free gift, so a little extra incentive for you there.

Again, we love you, we love being able to do this for you, and creating a product at this level requires things like studio time, sound engineer, and so a little bit of support, will really go a long way. Thank you so much, and remember, check out [LatinaToLatina.com/Shop](https://LatinaToLatina.com/Shop).

Clip (Mishel Prada):

*I think identifying as straight is really weird for me. I feel completely capable of falling in love with whoever, because I know I was even asked, "Oh, well what's it like doing sex things with another woman?" I'm like, "They're really hot. They're sexy people." It wasn't really that difficult.*

Menendez:

Anyone who has binge-watched *Vida*, knows Mishel Prada as Type A Emma Hernandez. It was a series of pretty bold moves, that led Mishel to that role. We'll take about that, along with things like sneaking champagne in your bag to awards shows, and how Mishel, who grew up in a conservative Christian household, refuses to put labels on her sexuality, and the stories she wants to tell, as a writer and creator.

Take me back to how you scored the audition for *Vida*.

Prada: Well, after I had made the decision I was going to do film and TV, I wasn't going to be an actor that just did commercials, and print and whatnot, I tried to get an agent, and I couldn't. I got told, "Oh, we have one ethnically ambiguous girl. You're really great, but why don't we wait until after pilot season, and if she doesn't book anything, then come back, we will. I was like, "Okay. Cool." Then, I did finally meet an agent, that was really great, but he was like, "Let's just give it a shot, and see how this goes." I thought, well, if I was dating somebody, and they went that way-

Menendez: Need a little more enthusiasm.

Prada: ... I'd be like, "I think I'm good." So, I talked to my manager at the time. It was right after *Moonlight* had won the Oscar, and it really completely just shifted things inside of me, in this way, where I realized, wow, the story of a neighborhood where I'm from, is important, and this can be seen. It was so powerful for me to see that. It put that scene in my head, that I wanted to get to do something that showed these neighborhoods in this way.

So, I didn't get with agent, and decided ... I spoke with my manager and decided, "Hey, why don't we just give it a year, to see if I can book something, and I can actually show up to these meetings with some credit, something that really feels like I'm not asking people to give me a favor." I want to show up and actually say, "Here. This is what I have. Can we work together? Are you excited about this?" He said okay.

I had gone on a commercial audition, and when I show up, it was just like a page and a half of, essentially, a monologue. I'm crying, and I'm thinking, "Oh my gosh, this must a Zoloft commercial something," like what's going on, but they won't tell me what it is.

They're like, "Well, you can come back after lunch, if you're not ready." It was Santa Monica, so I was not doing that. I went into the audition cold, and I booked it, and it was a web series for *Fear the Walking Dead*. I didn't know, at the time, how that would change my life, but it was a really interesting thing. It was the first time working on a set, with Andrew Bernstein, Mike Mosley, Kelsey Scott. They were all much more established than I was, and I was really convinced that I was going to get fired, because I had never worked on a set like that before. We did it, and it was really fun. It was two women of color, in this *Fear the Walking Dead* universe, and-

Menendez: What was the lesson there? That if you watched other people, and learned from other people, you could find your way?

Prada: Yeah. I think it's a combination of things. I think you have to find it within yourself. I think that, that is the most simple and profound thing, that you spend your whole life trying to figure that out. You also spend a few months thinking, "Oh, I got this," and then, one day you wake up, and you're like, "Oh my gosh. I don't if I have this anymore. I felt really great a week ago," but also just show up. I could've just been, "Oh, I don't feel prepared. I don't whatever."

So, I did, and then, a few months later, the series was nominated for an Emmy. Me and Kelsey were the leads, and it was really cool. It was the Creative Arts Emmys, and I thought we were going to get seated all the way in the nosebleed seats, because I'm like, it's this little series. Cut to me third row center. I had snuck in all this champagne, because I was thinking we're going to be in the nosebleed seats, and we're next to all of these people that I admire, in the mix. It was a bit surreal.

Menendez: You made a ballsy introduction.

Prada: Yes, I did. It didn't even feel ballsy, at the time, which is-

Menendez: It's because of all the champagne, Mishel.

