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**Transition:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

**Jesse Thorn:** From [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR, it's *Bullseye*.

**Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

**Jesse Thorn:** In 1971, Sonia Manzano was in her early 20s. She was a junior in college studying acting. She'd just gone back home to New York for her first gig, a role in an off-Broadway musical called *Godspell*. While she was there, she got an audition for another part. This time, it was a TV show for kids set in New York. She got that part, and her life changed forever. The show, of course, was *Sesame Street*. Sonia played Maria, one of the human friends to Big Bird and Grover and the Count.

**Transition:** Music swells and fades.

**Clip:**

**Big Bird** (*Sesame Street*): Maria!

**Maria:** (*Startled.*) Oh!

**Big Bird:** Oh, did I give you a scare?

**Maria:** Yes.

**Big Bird:** Oh, sorry. I just wanted to find out why are you walking around like that? Muttering to yourself?

**Maria:** Well, I'm trying to figure out the right way to go in there and ask Luis to give me a raise.

**Big Bird:** Oooh. I see. Uh, Maria?

**Maria:** Huh?

**Big Bird:** What's a raise?

**Maria:** Well, it means that I'm gonna ask him to pay me more money for the work I do in the Fix It shop!

**Big Bird:** Ooooooh! Oh, more—oh, that's very important!

**Maria:** Mm! You're telling me! (*Chuckles.*)

**Transition:** Music swells and fades.

**Jesse Thorn:** Sonia performed on the show for over four decades, a legend of kids' television, who helped change what that medium could be. And now she has a show of her own. Manzano created an animated kids' series called *Alma's Way*. It centers around the show's title character, Alma Rivera. She's a six-year-old girl living in the Bronx. She's Puerto Rican. When I talked to Manzano in 2021, the first season of *Alma's Way* had just premiered. We're now in the thick of season two.

Let's listen to a little bit of *Alma's Way*. Alma and her friends have been painting a mural on a neighborhood storefront. And as you'll hear, one of the friends has been taking some artistic liberties that don't match Alma's design. So, Alma has to figure out a polite way to get her pal back on the same page.

**Transition:** Music swells and fades.

**Clip:**

**Speaker** (*Alma's Way*): I can't wait to see the mural, Alma. Let's look.

**Alma:** It looks just like my design!

(*A dramatic, discordant trumpet run underscores their gasps.*)

**Speaker:** It's, um... different than your design. It's not quite what I was expecting.  
(*Chuckles awkwardly.*)

**Andre:** Pretty awesome, right?

**Alma:** I gotta get Andre to stop changing my design! But how?!

(*Cheerful guitar fades in.*)

I know! I gotta speak up! Like I did last time! Hey, Andre? I wanted the mural to be the view from my window—like this. See?

**Andre:** Oh. You don't like my ideas?

**Alma:** Your design is cool! But this is my design, and I've never looked out my window and seen a hippo with a flying saucer in the Bronx!

**Andre:** Yeah. Me neither!

**Alma:** If you want to add something to my design, just ask first! Okay?

**Transition:** Music swells and fades.

**Jesse Thorn:** Sonia, it's so nice to have you on *Bullseye*. Thank you for making the time.

**Sonia Manzano:** Sure, my pleasure.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, once you think you're out and I keep pulling you back in, right?

*(They laugh.)*

**Sonia Manzano:** Absolutely right. I feel like Michael Corleone in the *Godfather* movies when he said at one point, you know, "I try to get out, but they pull me back." I'm back at PBS.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, what did you want to do in children's entertainment, on PBS, that you hadn't already done in your 44 years on *Sesame Street*?

**Sonia Manzano:** Wow, what a—what a question! Well, when PBS kids gave me the opportunity to create a show, I looked around. That's what *Sesame Street* always did: looked around to see what the needs of American kids were. And I noticed that a lot of kids were turned off to school because they had to memorize, or there were too many kids in the classroom, or they didn't speak English and they were tested every 20 minutes. And they thought that memorization was thinking! And I thought this was an opportunity to dispel that.

[00:05:00]

So, the show simply—*Alma's Way* is about thinking that everybody has a brain, and you could use it.

**Jesse Thorn:** It also has a really strong sense of place that you don't find in a lot of children's television, I think.

**Sonia Manzano:** think.

Yeah. That was—that came about like this. As you know, *Sesame Street* was sort of based in—well, it could be Harlem. It could be El Barrio. You knew it was the city because of that wonderful brownstone and Mr. Hooper's store and the construction doors and all of that. You knew it was New York. But we never really said it on *Sesame Street*. So, I was gonna do the same thing on *Alma's Way*, until, uh—place it in the Bronx—and I thought, well, people will sort of know it's the Bronx. And then Ellen Doherty of Fred Rogers Productions said, "No! Why don't we just go for it? If it's in the Bronx, let's put it in the Bronx!"

