

# Familiar Face on 'Sesame Street' Tells of Her Own Childhood



ZACH HYMAN

"Sesame Street" was "like a reality show without the whining," says Sonia Manzano, a.k.a. Maria, here in 2011 with Big Bird and Gordon (Roscoe Orman). She recently announced her retirement.

By **GEORGE GENE GUSTINES**

Talking to Sonia Manzano feels like catching up with an old friend.

Some of the familiarity comes from the fact that Ms. Manzano played Maria on "Sesame Street" for 44 years. Naturally, a wave of sadness and nostalgia followed news of her retirement from the show, which she mentioned in an almost offhand way during a speech in July at the annual conference of the American Library Association. Her listeners "gasped and they tweeted it," she said on a recent Wednesday over lunch, at a modest Mexican restaurant in her Upper West Side neighborhood. "I always say I meant to do it five years ago, but I forgot."

Though she's no longer working with the Muppets — besides playing Maria, she was also a writer for the show and won 15 Emmys for that work — it does not mean that she's idle. Ms. Manzano's memoir, "Becoming Maria: Love and Chaos in the South Bronx," a chronicle of her journey from an impoverished childhood amid domestic vio-

lence to adulthood, was released in late August.

Ms. Manzano, 65, who already has a novel under her belt, as well as two children's books (a third, "Miracle on 133rd Street," is out on Sept. 22), said she had always been a fan of memoirs and was especially taken with "Angela's Ashes," by Frank McCourt. "What was so striking about it was that it was such a sad, miserable experience, yet it was so funny," she said. "That kind of laughing at the absurdity of the situation you find yourself in was really appealing to me."

Ms. Manzano had been considering a memoir at least as far back as 1995, which is the date on an early manuscript in her closet. "I've been working on this book for so long that my parents have since passed," Ms. Manzano said. She responded wryly to condolences offered solely for the loss of her mother. "I have a feeling I'm going to find myself defending him," she said of her father, who was abusive. "That's the difficulty of being a kid — when you feel two things at the same time."

Her childhood provides plenty

of material. In the book, there are moments of giddiness, as when she looks at the advertisements in a subway car and realizes that she has a new skill. She writes: "In one split second the words fall into place and I am reading. I'm reading!"

There are also times of bleakness. At one point, Ms. Manzano hides knives before her drunken father arrives home; at another, she watches him beat her mother with a broken table leg. Somehow, family life always resets to nearly normal after these tempests.

The promise of a bright future begins when she arrives at Carnegie Mellon University on a full scholarship. She is assigned to a show called "Godspell," which is being developed at the university. It is a success and moves to New York. In a 1971 article in *The Times*, the critic Walter Kerr described his excitement over the sight ("impertinently curved") and sound (his ear was, he wrote, "startlingly teased") of Ms. Manzano. The memoir is nearly at its end before the magical words "Sesame Street" appear. In 1969,

Ms. Manzano happened to see a broadcast of the series at the student union at Carnegie Mellon and was thunderstruck by what she saw: people of all different races. "I am really taken aback by the street scene depicted because it reminds me of every neighborhood I have ever lived in," she writes.

"Becoming Maria" ends with

## A dark story, not tailor-made for a children's show.

her audition, in 1971, for the show, which was produced by the Children's Television Workshop (now the Sesame Workshop). "It just seemed like a natural breaking point," Ms. Manzano said. "It was the beginning of a new life, the beginning of separating myself a little more from my family."

Last month, the Workshop announced that it had struck a deal

with HBO in which new episodes of "Sesame Street" would first air on that premium cable network and be broadcast on PBS nine months later. Ms. Manzano discussed the agreement in a follow-up email. "'Sesame Street' has always mirrored the sensibility of the times it exists in," she wrote. "I guess this move to HBO means it continues to do so. I would be sadder if it wasn't on the air at all."

The series helped propel Ms. Manzano on her path to becoming a writer. She was often asked for her ideas about the Hispanic content and felt validated when they became part of the show. "I had a lot of support," she recalled. "They really wanted to get people of color behind the camera, as well as in front."

Emilio Delgado, who joined the cast as Luis in 1971, was not surprised that Ms. Manzano became a writer for the show. "She's a natural for it and she's got a great sense of comedy," he said. He said "Sesame Street" was a perfect place to work. "We all got along perfectly — even better than some people in families."

The circumstances of Maria's life often reflected what was happening to Ms. Manzano in the real world. "It was like a reality show without the whining," she said. Ms. Manzano married a conservation foundation official, Richard Reagan, in 1986; Maria married Luis in 1988. When Ms. Manzano became pregnant, so did Maria, whose daughter, Gabi, was played by Ms. Manzano's daughter, Gabriela, for several years.

But that did not lead to an acting career. "She didn't like it," Ms. Manzano said. "You have to force your kids to do enough stuff. Go to school, go to the doctor, go to the dentist. You don't have to force them to be on television."

Gabriela is now 27, a yoga teacher who shares her mother's sense of humor. Ms. Manzano recalled a long drive, a few years ago, after she had completed a chapter in the memoir. She offered to read it aloud to help pass the time. Gabriela pointed to a copy of "Vanity Fair" and responded, "How about you read that story on Lady Gaga?"



RICHARD TERMINE



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES



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Muppets and more: Ms. Manzano in 2012 with Rosita, left, and in 2009 with Elmo, right. At center, Ms. Manzano at Crotona Park in the South Bronx, the neighborhood where she grew up.