

Pepe Serna
Statement for the Record
September 24, 2020

My name is Pepe Serna, I am a Mexican American film, television, and theatrical actor. I am also a visual artist and motivational speaker who believes that art is the essence of who we are as human beings.

My purpose for addressing Congress via this statement is to issue a **CALL TO ACTION to address and resolve the lack of inclusiveness and diversity in the entertainment industry**. I challenge each and every one of you become more familiar and aware of the struggles and challenges that we as Latino Hollywood actors, producers, directors, technicians, and others supporting our trade face in our day-to-day activities. While I'm addressing primarily *Latinos* in this statement, I also speak for our minority populations, who also face pay discrimination and prejudice in this industry. Diversity is not just black and white – like vintage films. Just as movies and television have transitioned to technicolor, so should the entertainment industry transition to represent all people of color and sexual orientation.

Let me set the stage so that you can judge for yourself that I know what I am talking about and that my **Call to Action** has merit.

For the last 50 years, I have worked with Oscar-winning producers, writers, directors, and actors in 100 films and 300 television shows. I have given hundreds upon hundreds of improvisational workshops around the country. My lifelong passion, next to being an actor, has been to teach character education through my "*Pepefied Breakthrough Improv*." These workshops teach students and adults alike how to *Connect, Communicate and Collaborate*. I draw my teachings from my own life and how I was raised in the 1940s, '50s and '60s – to be an altar boy, cub scout, boy scout, dancer, Golden Glove champ, and a Marine. My character was being built from the inside out – no cheating, lying, or stealing.

I was born at the Corpus Christi, Texas, naval base on July 23, 1944. There have been more than a few Mexican American actors and recording artists who are originally from Corpus Christi, including Freddie Fender, Selena, Eva Longoria, and myself.

In our Mexican American society, it is often said that you must work twice as hard to get half as far as our white counterparts. I disagree with that sentiment. I think in Hollywood Latinos must work 30 times harder.

My father was educated both in Monterrey, Mexico, and Laredo, Texas. While serving in the Navy, he became the interpreter for all the Latin American pilots who were training at the Corpus Christi Naval Base during World War II.

My mother, who was a hairdresser, filled our home with her singing every day. Together, they afforded my brothers, sister, and myself with a good life and a good education.

I had a dream of becoming an actor since I was 3 years of age. After a lifetime of my family's support, I continued my education and studies, in New York City, The University of the Americas in Mexico City, and 6 months active duty in the Marine Corp reserves.

Despite having absolutely no connections or contacts, I finally made my way to my dream quest destination of Hollywood at 24 years of age. Despite all the hard knocks of homelessness, hunger, and rejection, I would not be deterred in the pursuit of my lifelong journey of getting to Hollywood.

I was able to keep fortified by the resilience in my convictions and because I was able to live off all the love and compassion I had been fed since my childhood. I recreate this love of family wherever I go.

In the 50 years of being a working actor in the Hollywood entertainment industry, which by the way has not been an easy feat, I have succeeded by acting in over 100 movies and 300 episodes of television. I have worked my way to the top of my industry and worked with a score of the most highly touted and Academy Award-winning directors, producers, writers, and actors in Hollywood.

In fact, I was discovered by legendary Producer Hal B. Wallis, who produced the movie *Casablanca*. In 1970, Hal cast me in two back-to-back films, *Red Sky at Morning* and the western, *Shootout*, starring Gregory Peck, who was fresh off an Oscar win 7 years prior for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Right off the bat, I was running in fast company.

Some of the critically acclaimed directors I have had the privilege of working with

include Dalton Trumbo, John Schlesinger, Carl Reiner, Brian De Palma, William Friedkin, Mike Nichols, Lawrence Kasdan, Michael Shulz, Clint Eastwood, Greg Nava, and Alexander Payne.

I have shared the screen with award-winning actors, including: Meryl Streep, Al Pacino, Kevin Costner, Steve Martin, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Johnny Depp, Edward James Olmos, Raul Julia, and Clint Eastwood, just to name a few.

When it comes to equal pay, Mexican American and Latino character actors, in general, are positioned on the lowest rung of the pay scale ladder. We are like the farm workers of the movie industry, but at least we get shelter, bathrooms, food, and drink. In the eyes of the producers, we have it good.

