

# From 'Sesame Street' to the stage



**SONIA MANZANO:** She will continue in the role of Maria when *Sesame Street* starts its 37th season in August.

*I used to watch a lot of television when I was a little kid and I used to wonder, how come there's no people who look like me?* — SONIA MANZANO

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Big Bird confides in her. Elmo cuddles up to her. Oscar the Grouch can't seem to stay angry around her.

As the patient and motherly Maria Figueroa Rodriguez on the iconic children's television series *Sesame Street* for the past 34 years, Sonia Manzano has inspired the imaginations of countless preschoolers.

But when she sought inspiration for her first book, *No Dogs Allowed* (Simon & Schuster, \$15.95), Manzano reached into

her own childhood growing up in the South Bronx during the late 1950s and '60s.

As part of a Puerto Rican clan that grew whenever a new family member arrived from the island, Manzano says she often felt different from her peers.

She never saw people who looked like her on television programs like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. And even the food her family packed for picnics differed from the other kids' meals: They ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches; she had rice, beans and roast pork.

Manzano came to appreciate the differences, though, and she looks back fondly now on the childhood that informed *No Dogs Allowed*, a book that should be familiar to South Florida readers. It was the 2004 selection for "One Picture Book, One Community," a community-wide literacy initiative for children and their families.

Now Manzano has adapted *No Dogs Allowed* into a children's musical that premiered June 17 in the Actors' Playhouse at Miracle Theatre in Coral Gables. The musical runs

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through July 29.

Writing a musical was a first for Manzano — and a reluctant one at that.

"There's a million people in New York with a musical in their back pocket," she says, "and I wasn't about to join them looking for a theater."

But Manzano's production had a better shot at the stage than the average musical — not just because of her celebrity but also because of a series of serendipitous events that began last summer.

Bob Holtzman, a Miami publicist who represented the Actors' Playhouse, had run into Manzano, an old college friend, at a Miami Children's Hospital Pediatric Hall of Fame function.

As the pair caught up, Holtzman asked if she had ever thought of turning the book into a musical and Manzano said she had not.

So Holtzman arranged a lunch for Manzano with Barbara Stein, executive producing director of the Actors' Playhouse, and Earl Maulding, children's theater director.

The meeting went well enough, Stein says, and "we asked her if we could commission her work. . . . Her celebrity adds a lot of recognition and credibility to what we're doing here."

Manzano agreed and partnered on the project with composer Stephen Lawrence, who writes music for *Sesame*

*Street*, and lyricist Billy Aronson, who worked on the Broadway musical, *Rent*.

The musical, like the book, draws on Manzano's memories of weekend family outings to the lake and all the ritual preparation that went into them: the women waking pre-dawn to cook food for the picnic; the men making last-minute car repairs to ready for the 100-mile roundtrip — only to have the cars routinely break down; the children feeling giddy in anticipation . . . then growing impatient on the long drive.

But the musical has a slight plot twist that, Manzano says, lends the story enough tension to carry the audience through the hour-long production.

The plot twist involves the family dog, but you'll have to see it to learn the rest.

Manzano, who will continue in the role of Maria when *Sesame Street* starts its 37th season in August, does not appear in the play. Maybe it's just as well.

She says children don't recognize her as much as they used to anymore. Part of the reason is that the children's television landscape is much more crowded today than when *Sesame Street* debuted in 1969.

"I'm competing with . . . 50 billion puppets and *Dora* [the Explorer, of cable TV children's network Nickel-



**'NO DOGS ALLOWED':** Director Earl Maulding goes over a scene with Jeremy Hawkins as El Exigente the dog and Fiorella Bianchi as Iris during rehearsals at the Miracle Theater in Coral Gables.

odeon]," she says.

But the adults who grew up watching *Sesame Street* still get emotional when they encounter Manzano, who is a youthful 56.

"When I appear at various places at events," she says, "people, usually in their 30s, will come up to me and go, 'Oh!' more than their kids. They'll say, 'I feel so emotional. I had no idea I was going to feel so emotional when I met you.' It's because they watched *Sesame Street* when we were the only show."

Despite *Sesame Street*'s waning influence on young minds, Manzano has not tired of playing the part of Maria.

In fact, she relishes the role for allowing her to bring to television something that was lacking during her childhood: ethnic diversity.

"I used to watch a lot of television when I was a little kid," she says, "and I used to wonder, how come there's no people who look like me? Or who live in a neighborhood like the one I live in?"

"As an adult I can tell you that if a kid doesn't see them-

selves represented in society, they don't know what they're going to grow up to be. . . . And so I had to satisfy myself going to Mexican movies that my mother used to take me to. . . . I used to try to be Mexican because those were the beautiful girls I saw in the movies.

"I think it's wonderful that I ended up being on a show to remedy what used to bother me as a little girl. Because when they hired me they said, 'We want you. We want all the Spanish kids to relate to you and see you as one of them.'"