Prada: Yeah, probably. Actually, yes. Now, this is the first time I'm thinking that, that's probably true. Carmen Cuba, who is the casting director for Stranger Things, got up there, and with her speech, took that platform, and really took advantage of it, and talked about being an immigrant, being Peruvian, and being really clear, as, "I'm what immigrants look like. This is where we're at." It was very moving. It brought me to tears.

My date, Jesse Hill, had worked with one of the guys on Stranger Things, for Season 2, and we ran into him, so random, and he invited us to the after-party. So, we went, and Carmen was there. I just went up to her, and said, "I really appreciate what you said. It was really powerful, and it moved me, and thank you so much for using that, because it makes me so proud." She complimented me on my outfit, and that was that.

The next day, I got called in for Vida. I did a self-tape, and it went to producers, and then I got to meet Tanya. I remember when Vida was announced, and just being so excited that a show like that was being made, and hoping that maybe I could get on it, one way or another, but wasn't really sure if I was there yet, and-

Menendez: Right. Your path to getting the role was bumpy. They didn't bring you in, originally, for Emma.

Prada: They brought me in for Lyn, because I actually, in life, associate a lot more with Lyn's journey.

Menendez: Free spirit.

Prada: Yeah, and then also, just that shift of thinking, "You know what? It's time to start a career, and what do I want? Where is my self-worth in myself?" and finding that. I lived, also, for a few years traveling around on a tour bus with a boyfriend, and just all sorts of stuff like that.

I didn't get that, and then, what I got called in for, was for Cruz. I remember reading this character, and thinking, "Oh, this is so cool." It was originally a recurring character, that they bumped up to series regular, but I was so excited to

get to portray a character like that, that was intelligent, part of the community, queer, and just unapologetically herself.

So, I went in, and I tested, which means I got up into the last few choices, and everybody was preparing me for it, because I'd never ... I was trying to book a few lines on a show, to get credits, and that was my first test. I really thought I was going to be super nervous, and I went in, and it was great. It was so fun. Tanya created a really playful environment, and then, I didn't get it. I felt this-

Menendez: Strike two.

Prada: Strike two. But the cool thing, was definitely feeling in a good place where I was really just okay with it. There was something that I was so proud, of being that far down the line and also being in that room, because at the point when you get to the last few choices, you're considered good enough to get the role. They're just trying to figure out how you fit into the bigger scheme of the world. Part of the reason I didn't get it, was because I looked too similar to the sister. And then, the opportunity arose, and they were just thinking, "Well, actually, maybe she could be one of the sisters."

Menendez: You know, it's interesting to me, though, because there is a parallel in your story and in Melissa's story, which is that both of you took the opportunity beyond your acting, in that room, to make an impression, to convey to Tanya, how important to you, what she was doing was.

Prada: Yeah. Yeah. I was prepped for the auditions, and they say, "Just go in there, do your job, and be professional, and walk out." I totally understand why, because nobody wants to put across any type of desperation, or like ... And they're, "Yeah, just remember me."

I was about to walk out, and I turned around, and I said, "You know, I know that maybe this isn't the most professional thing to do, but I can't walk out of this room without letting you know how proud I am to stand here, and we may work together on this project, we may not, but if I never see you again, I need to express that." I called my manager afterwards, and he's like, "You did what?" But I just knew that I couldn't. It was powerful, even in that space.

Menendez: Right. First time you read Emma, what did you think?

Prada: Ooh. Well, first time I read Emma was from the side of Lyn when I was auditioning for Lyn, and I had these ideas of who she was based off of ... from that point of view. Then, when I was given her, as my package, and my responsibility, she's not a very easy person to deal with, and-

Menendez: It's funny, because, as you say, I'm more of Lyn. In my mind, I'm like, "I'm more of an Emma."

Prada: Yeah. Yeah. No. I think it was a challenge, and it was a little bit scary. It was a little bit outside of my wheelhouse, and-

Menendez: She's a Type A assertive personality, in a world that is not kind to women who are Type A assertive personalities.

