

Born to *Run*:

Esai for President

He's a contender. Esai Morales steps into the ring to battle for the top job at the entertainment industry's biggest union.

Story by Judi Jordan Photos by Ejen Chuang

SAG-AFTRA
ONE UNION

Cesar Chavez nearly died during his heroic 36-day hunger strike in 1988 protesting the deadly pesticides poisoning workers in the grape fields. To keep him alive,

his cross was symbolically passed between devoted friends and followers who fasted in his place. Martin Sheen fasted for three days, and then passed the cross on to Esai Morales, who in turn, fasted for three days before passing the cross to Rev. Jesse Jackson. The spirit of those fiery times rocks on in Morales' restless soul, feeding the fire for equality in his chosen arena.

Many years have passed since the activist bug first bit Morales, but as the accolades followed for his artistic work, he held fast to his ideals staying engaged with the Latino community as he honed his unique presence in hundreds of TV and film, Broadway and Theater productions.

A time-and-genre traveler, Morales's work runs the gamut from Shakespeare to Mambo Kings, from Atlas Shrugged to Magic City, Los Americans to Caprica. Through his early choices of roles, Morales organically branded himself, creating unforgettable characters that resonated with the unrest in the Latino community. Who can forget Bob Valenzuela's anguish in "La Bamba," or wisecracking Lt. Tony Rodriguez in "NYPD Blue," or hot-blooded Chucho in "Mi Familia?"

Morales is the rabble rouser, the bad boy, the charismatic leader, the guy with the grudge, the dad with the edge, the brother with the secret, the man on the ledge. His recent success in the Sundance hit, "Gun Hill Road" as the confounded ex-con dad of a transvestite son reflects his ability to portray characters that satisfy expectations but also allow him to grow as an actor and help society bridge the gaps in understanding. In his present TV project, "Magic City", the Starz Channel drama set in Miami circa 1959, Morales plays Cuban rebel Carlos "El Tiburon" Ruiz, a man who once fought beside Fidel but is now determined to free his nation from Castro's death grip.

Morales likes intense roles that externalize the inner rebellion and reinforce his commitment to change. His persona is so recognizable and enduring that when he comes on the screen, you instantly know something is going to alter, come

to a head, and never be the same. That still holds true, but in 'real life' he is so much more. Morales is a force, an agent of change, and a man of conviction. The calling that came to Morales in his mother's milk is alive and well, tugging at his heart and conscience. With three-plus decades of award-winning, artistic acclaim, and the street creds of high-profile cause-driven commitment, his time has come.

Morales is running for president.

To understand Morales, you only have to hear his admiration for his fierce mother, Iris Margarita Morales, a union organizer, who raised him solo in Brooklyn. Morales, a natural storyteller, paints a scene that brings to life the memory of his activist origins.

"My mother was an organizer for International Ladies Garment Workers Union (IGLWU)," Morales said. "She was always giving advice and support to women who were being sexually harassed by employers. She barely spoke English -but she spoke justice!"

His early passion for the arts was nourished on dreams of a world where talent was the foremost requirement for success. He attended the well-known New York High School of the Performing Arts, portrayed in FAME. Morales went on to star with the best of them; Raul Julia, Sean Penn, Al Pacino, the list is long and keeps growing. He has done it all--Shakespeare, sci-fi, period films, romantic comedy, musicals, TV. But how do you sustain your love of the craft when the deck remains unfairly stacked?

The slow, painful realization of the reality boiled his blood in a heart intended for artistic self-expression. A dual side to Morales took root, and sprouted. He now calls himself an 'actorvist.'

He will need to be a lion tamer as well as president of SAG-AFTRA, two unions, now one, and both famous for discord.

The unruly, newly-merged and powerful 165,000 member-strong Screen Actors Guild- American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has proved challenging for those all who attempted to tame the beast. An abysmal 13 percent

of members voted on recent contracts, disengaged by the density of the information. Morales's goal of leading the entertainment industry's giant talent union into a new era of transparency and simplified and open communication could stimulate interest of the normally disengaged younger members-- in fact he is counting on it.