So, we were not shy about placing it in the Bronx, and it's charming. It's like I felt when I learned *Spider-Man* was in Queens. And I thought, "Oh! I know Queens!"

*(They chuckle.)*

I don't know, there's a—it makes it a little bit more real, and we've gone so far as to even have the Number 6 train.

**Jesse Thorn:** This came up on our show, for some reason—maybe it was when Caroll Spinney was on years ago—but I grew up watching *Sesame Street* and as I thought about it, retrospectively, and why it was so important to me, other than the obvious reasons of it—you know, being maybe the greatest television show for children of all time! And one of the things that I thought of was that I grew up in the city and, you know, every piece of children's entertainment involved people wandering through their front yard and out their front fence and that kind of thing, which was totally foreign to me. Like, it was as though all of children's entertainment existed in a fairytale world!

*(Sonia agrees.)*

Like, that's where kids in children's entertainment lived, and it was a different kind of kid that was fictional, relative to my actual childhood.

**Sonia Manzano:** Yes, that's exactly right! They were either in fairytale land or a suburb. There was never an urban environment for some reason. And because *Sesame Street's* original target audience was underserved African American children who lived in urban areas, it had to speak to those children from a place that was familiar to them. So, they were very careful about making sure that the cast looked like people they would relate to and also the environment. Of course, another huge *Sesame Street* tenant was that kids wanna be in the real world. They really do wanna grow up. This idea that Peter Pan had, *(singing)* "I'll never grow up, never grow up! Never grow uuup! Not me!" Is a fallacy. It's not really true. Kids always wanna be big and, you know, get a part of the action.

We always say to kids, "Oh, what a big boy you are! What a big girl you are! You did that! How proud I am!" You never say, "Oh! How little you are! Stay that way!" *(Chuckles.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** You're a New Yorker yourself. Can you tell me where you grew up?

**Sonia Manzano:** I grew up in the south Bronx. I was born in Bellevue Hospital and lived on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue for a very little while and then moved to 38<sup>th</sup>—58<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. And the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue elevated train was still up. And then moved on to Southern Boulevard and, as my parents tried to sort of claw their way out of the ghetto. And then up to Throgs Neck, when they finally had their house. But then, by that time, I had gone off to college. But I lived in the Bronx before the Cross Bronx Expressway. Before Moses barreled through the city, creating thoroughfares.

And I just remember it being a wonderful place. Maybe I was an extraordinarily positive kid, but I do remember the excitement of the train. I do remember how fabulous it was that all your relatives were like a block away.

[00:10:00]

I do remember walking to PS4. And I want to get all of those sensibilities, maybe, into a current-day *Alma's Way*.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you out and about in the street when you were a kid?

**Sonia Manzano:** Yes! Yes. And I think a reason that a lot of kid's shows are placed in the suburbs is because a lot of people who work in children's television like to model a lot of parents being around or kids being close to home and kids not roaming around by themselves. The reality was, in my childhood, we did all kinds of things by ourselves in the street. We would wait for the bus to stop and stick a beer can under the wheels so the bus would drive over it and we could play kick the can.

*(Jesse chuckles.)*

My brother would hang onto the end of the bus to, you know, get a ride while he was on his roller skates. We did all kinds of things that really we shouldn't be walking around today. And we lived in buildings and our—you know, there were neighbors, but we roamed around freely. So, that's a reason that *Alma's Way* couldn't be set in an apartment building, as I grew up in, or a projects, because we didn't wanna model these kids roaming around by themselves. But I think we've reached a happy kind of middle ground with Alma in that the train is there and there's an urban feel to it.

**Jesse Thorn:** When I think back to my own childhood (*chuckles*), the main thing I liked to do was like go around and do stuff. And it's an experience that I think a lot of folks who live—you know, I think people who live in—grew up in rural environments have that experience. I guess they're going down to the crick or whatever. I don't mean to sound patronizing, I just don't—(*laughing*) it's not a world I know about! But like, you know, in the city when I—starting when I was 7/8/9 years old, I was like going and doing stuff, even if it was just going to the corner store or going down to the boy's club or, you know, these things that were a few blocks from my house. And that sense of exploring is so important to childhood.

