

PETRIE

In Conversation with Ariana DeBose

“It’s a triumph to experience deep adversity and choose to continue on.”

WORDS

TAANYA GARG

PHOTOGRAPHER

SILVANA TREVALE

STYLIST

BRILLANT NYANSAGO

SET DESIGNER

BRONTE CARTER

HAIR STYLIST

MARCIA LEE @ ONE REPRESENTS USING LIVING PROOF

MAKE-UP ARTIST

ADAM DE CRUZ @ ONE REPRESENTS USING SUQQU

PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT

ANTONIO PERRONE

STYLIST'S ASSISTANTS

THEA BYRNE AND JAZ GANDHI

SPECIAL THANKS TO

ZADRIAN + SARAH, MORGAN PESANTE, MATTHEW AVENTO,
ELENA STANCIU AND MELLO STUDIOS.

MAY 2022



ARIANA DEBOSE IN ALEXANDER MCQUEEN



Until Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*, Ariana DeBose's own modest fame had stemmed from nearly a decade in television and theatre; beginning from her TV debut in *So You Think You Can Dance* and Broadway debut in *Bring it On: The Musical*. Some of DeBose's most notable roles include playing Bullet in the original cast of *Hamilton* and *Jane in A Bronx Tale*, as well as the lead in *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*, which resulted in a Tony award nomination for the Best Featured Actress in a Musical.

In this issue of *PETRIE*, a conversation with Ariana DeBose gives us a glimpse of the person behind *West Side Story*'s Anita, taking the reader from the kid who wanted to become a policeman just so she could protect the ones she holds dear, to becoming the first queer, Black Latina woman making history at the 94th Academy Awards. As she shares stories from her early childhood, her theatre and silver screen career, and post-Oscar win reflections, we find that no one can personify this issue's theme, Triumph, better than Ariana DeBose.





ARIANA DEBOSE IN FENDI

Taanya Garg: Tell us a bit about yourself and your background? How would you describe your younger self?

Ariana DeBose: I grew up in North Carolina, so I'd say that I am a Carolina girl. My mum raised me as a single parent, alongside my grandmother. It feels like it took a village to raise me – a village of very strong, eclectic, opinionated women. I had the benefit of varying viewpoints and examples for learning to advocate for myself and learning how to be an active supporter and leader in the community. I was always encouraged to be 100% myself. I was raised by my mum's side of the family, who is white. So, for a long time, I was the only one who looked like me, but I was never put in a position to think that I was different. They embraced all of my quirks, so I fit right in. Not until I was older, did I realise that I am different by virtue of my skin colour, but that's about it – it never separated me from my family.

I was a happy kid, for the most part. I loved people. As a kid, I won an *Ivory Baby* contest in the States. There's a brand of soap called Ivory soap, and for the longest time, they would choose a toddler every year to represent the brand. So, my mum always tells this story that when I became a finalist in the contest, we attended a big dinner in New York. As everybody's names were being called out, I just clapped and cheered for everyone because I was genuinely just happy to be there; I didn't really know what was going on. And then I ended up winning the contest. That's something that has still stayed with me. I still like to see other people succeed and am very interested in their achievements. If I'm a part of their journey, that's great, but even the benefit of witnessing their success is just as great. That's what we're here to do.

TG: At what stage in your life did you decide to pursue acting and how was that decision received by those around you – friends, family, and teachers? Was there any pressure from your family to pursue a more traditional career?

AD: As a kid, the media you consume influences what you end up pursuing. I told my grandfather once that I wanted to become a policeman, like him – “you're protecting the people you love, and I want to do that’.

Later, I thought that I could be a doctor, like Julianna Margulies and George Clooney, because my mum was watching the drama *ER*. I moved on from that and wanted to become a senator because of *The West Wing*, thinking that I'll change the world one day. It was my Nana who then said that I could become an actor, since I really liked movies. I enjoyed dancing, so I started out in the industry by pursuing dance and eventually came to realise that I didn't want to limit myself to one thing. I once visited my aunt in NYC and we saw *Aida*, and as we walked out of that theatre, there was a giant billboard of Bebe Neuwirth, whom I recognised as Lilith from *Frasier*. Seeing her be a dancer, singer, and an actor, I realised that I could do everything. That's when things began to change for me. In high school I started taking theatre classes, which was kind of late, but until then I had focused solely on being the best dancer I could at the time.