Ripe for new direction, Screen Actors Guild, launched in 1933, has long been a pulpit for actor's rights. In recent years, it has been a never-ending source of heated discussion over the recently-enacted merger with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, which dates back to 1937. There has never been a SAG or AFTRA president of 'diverse' heritage, but there could not be a better time to have a grassroots, grounded leader with a Latino fire in his belly, sparking membership dialogue and quantifiable casting diversity in the stalled industry.

At this moment, widely acknowledged as the 'tipping point' or 'critical mass' for the US Hispanic population in general, the lack of representation and respect for the contributions of Latinos in mainstream media has deteriorated from hurtful to offensive. Networks, cable and studios have steadfastly resisted authentic, inclusive casting proportionally and progressively representative of modern society in favor of tokenism. As many laud the quality of shows produced at present, Morales echoes the sentiments of many saying.

TOUGH LOVE FOR THE ARTS:

Morales, possessed by his deep need for justice, with his great friends Jimmy Smits and Sonia Braga, Merel Julia and attorney Felix Sanchez created The National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts in 1997, www.hispanicarts.org with the goal of nurturing and encouraging talent and fueling acknowledgement of Latino achievement.

It's been a good 15 years.

Since then, they have granted over a million dollars in scholarships. Recently, they also gave the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences a slap on the wrist for the blatant exclusion of late Latina icon Lupe Ontiveros in the 2012 Oscars In Memoriam. The Kennedy Center also felt the wrath of NHFA for the persistent lack of acknowledgement for Latino artists; in the 35 years of the Center's existence, only two Hispanic artists have been honored; Chita Rivera and Placido Domingo.

The gala in December could hold surprises if the Latino community submits names of potential honorees in force. Send your ideas:

www.kennedy-center.org/programs/specialevents/honors/



"I like the shows on TV now," he said. "But there just aren't enough Latinos or other ethnic groups cast as leads in them. It's not about special Latino shows, it's about being inclusive with more lead characters with Latino names."

And it's not 'just' about Latino employment for Morales.

"I'll be president for all of SAG-AFTRA, protecting the interests of everyone, from the bottom up."

Morales enjoys debate but admits he has learned to keep his passion

in check. In a reversal of the present opaque, closed door, top-down policy, he proposes a transparent, bottom-up approach with his faction called "Members First" in which his good friend Martin Sheen is an integral participant.

Members First focuses on protection of the future interests of all members in ways that have not been fully explored in the past. Morales, as a board member, is no stranger to SAG's drama. He's seen the wheeling and dealing, the maneuverings for power over the members' futures and

the relations with the estimated 200+ billion dollar industry. Morales's "Fierce but Fair" mantra underscores his determination towards greater equality in the industry. To achieve this requires restructuring the status quo favoring the fortunate few. Change is always tough but Morales digs a challenge -- it's in his blood .

LATINO LEADERS: When did you become fully engaged in the future of Latino entertainment?

ESAI MORALES: I'm not as much engaged in the future of Latino entertainment as I am in the future of my family. And Latinos in entertainment—it's like where are we in the big picture? Because we pay into the tax system we're a major part of this society but when it comes to being reflected in our media, were almost invisible and when we are visible it's in a marginal role and a less-than-reality role and that hurts. It just damages our own children's ability to see themselves as valuable contributors to society but the rest of society doesn't know who their neighbors are, and of the value that we bring to the table. It isn't just for us. It's about us so that the rest of the world can truly see who their brothers and sisters are in the Latino community.

LL: Why is there so little progress for Latinos in entertainment? It seems like a lot of people are doing a bunch of different things but we don't see real change.

EM: We have a lot of self-appointed leaders, they mean well, but you need to get the support of the community before you can speak for the rest of us, you need to do well by them, before you can go out and talk about blackouts and brownouts. We need materials and support to have it stick. We can complain all day long and we can have bones thrown at us. Just look at the African American community who got three Oscars in one year: Halle, Denzel and Sidney Poitier, and afterward, it's like "now, go away." And I don't like that. We are here. We pay with blood and taxes. Our constituents die and serve with distinction and we just want what's fair, and what's fair is that people show us as the heroes that we have been, not just the zeros that you see in the aggregate media—we're almost always the zero and almost never the hero.