**Sonia Manzano:** Yeah. Well, I was actually—we have a running cocktail party every Tuesday, with the *Sesame Street* writers. And we Zoom every Tuesday and sort of chat about things. And one of my friends was saying that, as a kid, he always walked to his friend's house. And he said that was a moment of—“That time of walking through the streets and getting to his house, I cherished. I had my own thoughts. I could look around. I could put two and two together, correctly or incorrectly. It didn't matter. And I cherished that time without anything particular to do or think about.”

And he said he has the hardest time getting that idea across to his grandchild, who just wants to sort of be connected or, you know, play a game on his device on his way to do something. And that kind of free flowing, musing thoughts escapes a kid as to why that would be enjoyable!

**Jesse Thorn:** I think sometimes, also, when home is not an entirely comfortable place, those kinds of family and caretakers that are outside the home and even almost like transitory become important. Like, I think of one bus driver. And when I say bus driver, I'm not talking

school bus driver, but a guy who drove the 49 Van Ness-Mission where I grew up. Like, he used to put his hand over the fare box when we would get on the bus so we couldn't put our money into the fare box. And then we would have money for candy, for Now and Later, when we got where we were going. And I think about those kinds of people or the people who ran the liquor store down the street from my house who were like looking out. You know?

*(Sonia affirms.)*

And sometimes when you're out in the world, those kinds of people—and that was something that I always saw on *Sesame Street*. Like, those are the people in your neighborhood, right?

*(Sonia agrees.)*

It's a kind of a tapestry.

**Sonia Manzano:** Right. And it's a comforting feeling. That was a very nice gesture of that bus driver to give you this easy treat. And you didn't have to interact with him. It was a communication between you and the bus driver that was probably pretty silent and something you could look forward to and not make a big deal about it.

And those are nice interactions that children have with adults that they might not have these days.

[00:15:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** Was your house a safe place when you were a kid?

**Sonia Manzano:** Absolutely not. *(Laughs.)* As I've stated in my memoirs, so I don't mind saying publicly, I was raised in a tumultuous household that was ruled by domestic violence. And I spent a lot of time finding refuge in my mind, looking out the window at the train going by, and watching television. And I formed a lot of my thoughts about the world doing those three things and looking down at the neighborhood activity. You knew who had a fight with who. You knew what marriage was on the rocks. You knew which father was coming home at an angle, a little tipsy.

*(They chuckle.)*

You knew who was the best at double dutch. You could sort of see these dramas unfold. And coupled with watching television, I formed a lot of opinions and thoughts about the world.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your folks were together, and your father was abusive toward your mother.

*(Sonia confirms.)*

I mean, you must have loved your dad, because he was your dad. I've heard you talk about him making you laugh by wiggling his ears.

*(Sonia chuckles.)*

Did anyone ever explain to you what was going on or how people who were married and seemed to love each other could have that happen between them?

**Sonia Manzano:** No. I actually thought it was normal. I thought that everybody's household was like that in some way or other. It was the only example that I saw. As a matter of fact, I remember one day visiting some people unexpectedly. My brother always used to say that we had a habit of—that our friends had a habit of showing up unannounced and hungry. Anyway.

*(They chuckle.)*

We visited these people, and the mother and the father were—he was teaching her a song on the guitar. And the child was playing with a truck in front of the living room. You know, in front of them on the floor. And I remember being surprised at the tranquility of the place and how they were interacting so nicely! It was like, “Wow! This is like something new.” And I didn't—I knew it was different from my family, my household that was tense all the time, but I just filed it away the way kids file things away and you don't come to any conclusion about it. You just file it away. It wasn't until I got older that my sister said to me, “This is probably a terrible situation that we're living in.”

And you don't know—you don't know what goes on between a man and a woman, as a kid. I mean, you kind of can guess when you're very much older and have some sympathy. But it was just kind of—it just kind of went on, and I assumed it went on in everybody's household and—I mean, nobody talked about domestic violence. It was—the only ads I remember on the train about family culture was, “You don't want your kids to come from a broken home.” And I'd always think, “I do! I would love to come from a broken home!”

*(They laugh.)*

So, there you are!

**Jesse Thorn:** I think I might have been seven years old when I had the realization I was glad my parents weren't divorced.

*(They laugh.)*

**Sonia Manzano:** I loved that. Yes. So, there you are.

**Jesse Thorn:** Even more to get into with Sonia Manzano. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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[00:20:00]

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, we are replaying my 2021 interview with Sonia Manzano. For nearly 45 years, she played Maria on *Sesame Street*. These days, she has a show of her own, also on PBS. The new show is an animated series called *Alma's Way*. Its second season is airing now. Let's get back into our conversation.