From my family there was nothing but support for my dream of being a dancer. They asked me some challenging questions, to test my dedication, but they never tried to steer me in a different direction. They just pointed out that it was not going to be easy. For some reason, I always looked at them and said, 'Well, I can do it.' I don't know where I got that confidence from, but it has served me well.

TG: I read that there was a time in your life as an actor when you used to ride a subway for 24 hours as you didn't have a place to stay at the time. From struggling young to reaching where you are now – what kept you going? How did you navigate through those moments of uncertainty?

AD: It all goes back to my time growing up with my mum. I was born in Wilmington and then we moved to New Bern, and that's when it was just her and me. I grew up watching her navigate many challenging situations, but she always found a solution. We liked the phrase 'It's gotta get dirty before it gets clean,' so I'm not averse to struggles. When I had first moved to New York, and where I was staying sort of fell through, I didn't know what to do, so I got on the subway, and I rode it over 24 hours. It wasn't necessarily a place of safety, but it was a place where I could think about what I should do next.

I eventually found support (and a place to live) with my friend Eleanor Scott (who became a choreographer and has got two Broadway shows playing right now). But I think the lesson there was realising that sometimes the best solution is asking for help, and humbling yourself to acknowledge you don't know what your next step should be, but that you do need help. It's hard for some people to ask for help but the greatest thing you can do is to reach out.

TG: You recently won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for your role as Anita in *West Side Story*. How did it feel to win the Oscars in the presence of your mother, who you've mentioned in your winning speech as an equal recipient of the achievement?

AD: It was a truly special and poignant moment, in the context of my career and life. Having my mum there, who is my best friend, was so special. She's one of the few people who would never want anything from me, she just wants to be there to support me. That kind of unconditional love is something that you can only find from your mother. So, to have her there in that moment with me was very candid.



I wouldn't have had what I have without her. She sacrificed so much for me to be able to pursue my dreams. As children, we don't understand how much our parents give up, for us to have an opportunity. Sometimes parents take on tremendous stress and responsibility for their children's success, or to have what they need. I don't think it's a burden, as they take it on willingly, but that doesn't mean that it comes easy. I was always able to see it and acknowledge it growing up, but in my adulthood, it has become clearer to me that my mum's sacrifice and willingness to take on challenges and make hard choices has formed me into the human and artist that I am today.

TG: What are some of the changes that you've noticed after winning an Oscar? In the beginning of their career, an actor probably feels compelled to take up any and all roles, do you see that changing now?

AD: I have noticed that there's more opportunity now. It's funny, I think accolades serve as a form of validation in the eyes of the industry. It sort of says that you're worthy – just the top 2% of the industry have an Oscar to their name. Once you become an Academy Award winner, it doesn't go away. I don't know if it has made anything easier, but it has brought me more opportunities, for which I'm grateful. It also means that I have to be more discerning; I guess the word is picky. I have the privilege of choice, and I can choose to take on roles and projects that call to me, rather than because I need to work for the financial gain of it. In itself this is a tremendous privilege.



TG: Which projects would you prefer to take on going forward?

AD: I want to take on things that are not only timely, but that push the button. Culturally, there are many buttons to be pushed at present. I strongly believe in aspirational stories. I never thought that I'd be an Academy Award winner and suddenly, I am. So, I do believe in aspirational stories; and in stories that challenge society's understanding of who we are as humans. I'm currently working on a new rom-com project that I'm executive producing, called *Two and Only*. I believe it has the potential to explore bisexuality in a way that was not previously explored. I believe in sharing lived experiences that are not highlighted frequently in Hollywood: a chance to be seen and heard.

I'm not precious about the vehicle of which this comes in. I am not specific about the kind of person I must work with, or if a project should be made by a particular director; nor do I say how successful a project should be and how much money it should make. I just imagine the type of work, the subject matter, and the feeling I get when I'm doing it; and the feeling that other people get when they view it.

TG: What's a role that you've played, either on stage or screen, that's closest to your heart?