Prada: No, and also push you, if you want to succeed, a lot times, to feel that you have to be that way, to not take any BS from anybody, but I don't know. We talk about just chances, and the way that the stars align, or whatever you want to call it, but I had started working with an acting coach, Marjorie Ballentine, this amazing Cuban Latina from New York. She was Stella Adler's protégé.

I went in, and I was a little scared to be back in acting class, because it can get a little intense, and a little weird. She had been pushing me, because I'd been doing privates with her, and she said, "Just come into my class. We can work out. We can do some stuff," so I did, and I said, "I want you to give me the things you think I'm not good at. I just want to be able to fail, and I want you to really work me out, in that way."

The specific things that I'd been working on, were the specific things that Emma needed. It was about three months. I was in class with her for three months before I got the job, and it was a lot about standing in a room, and not apologizing for your space, and just really also being able to say something really vile, and not pull back a little bit.

Menendez: Are you sure it wasn't therapy, secretly masked as an acting class?

Prada: That's what acting class essentially is.

Menendez: How soon can I go?

Prada: I know, right? Oh, she's amazing.

Menendez: Tell me about booking jobs before the success of Vida.

Prada: I had a friend of mine, Clifton Collins Jr. I remember sitting in his backyard once, and he's like, "I think you need to just do this." He's like, "This is something that you need to go full force with."

Menendez: What was holding you back at that point, from doing that?

Prada: Confidence. I really didn't think that I had the strength to continue forward, and also just to put yourself out there. This town really does a really good job of disrespecting actors. You have to really find that strength within yourself, because it isn't until you book something, then all of a sudden, everybody's like, "Oh yeah," but then they're like, "But, what's the next thing?"

Menendez: Right. Right.

Prada: So, yeah. I think that was that, and I don't want to say that all of a sudden I got all this confidence and I went forward. I just went forward. I realized that the desire to

do it was enough. I didn't need every single thing propping me up. In a weird, though, everything kind of was.

I remember I was at a Mexican restaurant, when I first came out here, and there was a agent, that was with a pretty well-established cool agency, that was like, "Hey, are you an actor?" I was like, "Oh no, not me. I do it for fun," and he's like, "Well, here's my card. Send me your stuff. I really feel like I can work with you," and I just didn't. Things like that happened a few times, where you got the dream story.

Menendez: Wait, but dig into it for me. You think it was because you didn't know people who were actors, because you didn't want to deal with the rejection? What was the ...

Prada: I think it was really, I didn't understand the idea of just finding that validation, and that courage, within yourself, to go forward. I also didn't really see anybody around me, where I grew up, doing what I was doing. So, it definitely felt like this thing that I loved to do, and that maybe I could do, but even when presented with these incredible opportunities, it was still something that I was like, "Oh no, but not me," like not me.

And then, gathering that together and thinking, "You know what? Yeah, why not me?" Who does she think she is? And it's like, yeah, I'm going to go forward. I always had these this idea that artists ... which feels so silly now, because now I know so many actors, and musicians, and painters, and all that stuff ... but that you just came forward with this amazing strength of self-worth, and you just showed up, and you did your thing, and that's what made you capable of succeeding. I didn't realize that you kind of bring it all on the bus with you. You're like, "The self-doubt, you go maybe." The joys, and the successes, and you're just like, "All right guys, we're all getting on this bus."

Menendez: Get in here, load up.

Prada: "We're going this way. I mean, we may only make it for a few blocks, but we're definitely heading in that direction."

Ad: *Hey, if it's time to upgrade your bra, then you should check out Lively. They offer bra styles for all different body types, available in 32A-44DDD. They've got bralettes, T-shirt bras, no-wire bras, and so much more. For a limited time, you can get \$10 off your first order, by visiting [WeArLively.com/Latina](http://WeArLively.com/Latina). That's [wearlively.com/Latina](http://wearlively.com/Latina). The Lively bras I ordered were stylish and really comfortable. They're made of soft fabrics, that you'll actually want to wear all day. The website is easy to navigate, and as you know, I love trying things on at home. Their How To Measure guide is on point, and makes the process really easy.*