Can I play a little bit of you singing in *Godspell*?

**Sonia Manzano:** Oh, god!

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, literally in this case, since it's *Godspell*.

(They chuckle.)

Kevin, Play a little bit of Sonia, who was in the original-original cast of *Godspell*.

**Music:** “Turn Back, O Man” from the original production of *Godspell*.

*Old now is earth*

*And none may count her days*

*Da, da, da, da, da*

*Yet thou, her child*

*Whose head is crowned with flame*

*Still wilt not...*

(Music fades out.)

**Jesse Thorn:** Sonia, I really, truly don't think you could have a better “I was in acting college in 1970” credit than to have been in the cast of—in the development cast of *Godspell* that ended up off-Broadway.

**Sonia Manzano:** I know. It was just a wonderful, wonderful experience. This was at the time of *Hair* and *Story Theatre* and rock musicals—this was a new idea. And John Michael Talbot, it was his director's thesis was *Godspell*: this idea of telling the parables, you know,



with ten clowns. And I learned so much. First of all, I learned that I would do something, and people laughed. That was a big one. That's very powerful. And then we came to Café LaMama and—with some cast adjustments and Stephen Schwartz came in. And kudos to him! He wrote a song for me to open the second act incorporating the only three notes I could hit.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) You sound fantastic on the record, Sonia.

**Sonia Manzano:** (*Chuckles.*) And I had a very developed character. I was—you know, the sexy clown and—

(*Jesse puffs a laugh.*)

Comedically sexy and I loved—you know, I was inspired by Mae West in doing all of those asides. And—you know, and I would—it would annoy me when I would open up the second act from the back of the house and people would go into their playbills to look me up, as opposed to looking at me. And that's when I would say things like, "It ain't in your playbill."

(*They laugh.*)

With as much innuendo as I could muster. And you know, a lot of the clergy would come, and I would say things like, "Your collar's on backwards, Father." And stuff like that.

(*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** You're definitely the first sexy clown ever to appear on our program.

**Sonia Manzano:** (*Laughs.*) And I used to wear great big Converse sneakers. You know, clown Converse sneakers with net stockings. I had a lot of fun. It was great. And I—I mean, sometimes when you're in that space of creativity onstage and you're—nothing—a fire could break out, and you're in it. And you're just flying. It's a wonderful high. And you know, I realize a lot of American actors don't have that opportunity, because this was a long process! It was six months of working on this and developing it. And I expected that experience in every other project that I did. And wouldn't you know it! I had it again on *Sesame Street*! 'Cause the—you know, when I fell in with those guys.

**Jesse Thorn:** How old were you when you auditioned for *Sesame Street*?

**Sonia Manzano:** 21.

**Jesse Thorn:** Had you seen the show before?

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**Sonia Manzano:** Oh, yes! I started Carnegie Mellon University, and I was—I flipped when I saw it. I walked into the student union and there was James Earl Jones reciting the alphabet in

this very deliberate manner. You know how he talks? (*Pitching her voice low.*) “Aaaaye, Beee, Ceee.”

And the letters flashed over his head, and I thought, “This must be a show that teaches lip reading or something.” It was the oddest thing!

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

And then (*laughs*)—then there was an animation. Wanda the Witch, which Gracie Slick sang, I believe, of Jefferson Airplane. And then they cut to the street, and I see these Black people on television! Oh my goodness. In a city?! As we were talking, we were used to seeing children’s shows in rural or suburban areas or fantasy places. That looked like my neighborhood! There was a fire escape on it! Construction doors! And I had personal feelings about it, because all the television I watched when I was a kid—and I’ve said this many times in many interviews—not seeing yourself reflected makes you feel invisible. And on some uncomfortable level that you don’t wanna reveal to anyone, you don’t know what you’re gonna be when you grow up or what you’re gonna contribute. If you don’t see it, you can’t be it.

And so, that took its toll on me, I guess. And so, when I got to be on *Sesame Street*, it was really great.

**Jesse Thorn:** What did you do at the audition? Steinbeck monologue?

**Sonia Manzano:** (*Chuckles.*) I’m still trying to remember the name of that book. *The Moon is Blue?* *The Moon is Down!* Anyway. No! Uh, this was a time in television, when this show was first created—*Sesame Street*—when one or two people could make a decision. Okay? So, I met Jon Stone, one of the creators of the show. I mean, the creator of the show, really. There were other people who had—he was the leader. And if you watch the documentary, *Street Gang*, you’ll know that.

