

¡PULSO PULSE!

The Beat Of A Latino In The Entertainment Industry.

By Marco Antonio Rodriguez (Latino Leaders Columnist)

### **I'm good enough, I'm smart enough... but am I Latino enough?**

It begins... again. My talent agent summons me to the next audition: a home improvement store commercial that calls for quirky, funny, fluent in Spanish, yet ethnically ambiguous (code for "where in Paula Abdul's name are you from, exactly?") males.

Male: check. Except on weekends (don't ask). Fluent in Spanish: Sí señor. Quirky: I like mayonnaise in my rice... so check. Funny: according to my mommy. Ethnically ambiguous: Quick, look at my pic and guess what specific country I'm from. Check and check!

I get the callback then the hold (code for "we kinda want you but must check with the 87 other product execs who haven't a clue about the entertainment industry but enjoy time away from real work"). The result: "They felt you were perfect but... they went with someone who looked more Latino." Images of a quirky, tanned man with Sofia Vergara accent eating rice with mayonnaise flash before my eyes. Did they not request ethnically ambiguous? And yet, the commercial is for the Spanish market. Perhaps this has little to do with ethnic ambiguity and more with a preconceived notion of a generic Latino look. Something that is becoming a rising trend in the entertainment industry.

My country of origin is the Dominican Republic but I also have Turkish descent. How did my Turkish peeps end up in a Caribbean paradise? Perhaps Columbus had a stronger diversity initiative than theorized. My features are not typical of what you may think of as Dominican: Pale white, thick wavy hair, pronounced nose and I can barely hold a baseball bat much less hit with it. Many a time I've been confused with being Middle-Eastern, Italian, French... one person swore I was from Transylvania and quickly introduced me to Caterina, my twenty-year old future wife and baby mama. Perhaps there is luck in having many countries wishing to claim this pale white body as their own, but it certainly presents a challenge when trying to work in the entertainment industry where these days "ethnically ambiguous" is a term consistently thrown around, yet everything is about how you look; commonly referred to as your "type."

The commercial aspect of the industry is all about marketing. The desire for purchase should arise as you see a version of yourself using a particular product. Ethnically ambiguous is usually a way for marketing to cover as many countries as they can in one single look. From what I can deduce, this new ethnically ambiguous version of Latinos is typically tan to olive skin (but not too dark!), perfect teeth, straight but usually dark hair, and, if you're playing a father figure, a few extra pounds distributed in the right places. Sounds like a Latino version of a white dude. Well... at least my perception of a white dude. Ay dios mío, now I'm doing it!

In order to conform to this look, past agents have advised layers of spray tanning, relaxing my wavy locks, a nose job and eating more chicharrones. "But Miss, my metabolism is too fast for these chalupas to have any effect!" Are we now of the mentality that Latinos must have generic, yet racially suggestive features in order for us to identify and/or feel represented? What of those that are a mixed soup of gene heritage? How quickly we forget the Spanish and European conquests throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Those Buon Giornos, Bon Jours and ¡Oles! have spread far and wide, mis amigos.

Who are we really as Latinos? Inside and out, we are everyone. Black, white, spray tanned... French, German, Transylvanian...We are our heritage, whatever and how many ever that may be. No marketing company, home improvement store or chicharron should claim to define us. We define ourselves by owning every root of our roots. And there is hope. Recently I caught a rare Spanish commercial where a couple shared the positives of using a top laundry detergent to clean their children's clothes. He spoke with an Argentinian accent and had long, black wavy hair, blue eyes and pale white skin. She spoke with a Mexican accent, short blond hair and dark complexion. I, for one, was ready to get me some detergent!

On the way home from the supermarket and yet another ethnically ambiguous commercial audition it hits: Its been some time since I've booked a commercial and my agent, not to mention my bank account, is giving me shifty-eyed stares. I halt at a stoplight. To my left, a car inches forward and lowers the passenger window. A man leans out. He points and waves for my attention. He seems to be asking for directions in what I think is Arabic. To my right, a tanning salon beckons with its long, cursive writings and neon green sign. Ten tans for the price of five! Dare I enter?