*Lively is creating products that we all thought were impossible, like their no-wire strapless bra, or best-selling busty bralettes, both of which quickly sold out, and had thousands on back-order. Plus, they have free and easy returns, using the prepaid shipping label included in every package. When you refer a friend, for every friend that signs up for Lively, and makes a purchase, you receive 100 points. That's \$10. So, head to [WeArLively.com/Latina](http://WeArLively.com/Latina). That's [wearlively.com/Latina](http://wearlively.com/Latina), and get \$10 off your first order.*

Menendez: When I had Melissa on the podcast, Melissa Barrera, who plays your sister on the show, she talked about how the nudity mandate, which was made clear to you guys when you got the roles, originally, was off-putting for her. She had reservations about it. How did you feel, about the fact, that you were going to have to be nude on the show?

Prada: I always felt that I would do nudity, for the right project, and for art. I actually had gotten offered a part, on a movie that was kind of a bigger movie, but I was going to have to be ... I was a butt of a joke, and I was going to be the girl on the webcam, topless, and I said no. I said, "I don't have a problem with nudity, but it is something that I want to make sure it's for the right thing," and I knew that Vida would be a project like that. It's exposing, but it wasn't anything that I was completely just turned away from.

Menendez: There's another question I had, which is you grew up as a conservative Christian.

Prada: Oh yeah.

Menendez: What was the journey, from that conservative Christian upbringing, to being on a show that celebrates and explores sexuality?

Prada: I don't know. Sometimes I look back, and I'm just like, "How did I start there, and come here?" I grew up in Miami, in Hialeah, and my high school was very queer. It wasn't anything that made you ostracized or otherized. It just was what it was. I think, in a weird way, that was kind of blessing, because even though I had this upbringing, in church ... I was really involved, I was doing plays, and just really in the little drama club at church, but also, I was doing theater in high school too, so I was just exposed to a lot of that.

Honestly, I don't know. I think back on it, it's just, for me, I look at just what's in front of you, and you just decide, do I feel comfortable with this, or do I not, and then you go forward. I also realized I had this conversation with my mom, about that, and I realized it wasn't something that I felt ashamed of, with her. I just thought, "You know what? This is what's going to happen. If you don't want to watch it, I totally understand, but I'm letting you know, that this is what's going on."

Menendez: What did she say?

Prada: She said, "Well, at least you're playing a character." I said, "No, mom. I'm actually playing a part of myself. I don't completely just take this other person, my characters are part of me. So, if it's difficult, I understand. You have every right to feel the way that you feel, but I'm just letting you know."

Menendez: This is an indelicate way to ask this question, but I've read about boyfriends.

Prada: Yeah.

Menendez: So, do you identify as straight?

Prada: I don't. I think identifying as straight is really weird, for me. I feel completely capable of falling in love with whoever makes sense, and I've always felt that way. I was in a really long relationship, so I think that kind of hinders the ability to explore other avenues, but I feel completely open to whatever life brings. I know I was even asked, "Oh, well what's it like doing sex scenes with another woman?" I'm like, "They're really hot, they're sexy people." It wasn't really that difficult. It just wasn't anything that really feels like it's pushing that boundaries.

Actually, one of the lines that Emma says is, "I don't identify as anything. I'm just me." That really resonates. I just want to fall in love with whoever I fall in love with, and I don't want it to be something that I have to represent through other people's experiences. I never had that issue with my mom, of feeling like she was going to not accept me, because we did have that discussion. I did tell her that, and she was like, "Oh, okay. Oh whatever."

But my sister, who has been in relationships with women, for the last 10 years, she feels the same way too. She tells people, "I tell people I'm a lesbian, because it makes it easier for them to understand, because chances are, I will be in relationships with women. When I'm single, I could really just be with whoever, but I use the word lesbian more, because it's easier for other people." Literally, that's a line that she said as well, "I don't identify as anything. I'm just me," and I think it's something that I think we both really resonate with.