Anyway, I had to see him in his office and tell a story—a scary story that I made up, solve a problem—a visual problem, you know like the sorting song. (*Singing.*) “One of these things is not like the other. One of these things just doesn’t belong.” And I didn’t even have to sing. He just—and we chatted and the next thing I know, I got the job to be Maria. And then I had to make a big decision, because they were doing the *Godspell* movie. And I had to do one or the other. And I didn’t know what to do. And I was so—I mean, what did I know about showbusiness or what was important or what was—? And I just let my agent decide. (*Chuckles.*)

He said, “I think you should stick with *Sesame Street*.” And so, I did.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you stop going to other auditions after you got *Sesame Street*?

**Sonia Manzano:** No! No. I continued to do *Godspell* at night, and I did *Sesame Street* during the day. And these were kind of the early days of Norman Lear sitcoms, so the door was opening a little bit for people of color. And of course, your agent wants you to, you know,

make more money than you're making on public television. So, you go off for these—I would go out for these jobs, but I was always like thinking, “Oh, what if I get it? Then I'll have to leave *Sesame Street*.” But there weren't a lot of—I wasn't comfortable. I've always hated auditioning. I always take it personally. They always say, “Oh, don't—don't take it personally! You know, it's—whether you're right for—”

I always say, “What do you mean you don't want me?” (*Chuckles.*) I could never take the rejection. And I was rejected a lot! You know. I'd have to—I'd have to make-believe I was African American or make-believe I have a Spanish accent, which I couldn't—I felt self-conscious doing. I didn't fit into any roles. Whereas, my White girl friends, they were going out for parts of girls just like them! I couldn't just be myself. I had to sort of like, you know, be somebody that I didn't know. So, all of that stuff, I just didn't like it. But I'd go, dutifully. (*Chuckles.*) And go to auditions and not get the jobs.

**Jesse Thorn:** There's this great hip hop magazine called *Ego Trip*. They put out a couple of books, and one of the books is called *The Ego Trip Big Book of Racism*. And one of my favorite things in that book is a list of the greatest Mexican roles on screen as played by Puerto Ricans.

[00:30:00]

(*They laugh.*)

It's like—granted, it's like half Luis Guzmán, but like—you know, one of those things about it is like when there isn't representation, you know, what representation there is, is either so vague or so like—such an awkward fit. You know what I mean?

(*Sonia confirms.*)

Like, you're Latina, but you're not Mexican American. You know what I mean?

**Sonia Manzano:** Right. Right. Right. Well, I'm happy to say that all the cast in *Alma's Way* is Latin. There weren't a lot—when I auditioned for *Sesame Street*, there weren't a lot of Latin performers, you know, on Broadway or on television. So, it felt like I—you know—fought through thousands of women. I didn't. There weren't a lot of Latino actors. But I'm happy to that *Alma's Way* is cast all Latins and the head writer's Latin, etc. But let me tell you a story about—I call this Roosevelt Franklin Syndrome, because I think the reason there's so much pressure on whether you're Latin, Mexican, or Puerto Rican Latin is because there's so few opportunities.

*Sesame Street*'s a big hit. They decide they need a Black puppet as popular as Grover or any of the other puppets. Matt Robinson, the original Gordon, African American, creates Roosevelt Franklin. And Roosevelt Franklin was a super hit! He was this urban kid, and he had this little funny way of talking. Well. He was a big hit, but there was so much pressure on this one puppet to represent every kind of African American kid. Some people thought he was too urban. Some people thought he wasn't urban enough. Some people thought he shouldn't speak funny, because it's a bad role model for—some people—it never occurred to

anyone to make another one! So, you would have Carlton—like Carlton on *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*—and Will Smith. So, you have a lot, like you have in the Caucasian world. You know, you have the smart guy, the dumb guy, the sneaky guy, the da-da-da-da-da! No problem. But it was all this one character had to fulfill everybody's hopes and dreams. So, what was the answer? Cut him. They cut the character, and *Sesame Street* did not have another Black puppet for 50 years. Imagine!

**Jesse Thorn:** On our show, Sonia, I'm the dumb one, and my producer, Kevin, is the sneaky one.

*(They chuckle.)*

**Sonia Manzano:** Well, it takes all kinds to make the world go 'round, doesn't it?

**Jesse Thorn:** At what point in your career working on *Sesame Street* did you realize or accept or embrace that children's entertainment was your life's work, not just a gig you had?

