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Emily Alabi talks Encanto, performing at the Oscars and Latin dance in Hollywood



by Victoria Davis 2 days ago

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It's a story of song, dance, opportunities, defying closed doors and believing in the magic inside herself. No, it's not about Mirabel Madrigal, though there are plenty of parallels with the *Encanto* character. The story belongs to Emily Alabi, *Selena: The Series* choreographer, whose disdain for salsa eventually became a life passion and career goal.

Alabi, hailing from both Salvadoran and Korean heritage, is an award-winning salsa dancer

with eight championship titles under her belt. Known worldwide as part of the dynamic brother and sister duo, "Junior and Emily," Alabi has performed on the stages of *America's Got Talent*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing with the Stars*, Disney's *Austin and Ally*, and CW's *Jane the Virgin*.

She's also had recurring and guest star roles on ABC's *The Rookie*, CBS' *Magnum, P.I.* and *NCIS*, Hulu's *Marvel's Runaways*, and MTV's *Teen Wolf*.

But alongside her most recent television project as choreographer for Netflix's biographical drama on Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla, Alabi's latest accomplishment was getting the chance to perform at [this year's Academy Awards](#) in the "[We Don't Talk About Bruno](#)" musical segment.

Selena choreographer Emily Alabi reflects on Latin dance's future in Hollywood.

We got the chance to speak with Alabi about performing one of the world's most popular Disney songs on the world's most popular televised stage, how *Encanto's* music has "opened doors" for Latin dance culture in entertainment, and Alabi's hopes for bringing encouragement and inspiration to Latin women through her work in Hollywood.



Hidden Remote: How did you get into dance in the first place? Did you always know you wanted to pursue this as a career and be a choreographer in the film industry?

Emily Alabi: Not at all. I got into dance when I was about ten years old. I grew up in a rough neighborhood in San Francisco and my brother was getting into a lot of trouble just being out on the streets. And I started to follow in his footsteps. My dad was with a salsa dance company at the time and he figured putting us in dance classes would keep us off the streets and doing something productive. And he could also keep an eye on us.

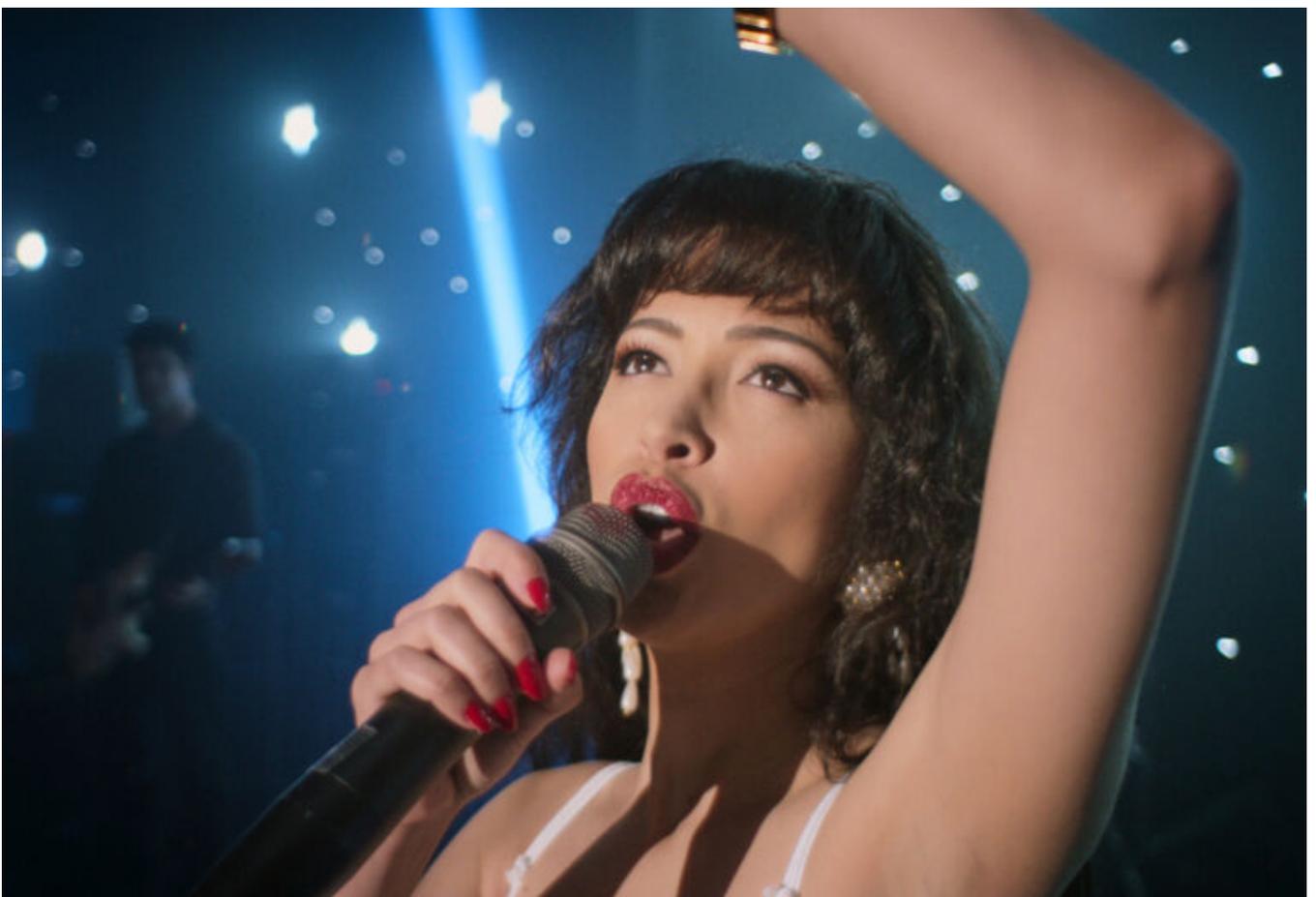
So that's how we got into dance. And we hated it. We fought my dad on going to class every week. To us, salsa dancing was something that adults did. It wasn't something that kids did. So it was not a cool thing to do. But here we are, twenty-plus years later, with a thriving career in dance and choreography. Nobody really thought could happen, but It's been amazing.