AD: All the roles that I've played have had a profound impact on me in one way or another. Playing Anita, obviously, is incredibly close to my heart; it gave me the opportunity on a human level to celebrate a part of myself that I had not really explored or shared

with my community. I've said this very publicly before that most people assumed I was African American, and no one ever asked me the question of how I identify or what my lineage is. I find it fascinating that we still assume someone's identity by how they look, their hair texture, or their physiognomy. Well, that's not really it.

Also, I played the Bullet in *Hamilton* and as I've left the show, over time, it's become more important to me. It was a role in which I barely spoke; yet it became something so essential to the plot. It's a testament to the fact that there are no small parts in a story. You don't have to always speak to make an incredible impact. Playing Donna Summer in the *Donna Summer* musical was a special opportunity for me to create a triple threat role. Donna Summer didn't dance, but my way into that character was through dancing. I used dance as a way to show the audience how she was feeling. And that's something that Sergio Trujillo, Des McAnuff and I were able to create in a way that hadn't been done before since the days of Gwen Verdon, in her collaborations with Bob Fosse, or Michael Bennett, who created *A Chorus Line*. It allowed dance to be used as a storytelling device and allowed a main character to show the audience who they were, how they felt, what they were going through. It's not something you see every day, so, I'm incredibly proud of that role.

TG: What was the most challenging aspect of working in a film as compared to theatre? Do you prefer one medium over the other?

AD: It's all about storytelling to me. I don't necessarily have a preference – there's a different kind of stamina each medium requires. When you're working on Broadway, there're eight shows a week. There's a different way of maintaining your body and a different version of self-care. When you're working on screen, it's a game of hurry up and wait, much like interval training. So, if you're making a musical, you learn your dance numbers and the rest, while you wait for the time to shoot it. You wait for the team to get the lighting right, the sound right, build the set and then you show up, and you do it. And then you redo it by trying something new. There's also a need of understanding your cameras, your audience, whereas in theatre, you're playing in a house of 600 or even 1600 people. It's a different skill but it's all storytelling essentially.

Okay, I will admit, I'm a little fearful of going back to the stage at the moment, since it's been a long time. I don't know if I'm any good at it anymore. I would need a lot of rehearsal and practice, I think.

TG: It is said that many theatrical actors follow superstitions before stepping on set. Do you have similar beliefs or a ritual that you follow before every performance?

AD: I don't think I am... I'm not terribly superstitious. I find that I just create a different routine for each show. I think one thing that's consistent is that I create a playlist for each character, even for my on-screen roles. It helps me get into the character's psyche.

TG: And what songs did your playlist consist of for playing Anita?





AD: Well, I had the benefit of having the original *West Side Story* soundtrack. So, there was *Dance at the Gym* on it, to get me in the right headspace. There was also a lot of Celia Cruz for Anita and a little bit of Celine Dion just because it felt like a power ballad. *I'm Your Lady* - that was very Anita-Bernardo to me. There was a lot of Gypsy Kings. I included the soundtrack of *Dance with Me* because it took me back to my childhood when I was my most creative self. I love all the tunes from that particular soundtrack because they remind you of who Anita is - she is creative and passionate. There was also some Kelly Clarkson. However, the ballad that really got me for all the deep stuff was It's *Quiet Uptown* from Hamilton. It always breaks my heart a little bit. So good. So sad.

TG: There's accounts of you not feeling initially confident to play the role of Anita as you couldn't speak fluent Spanish and didn't feel good enough to represent Latinas on screen. Has working on *West Side Story* altered the relationship you have with your racial identity or is it still changing?

AD: My relationship with identity and all of its facets is ongoing. I think that I'll feel that way for the rest of my life because I wake up and I discover something new about myself every day. But I'm much more comfortable with my racial identity now. I am who I am, and I do not apologise for it. I think my ability to be true to myself is one of my strengths.

I am Puerto Rican. I've got a white mum. I'm a Black woman. I'm also a Latina. And that's just who I am. I embrace all parts of myself, and I try to encourage everyone to do the same. If you can accept yourself, theoretically, you should be able to accept those around you for what they are.