**Sonia Manzano:** Oh, that's a really good question! And I'm not sure! I was just so drawn to it. I was so interested in what these people were doing. I remembered my own childhood. I thought, "What if this was around when I was a kid? This would've helped me better than *Romper Room* and *Father Knows Best* and *Spin and Marty*." So, I think that I was just attracted to *Sesame Street* because of what they were doing. And I wanted to be a part of it. One of the early titles from my memoir was *Healing Myself Through Time and Television*. *(Chuckling.)* Thankfully somebody talked me out of that one. It sounds like a television manual or something. Right?! But that's what I really felt.

So, I thought I could do that for other kids. And it just interests me. I like it. They inspire me, kids—the things they come up with, the way they see the world, their enthusiasm. You know, you'll watch a news reel in some war-torn area, and there's a kid in the background like trying to get the camera's attention, waving and making faces. And you're thinking, "What? You're in a war-torn area." You know. *(Chuckles.)* Or the soldiers set up barricades, and there's kids playing hide and seek. You know? That kind of jumping over, around the obstacle, through. You know, I'm gonna make it over there. It is something that like turns me on.

[00:35:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** Maria was my favorite character on *Sesame Street*.

*(Sonia makes a flattered sound.)*

And I was thinking today why that was, since you were coming on the show. And one of the reasons I think is that, you know, you have an extraordinary ability to convey caring and empathy without being patronizing. But to me, that was the—that was the obvious thing that was good about Maria. And I think the second thing—and I couldn't even think of an example of it; it was just a feeling that I had—was that Maria was tough. Or fierce. Like, you

felt like—I felt like, anyway—Maria was down to take care of herself and also like down to metaphorically scrap on my behalf.

*(They laugh.)*

You know what I mean? Like—and I think maybe it’s—like maybe it was how you related to Oscar the Grouch, who you had such—who your character had such regard for. But also, like—you know, had a—like engaged sort of firmly on the terms that he presented, which is his grouchiness. Right? Like, right there with him!

*(Sonia agrees with a laugh.)*

Like, “I see you and we’re gonna figure this out.”

*(They chuckle.)*

**Transition:** Music swells then fades.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Cheerful music.

**Oscar (*Sesame Street*):** Yeah, sometimes when I’m feeling blue I think of an old, abandoned shoe.

**Maria:** Ooh!

**Oscar:** Hehe. And if that’s not enough, I think of two.

**Maria:** Ooh!

**Oscar:** Hehehe. And if that’s not enough trash, I think of... yooou!

*(Music resolves.)*

**Maria:** Wait a minute, Oscar. You just said that thinking of trash reminds you of me!

**Oscar:** Yeah.

**Maria:** Well, that’s not very nice!

**Oscar:** Oooh, to a grouch it is!

**Maria:** (*Beat.*) Listen, anyway, this trash does not belong in the street. It belongs in your can. So, back up.

**Oscar:** Oh, no, no, no. I don't want it baaack! Don't you understand? It's for you.

**Maria:** (*Beat.*) It's for me?

**Oscar:** Yeah.

**Transition:** Music swells then fades.

**Jesse Thorn:** But I wonder if that was intentional. I wonder if you wanted Maria to be something more than just a symbol of maternal love, or if it was just something that shines through because of who you are.

**Sonia Manzano:** Well, it took me a while to find that. I know that the whole notion of being on a kids' show was foreign to me and I—I mean, I had my friends looking at me! I didn't want them to think I was some wussy girl! Because it was a kids show. I mean, it was hard for me to find who I was. And Jon Stone kept saying, "Be yourself, be yourself, be yourself." And so, I decided to be myself! To really get down to who I was. Some of the stuff that I—in the early years, I'm positively snarky.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I cannot believe they let me get away with it! But they did! And it didn't frighten kids! I mean, you liked it! And a lot of kids liked it. And I mean, that was my sensibility. That was my—you know, I came from a tough neighborhood. That's how we were. I couldn't be something else. So, I think that that came across. They were so free in those days. They just let you do whatever you wanted on camera. There's a moment where I do a scene with Northern Calloway, who played David. And I'm—we're demonstrating near and far. And Grover's in the middle as Maria and David get closer and closer. And he and I are playing it like we're about to engage in a lip-lock! (*Laughs.*) You know. And Grover's in the middle and we're completely ignoring Grover and like locked into each other's eyes as we walk closer and closer and closer to each other, to demonstrate near and far. And you know, it's really cool! I love to see that on YouTube.

(*They laugh.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you become a writer on *Sesame Street*?

**Sonia Manzano:** I was on the show about eight years, and I was—I felt I had contributed as much as I could as a performer. Or you know, my character was established, and I wanted to do more. So, I started to look behind the scenes, and I saw that that's where the power was. I started to question the Latino content. And the producer, Dulcy Singer, said, "You know what? Why don't you try writing it?"