Hidden Remote: How did you eventually navigate your way into Hollywood?

Alibi: My brother and I started traveling to different salsa festivals and we started to see this whole new world where we could actually travel to teach and perform and get paid doing this.

Our style is very flashy and we do a lot of spins and cool partner work moves, so there's always this attraction commercially to it. We did *America's Got Talent* during one of the first seasons and they were telling us that we'd be able to reach a bigger audience if we started dancing to commercial music, because middle America just didn't really know what salsa was.

We were so resistant to that idea, but fast forward a couple years and *AGT* asked us to come back on the show and we were put with the same producer, started working with commercial music, and people loved it.



Hidden Remote: Fast forward even further and you were also brought on to do choreography for Netflix's *Selena: The Series*. That must have been wild choreographing for this biopic of a famous Mexican-American pop star as you were also making your way into this business?

Alabi: Being able to research, you know, a part of Selena, her very beginnings, this whole other side of her that people hadn't known, was so inspired as well, you know, for myself as an aspiring artist.

The whole series was about shining a light on that part of her life and how she fell in love with music and dance, and singing and fashion. We all start from somewhere. And as long as we continue to be passionate about what we do, and don't give up on our dreams, anything is possible.

Hidden Remote: You've also been on the show *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing with the Stars*. Being on a televised stage is nothing new to you, but this year you got the chance to perform at the Academy Awards to a song that everyone in the world is talking about: "We Don't Talk About Bruno." What was that like?

Alabi: It was a dream. To be able to do this with my brother, alongside the film's cast, and do our style and our interpretation work with salsa dancing on one of the most prestigious stages in the world, and to a Latino movie and song at the Oscars, it honestly was just such an honor. I'm very grateful.

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The choreographer, Charm La'Donna, was able to really bring in characteristics of the characters and infuse them into the dance. She created amazing choreography, but for the partner work section that she had me and my brother put together, she was like, "Do your own thing. I just want you guys to embrace what the movies about," which to us meant being alive and embracing this light and we got to bring all those feelings to life through our dancing.

There were about forty dancers and everybody in the room was just so grateful and excited to be there. And it was awesome to see this performance that was embracing every and all types of movement, all types of styles. It was a big melting pot of joy and fun and happiness and color.



We Don't Talk About Bruno (Live at The Oscars 2022)



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Hidden Remote: As somebody in the world of dance and music, what is it about this song that's caused it to capture so much attention from everyone around the world?

Alibi: I once saw a video on Tik Tok of this little girl performing the characters in that number and putting on this whole performance play. And I think that is the key right there, the fact that this song is a performance. It's not just about dancing. It's about the acting and getting to sing along and putting on all these different emotions as these characters, I think that's what people really gravitated to, especially the kids because kids, I mean, they're the best actors, right?

Hidden Remote: In recent years, Hollywood's been a lot more intent on making cultural-specific movie features—be it dance, martial arts or even what's put on the table during a dinner time scene—as authentic as possible. Do you believe the dances in *Encanto* have set a new standard for, or have done justice to, the very expressive world of Latin dance?

Alibi: I think that both the performances of *Encanto* and those that were at the Academy Awards, I think it is a nice door open for us Latinos, and Latin dancing cultures, for the world to get a peek at what we do. And I'm hoping that this crack that happened, is going to become bigger as the years go by and allow more opportunities to see Latino dancing culture and Latinos on bigger platforms, on bigger stages, and part of bigger projects.

I want people to be able to see all the different movements and passions that are behind Latino culture and dancing.



We Don't Talk About Bruno (From "Encanto")



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Hidden Remote: Has that been a goal of yours from the beginning of this journey? From *Dancing with the Stars* to *Selena* and most recently with the Oscars, are you hoping to bring more authentic Latin dance to the forefront of film, television, and entertainment as a whole?

Alabi: Absolutely. I want to be an example that, as Latina women, we can pursue all and anything that we desire, and that we belong on the biggest stages and the biggest screens. We are powerful, we have greatness in us and we have so much to share.

I'm also an aspiring actor and, right now, my focus is to pursue acting full time. I definitely want to be one of those Latinas that truly makes an impact and is up on those stages and platforms sharing my story. And I hope that I can inspire other little girls to want to do the same.

Hidden Remote: That's very in line with the themes of *Encanto* as well.

Alabi: Yes, it is! And that's why I tell people, "Don't close the door on opportunities," because I always believe that there's a reason that they're placed there. Even with acting, I thought, "Well, I'm a dancer now. And this is all I'm meant to do." But then there were these opportunities that came into my life that required dancing and acting and productions that wanted me because of my dance. Suddenly, this whole new world opened up for me.

You just never know what things will appear on your path. We don't know why, or we may not even be interested, but I would just invite people to take a look and chase that curiosity and see where it leads.

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Did you watch the 2022 Academy Awards? What did you think of the performances? Let us know in the comments below!

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