Menendez: *We want to tell you about a podcast we think you'll like, TED en Español. In each episode, thought leaders from across the Spanish-speaking world, take the TED or TEDx stage, to explore the big ideas and questions of our time, like what is the connection between math and love? Can we apply the rules from the games of chess, to winning in our lives? Can entrepreneurs lead us to improving education and health, for the entire world? The weekly podcast features talks exclusively in Spanish, and is hosted by the curator of TED en Español, Gerry Garbulska. Find it on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen. TED en Español, ideas en nuestro idioma.*

Menendez: Mom's Dominican.

Prada: Yeah.

Menendez: Dad's side is Puerto Rican, some Mexican.

Prada: Puerto Rican. It's my biological father, who I don't know. Yeah, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and French. I just got my Ancestry.com back.

Menendez: No surprises?

Prada: Yes. Well, not really, but kind of. My biggest chunk, which I believe is 22%, is Portuguese, which isn't uncommon for the Caribbean, but I had no idea. Then, there's French as well, which I knew. But then, I always feel like, especially because I don't know my dad, I'm like, "Were my parents making that up?" You never know. I was like, okay, well the ancestry says that I have a lot of ... also Native American through Central America, which makes sense with the Mexican,

and then 3% of Andean Native American, 20% African, mostly Mali and Ivory Coast, and then 3% Eastern Jew, 5% Scottish-English.

- Menendez: Like you said, the Caribbean.
- Prada: I'm like, "What are we doing down there?" I feel like the rest of the world should just a note from there, and let's all just make love, until we all turn brown.
- Menendez: In addition to all of your acting, you also write.
- Prada: Yes.
- Menendez: Tell me what you're working on now.
- Prada: Oh, man. I have a script that I am just trying to finish polishing, that will hopefully, as soon as we're done with this press cycle, I'll be able to finish, because it's been a lot of stop and start, with the show being such a important thing. I just look at people like Donald Glover, or Jessica Alba, or whoever, and thinking-
- Menendez: They don't sleep.
- Prada: I'm just like, "Oh, okay-
- Menendez: They're vampires.
- Prada: ... I need to sleep less. Yeah, because I'm just like, "How do you do this?," but I realized, from Season 1 to Season 2, I feel a little bit more comfortable, and I feel a little bit more capable, because I'm not ... I just wasn't used to having to be asked so many things, and to have to put all this output, but yeah, I'm hoping that I can finish that up. I just have a few things that I'm really looking to just pitch, and get made.
- I actually wrote a pilot, that was similar to Vida, that took place in Highland Park, and wrote a character that was gender fluid and queer, for myself. When Vida was announced, I stopped, because ... Well, I'd written it, and I was like, "You know what? I just want to see what something like this looks like." I wrote it with a friend of mine, Mark, and we saw Vida announced, and I was like, "Oh wow, someone's already making something like this. We're good."
- Menendez: That's a generous energy of yours, instead of being like-
- Prada: I know, I need to not. Now, there's something also, nobody ever says that about buddy cop movies, or a procedural. "Oh, there's already a procedural," so I think that, that's also something for us to be mindful of, of thinking, "Oh, there's already one show like that, that's enough."
- I think being part of Vida, has really made that a much more poignant reality for me, of thinking, "You know what? It's fine." There's enough space for all of us, because the more we are holding our arms together, and stretching out that space, it's not, "Oh, I'm the one that got the series made," or "I'm the one that got

the script sold," or whatever. It's, "Well, if I'm doing it, I'm going to help you with my contacts, so that maybe you can do it too," and we're all going to be doing it together, and then just making more roles and space for us.

Menendez: Mishel, thank you so much.

Prada: Thanks for having me. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us today. Latina to Latina was originally co-created with Bustle. Now, the podcast is owned and executive produced by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, and me. Maria Murriel was the sound designer on this episode. We want to hear from you. Tell us who you want to hear from, and how you're making the show a part of your life. Email us at [Hola@LatinaToLatina.com](mailto:Hola@LatinaToLatina.com). Remember to subscribe, or follow us on Radio Public, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you're listening.

**CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. "What Vida's Mishel Prada Has Learned about Identity." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., June 3, 2019. [LatinaToLatina.com](http://LatinaToLatina.com).

Produced by