[00:40:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** What were you questioning?

**Sonia Manzano:** Well, I thought that all of the Spanish curriculum was always guitars or food or language—like static, like culture was in a museum. You know? And so, next to that is Ernie and Bert and that sophisticated humor that worked on so many levels. I said, “Why can’t we bring that to the Latino culture segments? That’s not like teaching somebody about Latin culture.” And so, she told me to try to do it myself. I did. And the first thing I did was a takeoff of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. And I’m obviously Ginger. And Emilio Delgado, who plays Luis, is Fred. And we’re teaching that hola means hello.

And because of all that television watching I did, I just loved Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. It was sophisticated and frothy and funny and glorious. And I thought, “How can I present this curriculum that hola means hello in the most sophisticated, frothy way?” Well, who else but Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers? I love that piece.

**Jesse Thorn:** What I like about what you’re describing—and it’s something that I like a lot about your new show, too—is that so often, especially in kids’ educational programming, but in kids’ stuff in general and even more broadly when, quote/unquote, “diversity” is made a priority, what that means is using people of color to explain their experience to White people.

*(Sonia confirms.)*

While the White people involved in that same thing get to assume that the person on the other side of the television or the other side of the speaker or the stage understands their experience innately. So, they can go to the second or third level of the thing immediately. Which, you know, both alienates people who don’t share that experience when the White people stuff comes on and alienates the people of color who might be listening when the stuff about people like them comes on, because they’re like, “Yeah, well, of course. I know this. Don’t talk to me like I’m a baby.”

*(Sonia agrees.)*

And what I’m hearing you—what I’m hearing you describe is that you wanted to have the same kind of lived-in quality to the stuff about the Latino characters and the same sort of kind of breadth. You wanted to do *(chuckling)* Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers with Luis!

**Sonia Manzano:** Of course! Yes! Absolutely! So, the Latin characters aren’t there for the benefit of White people to understand us and like us and, “See, we’re not that scary,” or whatever! But we’re just—we are what you are. Make of it what you will. But being what we are. So, the characters in *Alma’s Way* are—you know, the mother’s a music teacher. She forgets her keys. You know. The father picks up a toy and accidentally throws it in the washing machine. You know, they’re real—they’re real people. That was very important to me.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish up with Sonia Manzano after the break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Promo:**

**Music:** Upbeat, fun music.

**Laurie Kilmartin:** Hiiii! This is Laurie Kilmartin.

**Jackie Kashian:** And I'm Jackie Kashian. And we have a podcast, called *The Jackie and Laurie Show* on MaxFun, and it's very exciting. 'Cause what do we talk about?

**Laurie:** Comedy!

**Jackie:** Standup comedy. We both do standup comedy and have since the dawn of Christ.

**Laurie:** Well, Jackie!

**Jackie:** Is that offensive?

**Laurie:** It is offensive. To me. Because you've aged me.

(*Jackie cackles.*)

We started in the late '80s, and we're still here! You can't kill us!

**Jackie:** So, go to *The Jackie and Laurie Show* on Max Fun, and listen to that.

**Narrator:** The Jackie and Laurie Show. New episodes Monday, only on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

**Music:**

... *show, The Jackie and Laurie Show!*

(*Music ends.*)

**Transition:** Chiming synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Sonia Manzano. She played Maria on *Sesame Street*. Let's get back into our conversation.



Your character, Maria, and the character who became her husband, Luis, were—you know, probably the most central depiction of family on *Sesame Street*. You got married on the show, had a kid on the show.

[00:45:00]

And those things were mirroring what was happening in your own life, in real life. What did you want to show about those things on TV? What did you want to talk to kids about getting married, falling in love, having children, having a family?

**Sonia Manzano:** Well, I think of that time on *Sesame Street* as we were the first reality show without the whining. (*Chuckles.*) And I was—it kind of mirrored my life. I fell in love and got married and had a baby. And Maria followed suit. But what we were trying to get across was that these Latinx people had the same hopes and dreams as everybody else. At that time on television, when a Latin character came on, you waited for the taco joke. You waited for reference to that person's ethnicity. That was why they were on the sitcom! They weren't part of the sitcom! That's why they were there! And that never happened at *Sesame Street*, obviously.

So, this family just—you know, they worried about daycare, and they fell in love. They were just like any other American family. And that was the overall meaning of that love life, that life story that we showed.