LL: Is your motive driven by the lack of progress or because of the opportunity



"My mother was a union organizer for the ILGWU from the 60's through the 70's she barely spoke English but she spoke justice—and people understand justice."

presented at SAG-AFTRA You becoming president of SAG-AFTRA would be...?
EM: Legitimizing it. And that does not mean being the leader of the Latino Caucus of SAG-AFTRA. I have to be very sensitive to the needs of all of our members. But I will be especially interested that the Latino community does not continue to get short shift from its union.

LL: Did your mother teach you about sticking up for yourself?

EM: Basically my mother was active in the late 60's in the most turbulent of times. Oh man, it was rough! People fought police officers, scabs, provocateurs— they got all out there and fought with their fists, their signs. They fought... for the rights to earn a decent living. My mother was always on the phone advising other women, telling them to stand up to their bosses or their boyfriends or their husbands, saying, "If you don't stand up now, you never will." This applies to everyone. You have to do something, otherwise you legitimize the abuse. By standing up, running for president, I opt to be a champion for my fellow artists...the people who provide the most special of effects—the human touch.

LL: Growing up with a single mom—did she teach you to stand up for yourself, was there any one incident that pushed you over the edge, where you

said—that's it, I've had enough?

EM: Was there any one thing that kicked me over the edge?[Laughter] In elementary school I used to call myself Harriet Tubman, want to know why? I would see who was singled out for three o'clock, the big bullies would pick out some little kid, some nerd and they'd say to him: "You, three o'clock!" and all of a sudden that kid's life ended; you could tell that day that kid knew what was about to befall him, and I'd be like "Psst c'mere, do you want to get out of here? Meet me here at five to three," and I'd escort him to the boiler room and find the back, back, furthest exit to get him out of there— until one time one 'cat' caught onto me, and then I was the focus. They came after me. I had a pencil in my hand, and it was a regretful situation... but I was feeling very, very threatened, and I lashed out, and he never messed with me again. The point is it's an existential threat we face sometimes and if we don't stand up to it you will be subjected to it again and again.

LL: So it is pilot season, and a lot of shows, some Latino-themed, fall through the cracks when it comes to getting the series order. Why are the shows getting greenlit about maids and gangs?

EM: These are things I'm sensitive to; I can't for sure say Hollywood does it on purpose... [ironic] but sometimes it

sure doesn't seem like they're trying very hard. Is it ignorance? It's sexy. Hollywood is about sex and violence. Violence is romanticized. The Italian American communities got very sensitive about being portrayed as gangsters. And then along came Coppola and said "You want to see gangsters? I'll show you gangsters!" And he showed it from the inside out. Italian-Americans are still very sensitive about their portrayal because while there are a lot of very legitimate people, all we seem to gravitate towards is the violence. It's romanticized; but we don't want maids and gang bangers to be romanticized about our community because we have so much more to offer. We have to take notice of other communities that don't allow for that, and protect their brand. People's trademarks are their brand. We cannot whitewash it. We're not denying that we have a gang problem. We need to ask why do we have gang problems— where are the strong men that stand up for their community? Don't tell me we don't have leaders—we've been the victims of extremely sophisticated marginalizing techniques. We have to protect our brand.

LL: What kind of shows would you like to see on TV?

EM: The kind of shows that are on TV—just include us! Don't exclude us. When they write the script and the guy's

name is O'Brien or Jones, why can't the names of the leads include Chavez or Huerta or whatever something that says not only Anglo people are heroes. That we, Latinos are people worth caring for! Cause that's subtly the message, that if you have a certain background, you're less worthy. It implies "Please go back to your servile position, we're the adults here. Let the adults get to work." "People can be very condescending.

LL: Present project?

EM: Portraits of Courage. There are so many ignored heroes in our history we want our children to understand and to know that there's a place for us.

LL: So why are you running for president of SAG-AFTRA? You have a lot on your plate.

EM: If unions don't keep their membership democratized, their structures accountable, and their leaders accountable that put them there in the first place, that pay their salaries, then you have elitist top down structures, which is why I'm running for office. I'd like to go back to the days when they had four membership meetings a year and not just one. I'm not going to attack the present SAG leadership over broken promises, but if— when I become president, I'm going to have to take those same people that were attacking me and bring them into the fold. My door will be open my ears will be open and my mouth will be very measured; choosing what it is that we have to say not only to each other but to the rest of the Hollywood community. We have a big and powerful voice but we have to know how and when to use it. And use it for divine purposes and not self aggrandizement.

