

Cultural Daily

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The Amazing, Continuing 96-Year Life of Anita Velez-Mitchell

Jaz Dorsey · Thursday, October 18th, 2012

At 96 years old, Anita Velez-Mitchell is writing her memoirs looking back on a life which began on Vieques. This Caribbean island, off the coast of Puerto Rico, eventually occupied by the American military but was, back in the day, part of the Caribbean culture of coffee and sugar plantations.

In this world, Anita was “born to applause” in 1916. The story she tells about her birth presages her adventures in show biz.

Her mother, not trusting a midwife, left Vieques by boat for San Juan. Anita was born just as the boat landed, so the family rushed to the closest retreat, a hotel of dubious repute, owned by a French chanteuse named “Lola,” where US Marines went for R&R. At first it seemed that Anita had not made it into this world alive, but then her mother noticed she was breathing. The doctor spanked her, she screamed, and a bar full of Marines burst into applause.



From there, Anita just kept getting applause. Her family relocated to New York City after the US occupied Vieques in 1928. This was a time when many theatre artists were fleeing Spain; at 12 Anita joined a Spanish-language theatre troupe. At 15 she took a job as an usher in a movie theatre and spent her time memorizing the great movie classics of Hollywood and learning their dance routines at the back of the house. In high school, after being discovered by a prominent acting coach, she had to walk from the family home on 110th St. down to 14th St. for her acting lessons.

Times were tough, but her mother always said, “We’re not poor; we just don’t have any money.” Among her childhood acting colleagues she counts Margarita Cansino before she changed her name to Rita Hayworth.

A few years later Anita literally ran off with the circus. She was shot out of a cannon, and almost married into the famous Flying Zucchini Family. She says the character of Anita in *West Side Story* was actually named for her, but when she and her friend Chita Rivera went to the auditions, Chita got the role. Anita took it over when Rivera got pregnant, learning the role in four days. She and her dance troupe also introduced the mambo to major clubs in Manhattan, and headlined tours across the Americas.

Anita did go on to marry — four times. Her husbands included a Puerto Rican chemist, activist, and poet; an Argentine diplomat; a Greek composer; and the president of an advertising company. Today she is the matriarch of an amazing clan – her two daughters, poet Gloria Vando and HLN anchor [Jane Velez-Mitchell](#); two granddaughters, songwriter/composer Anika Paris and Artistic Director and League of Professional Theatre Women co-president, [Lorca Peress](#); grandson drummer/composer Paul Peress, the father of Anita’s great granddaughter Nicole. In 2011, at 95

years old, Anita saw the world premiere of her musical *Temple of the Souls* – a tale of early Puerto Rico, which was a collaboration with granddaughters, with music composed by Anika and produced and directed by Lorca.



On Monday, October 8, 2012, *Temple of the Souls* was recognized with three awards from HOLA (Hispanic Organization of Latin Actors) for Lighting Design (Alex Moore), Choreography (Milteri Tucker), and Musical Score (Anita Velez-Mitchell, Dean Landon and Anika Paris).

In addition, Anita is the subject of two documentaries: the award-winning *Anita Velez: Dancing Through Life* by her daughter Jane Velez-Mitchell, and the upcoming *Light Years* by filmmaker Claire Panke which looks at three artists in their “third act” phase.

As I was parting from Anita after our interview, she was out the door to a poetry reading at the *Nuyorican Poets Café* to read from her latest poetry book, *Woven Voices* (three generations including Gloria and Anika). If you run in those circles, you might find yourself sitting next to Anita one night. If you do, get her to tell you the one about Marlene Dietrich.

Photos: Top, Anita today; below, as a Broadway star.

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