**Jesse Thorn:** You know, I thought like you had this onscreen relationship with Luis, played by Emilio Delgado, for pretty much longer than anyone else has an entertainment, fiction relationship, romantic relationship with anybody. Like, that's longer than—there might be soap opera characters, but you know, it's longer than anything that's onstage. It's—like, the two of you were romantically attached on television for decaaaades. Decades!

**Sonia Manzano:** I know, I know, I know.

**Jesse Thorn:** I can't even imagine it! Like, there must have been months on end when you were just like, "Ugh, I can't look at him anymore!" (*Laughs.*)

**Sonia Manzano:** You know, but at that time we were all such a tight group. We'd hang around all day at the studio working and then we'd have drinks and dinner afterwards! Or we'd go to each other's house on the weekends. The night before I really got married, my husband went out drinking with Emilio.

(*They laugh.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** And Emilio was like, "Let me give you some advice about what it's like to be married to her!"

**Sonia Manzano:** Married to her, right, right. I mean, sort of—it really was that way.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's such a loving relationship onscreen and such a rich relationship onscreen. Not because—you know, I don't remember at least any storylines about Maria and Luis fighting or something like that. But the characters aren't just transparent avatars for love in a romantic relationship, like they feel like human beings who are in an actual relationship. And it's such a special thing to see on TV when you're a kid. I know it was for me, as somebody whose parents actively did not love each other.

*(They chuckle.)*

**Sonia Manzano:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Uh, that's interesting you say that. And I think a lot of times children shows, the characters, they shy away from showing love between the parents. And affection. And we've tried to incorporate that in *Alma's Way*. Mami and Papi actually do have a bit of an—you know, playful argument deciding where to put the bases when they're gonna set up a stickball game. And—but they kiss a lot, and they are holding hands, and we have a production supervisor who keeps an eye on all the animations when they come in and says, "Oh, this is an opportunity for them to touch." Or "This is an opportunity for them to kiss in the background." You know, during... and I think that—I mean, it's animated. This is new to me. I'm used to real people.

But we're trying to implement exactly what you're talking about, that kind of affection that—you know, when a kid looks at it and, you know, they don't have to know everything that's going on between them. But they can sense that those two people are looking out for each other.

**Jesse Thorn:** You must more than almost any other person in the United States today have people you don't know coming up to you crying.

[00:50:00]

**Sonia Manzano:** I know, it's a big effect I have on people. It makes me feel really great.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, it really is a lot to—like, it is both the most amazing thing in the world and a lot to hold.

**Sonia Manzano:** I know! It's like, "Oh, let's make Sandra Oh cry again!" We were at an event. The whole cast was—it was in some sort of awards show, and she started crying and said, "Oh my goodness! (*Gasps weepily.*)" 'Cause she was a so happy to—but yes! And it's like all kinds of people—people who watched in Manila, in the Philippines will say, "Oh wow, you were just—you know, you reminded me of me somehow."

And I'm thinking, "In Manila?! Really?!" You know, but it's true.

And I think it's like you're a catalyst for when—you know, because in those days, kids didn't start school 'til they were five. You know. Now they're in school much younger, but in those—I think you're a catalyst and you suddenly—they see me or any of the cast and they're

thrown back into that moment of sitting in milky laps. (*Laughs.*) And at that moment in their life where they're most absorbing everything, when they're just separating from you—you know, they've realized they're a little bit different from you. They're looking at the world and *Sesame Street* was showing films and animation and a lot of stimulating visual information. And I think that's why they cry. I guess! (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** I was driving my kids to school this morning and I was listening to you talking with Maria Hinojosa from Latino USA. And I counted—I think it was maybe a 12-minute segment or a 14-minute segment; something like that. And I had to force myself not to cry four times.

(*Sonia laughs.*)

And I don't want anybody to get the wrong idea, not because I don't think I should be able to cry, but just because I was driving my kids. Like, it would have been not safe.

**Sonia Manzano:** (*Laughs.*) Your kids are looking at you, “What's the matter with you?! It's just a red light!”

(*Music fades in.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** But I think I was just so grateful for you and your work. It's really special and it's meant a lot in my life.

**Sonia Manzano:** Thank you.

**Transition:** Upbeat piano.

**Jesse Thorn:** Sonia Manzano from 2021. Her show *Alma's Way* is sweet and lovely. You can watch it on PBS Kids.

(*Music fades out.*)

**Transition:** Brassy synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, it's pouring rain and my outgoing mail got really wet.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”. It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram. We share interview highlights, behind the scenes looks, and more there. We are [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

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[00:55:00]