Mexican American veteran actors sometimes joke around with each other when we get acting work on big budget films. We call ourselves, “*Miss Scale Plus 10*” or “*Mr. Scale Plus 10*.” This means that the producers will pay you the lowest amount possible per the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). This is the union that is supposed to protect actors. The 10 percent means that you will receive extra pay, but it goes directly to the actor’s agent.

I wish my dear friend, highly touted actress, and activist, Lupe Ontiveros, was here to speak on behalf of all Latina actors. She used to joke around that on her tombstone would be engraved, “*HERE LIES LUPE ONTIVEROS, SCALE PLUS 10*.” Lupe Ontiveros had an amazing and accomplished body of work. She received Best Actress by the Board of Review. She received a television Emmy Award nomination for *Desperate Housewives* and was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for *Chuck and Buck*. But Lupe never was accepted into the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), even though she had 71 film credits. Officials in the Latino entertainment industry, including MALDEF, took this as an insult to all the of the work that Latinos have created for the screen, both in front of and behind the camera.

The criteria by which you become a member of the AMPAS was compared to the criteria of a deep south country club membership. When the CEO of AMPAS was challenged in a meeting, her response at the time was that “AMPAS is an elite group of entertainment professionals.” When challenged, she did not budge. It was obvious that Latinos were not considered a part of this “*elite group of entertainment professionals*.”

Several years ago, Edward James Olmos was finally accepted into AMPAS as a voting member. Since then, he has sponsored many Latino actors who also have become voting members.

While this is a step forward, it is a baby step! Consider these findings from a study released in August 2019 – *The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative* at the University of Southern California:

“Latinos remain woefully underrepresented both in front of and behind the camera. The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California found that of the 100 top-grossing films each year from 2007 to 2018, only 3 percent featured Latino actors in lead or co-lead roles. Producers and casting executives fared badly, too, with Latinos making up only 3 percent. And they were equally rare in the director’s chair, helming four percent of movies studied during the 12-year period. In all, only 4.5 percent of the 47,268 speaking roles studied by researchers went to Latino actors.”

Another bottom line to consider is that Latinos are 18 percent of the U.S. population and represent 23 percent of the movie-going audience!

Lack of diversity also is grotesquely underrepresented in the area of entertainment recognition – Academy Awards, Oscars, Tony, etc. Hence, the social media hashtag *#OscarSoWhite* was created over 5 years ago to bring to light the severe disparities in front of and behind the camera. In social media, there are two hashtags that Latino actors identify with: *#LatinoActorsLife* and *#LatinosInHollywood*. These also speak to our experience dealing with unaddressed discrimination, microaggressions, blacklisting, sexual assault, harassment, hostility, and the list goes on and on.

Latino men have it bad in the industry when it comes to stereotypes, but women really have it much, much worse. As Latino actors, we are usually relegated to the playing the roles of maids, prostitutes, robbers, thugs, drunks, or drug addicts. These are all human beings dealing with emotional pain and in need of mental health treatment, mentors, education, or rehabilitation. The human angles are not accurately addressed on the big or small screen.

In 1997, a group of Latino actors representing *The National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts* traveled to Washington, D.C. to carry this message. Jimmy Smits, Esai Morales, Sonja Braja, myself and others presented our case to Congress. It is no

surprise that, to date, very little or absolutely nothing has been done toward resolving this problem.

During my acting career, I have played more *cholos* and gangsters and have been killed more times than I care to remember. I came to Hollywood to work in film and television, and I have done it in spades. Fifty years later, Latinos are still being portrayed as these negative stereotypes. Now I am afforded much better character roles, because I like to give a helping hand to young filmmakers who are starting to tell our stories.

Washington is our last resource! Unless you in Congress stand up for us, nothing will change. I testify before you as an actor who has been in Hollywood and experienced the slings and arrows for half a century.

Again, I boldly challenge you! Make the changes in the entertainment industry that we as Americans need! Do what you must do to ensure that Latinos and all other minority groups get the representation they deserve, both in front of and behind the camera!

Respectfully,

Pepe Serna
Film, Television and Theatrical Actor
Motivational Speaker/Teacher