TG: If 15 years from now, a new director remakes *West Side Story* what advice would you give to the person who plays Anita?

AD: I would just tell the actor to make the role their own. We don't need another me and we don't need another Rita Moreno. We need her version of Anita, you know? That's what Rita gave to me. She said, "Bring yourself to her. Bring all the things that make you unique. Infuse them in your role."

TG: Last year, Russel T. Davies gave a statement that ‘gay people should play gay roles’? What are your thoughts on this?

AD: I believe in respectful portrayals. If you’re willing to do the work as an actor, to bring respect, integrity, and authenticity to your portrayal of a character, then there is no reason why a straight actor should not be playing a gay role. I think the one caveat to all of this is particularly marginalised groups of people. And that is not to exclude the gay community as being marginalised, but there is more accurate and authentic gay representation, specifically white gay male representation in our industry than there ever has been before. However, that is not the case with the trans community. So, in that respect, I believe that trans characters should be played by trans people. I agree with the statement that non-binary characters should be played by non-binary identifying humans. But here’s the thing, if you are talking to a trans woman, I doubt she would say that she wants to be excluded from the opportunity of playing a woman. I could be wrong, and I won’t speak on behalf of all trans women but what I wish to say is that if I don’t want to be boxed into my one lived experience, I doubt most other actors would like that either.

TG: According to you, what can the industry do to ensure success stories as yours are heard more often, rather than as an exception?

AD: That is a good question, and I don’t know what the answer to it is. I think the way that I ensure that I am not an exception to the rule is by opening the doors that I can open for other people, and using my voice in the rooms that I’m in. For me taking on a role, like being an Executive Producer of a project that I’m a part of, ensures that I have a voice and can place more seats at the table; that we are casting and creating in an inclusive, equitable manner. I am not focused on being palatable, but I am focused on being heard. And part of being heard is being willing to listen. Everything that I have learnt in the last six months is that Hollywood is not black and white. Contrary to popular belief, what we think is so easy and straight up common sense, often it’s not. A way to make things easier and ensure that there’s not just an exception to the rule is having a conversation and realising that change doesn’t come overnight.

PETRIE

MAY 2022



ARIANA DEBOSE IN RICHARD QUINN





I can say this as a member of many marginalised communities that, yes, it's frustrating. It's absolutely maddening. We want change, and we want it now but that's not how life works. So, it's my job to be a part of meaningful, lasting change to ensure a better future but I can't expect that I will see all the fruits of my labour in my lifetime.

TG: What is your biggest fear and hope for the future?

AD: I really hope that the movie *Don't Look Up* never comes true. My biggest fear for the future, in general, is that we are seeing the death of compassion and empathy. Losing our ability to acknowledge that we will not always agree with each other is scary. This doesn't make our differing viewpoints wrong; it just makes us different. And there has to be value in difference, in addition to all the things that we agree on. There should be value in discord, and we should be able to move past it without inspiring hatred.

My biggest hope is that we see the rebirth of empathy and compassion.

TG: The theme of this issue is *Triumph*, how does that relate to your life and career?

AD: I think it is a triumph to get up every day and try again. It's a triumph to experience deep adversity and choose to continue. It's a triumph to make the most of the opportunities that you are given, the opportunities you have earned. And it is a triumph to be able to stand in the fullness of your being and acknowledge that you're not always going to get things right but sometimes you will. And both versions of that reality are 100% okay.

TG: In closing, is there anything that you'd like to share?

AD: If I could share anything at all, it would be about my post Oscar win. I think people forget that an experience like that is both shiny, beautiful, and absolutely life-changing and being-changing. I'm in a process right now where I'm lucky enough to be working on something that I really enjoy, but I have also discovered that my tastes have changed. My wants have changed. I'm learning in real time what that is, and how that affects the artist I am, the human I am. Perhaps my values have changed. I'm beginning to wonder if we don't have enough grace for how people evolve and grow. Because I think people like to look at growth in the context of what they deem acceptable growth, as opposed to someone's actual authentic growth.

I'm meditating on how I have grown. Who am I now? When you begin to lead a more publicly visible life, you get a better understanding of what you mean to other people or what you mean to an industry. And sometimes you forget to ask what you mean to yourself.