LL: What does this mean to you personally?

EM: I am someone that has somehow maintained a career despite incredible professional and personal obstacles. I still want to be a better human being every day. As much as it pains me, I have to listen to those critics whose complaints are legitimate. [Laughter] And I think the union should do that as well. We have to join the 21st century. A lot of people say that it's [unions] are old fashioned out dated, but unions protect people that create the product, that make others rich and some comfortable. We need to be properly represented and not be taken advantage of.

LL: You're going to rewrite what union means to actors?

EM: I will lead with my head and my heart a close second. I sure didn't invent the idea, but I'd take my lead from great actors like Jimmy Cagney who was at the top of his game and put his neck on the line, because if you remember were talking about the 30's people didn't play back then! People were murdered for standing up for their workers— these were men who had courage. Courage is a lost cause, and undervalued. It's seen as naïve. I will do everything in my power to protect not only my livelihood but that of every member of my union. I wasn't for the merger but now it's come out that the promises made by the opposition were not so easy to keep. I'm here to make sure that the board keeps the promises they made. Against promises made, SAG-AFTRA closed ten branch offices. This was very recent. I understand that we have to cut expenses but we have less services now. We merged two unions. We gained 30 percent in membership. The budget is almost double. So somebody's paying for that and somebody's absorbing that. And participation is what it's all about. This was a closed door decision. I didn't know about it. I don't mind taking tough measures but let's follow some sort of due process when they're at it. We know who fights out there and we know who throws the fight. We're not going to throw the fight.

LL: What's the first step you'll take if elected?

EM: Open the process. Make it more member-friendly. It's going to take pressure from the community, outside the boardroom. The talent agencies... we're going to have to all work together. In the decision-making positions it's a very closed environment—a fraternity with very little diversity. To change that, it's going to take outreach and basic communication, some people don't understand why it's so important to stand together. I want to get more young folks to understand that this is their back-up 'insurance plan' aside from their insurance plan, and that no matter how much money you make now, there comes a point when it peaks— then you have to join the ranks trying to figure out how to stay relevant, and how you're going to feed your family on a hundred bucks a day.

LL: What's going on with your foundation?

EM: A lot. Our National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts recently held the Kennedy Center accountable— we sent letters to their leadership trying to get some answers as to why after 35 years or so of their existence only two Latinos have ever been acknowledged for their excellence. One is Placido Domingo, he's a giant in any community and then we have Chita Rivera, who's a wonderful person, but what about Rita Moreno? And Raul Julia, Jose Ferrer? These are entertainers who have achieved great things.

Sometimes it comes across like we're not 'American enough! 'And that's a very touchy subject because you can't ascribe motives to people you're not familiar with but what can you say when the process has not been upgraded? And if they have any biases it's going to be reflected in the awards. Look at Lupe Ontiveros, yes—she played 150 maids—but, she was a brilliant activist; she had many causes she supported and she was a true leader. The fact that she was not even mentioned at the Oscars in Memoriam when many other very 'esoteric' people were honored... Michael Hopkins— a New Zealand sound editor? It's like anybody but us!

So how can we continue quietly?

The National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts is very active; we have given out over a million dollars in scholarships, and more importantly, we've given awardees connectivity. Hollywood is a classic case of "It's better to work with the devil you know, than the angel you don't." It's about who knows who, and who can be trusted. We bring them to the head of diversity development and introduce them. Some producers, who shall remain nameless— when they get input they don't want to hear it, but you can't let that stop you. We want to help get people in who will be more than tokens. We have to figure out active and aggressive, bold ways to end that. This industry will be just for children of the rich and hobbyists if we don't make it safe to have a career and raise a family.

LL: What do you want to leave to your daughter?

EM: The ability to act upon what I've left her genetically. I've given her a lot of my traits and I can see them for better and for worse [laughter] I want her to live in a world where she can pursue her dreams and even if she has obstacles they will only empower her more. ●