

Michael is an ideal depiction of what it means to be a first generation Latino aspiring to be more than the world initially offers him. His parents, Mexican farmers, immigrated to Chicago in hopes of creating better opportunities for themselves and for Michael and his brother. Like most Hispanic families going through economic hardships, family and community served as the backbone to everyday life. Although Michael was only able to enjoy his first bike for 10 minutes before it was stolen by a menacing group of adolescents, Chicago was the setting for his family's earlier years. As a child, Michael's mother would take her boys to the movies every Sunday. Instead of spending that money on herself or items for their home, the three would venture to the local theater to catch two movies - always a traditional Mexican film as well as a contemporary American film. It was during these trips to the movie theater that Michael began to understand and appreciate the power films have to incite emotion and inspire. Upon watching Edward James Olmos play teacher, Jaime Escalante, in *Stand and Deliver*, he felt compelled to take calculus in high school. Another education-related film he cited during our conversation was

*Dead Poets Society*

featuring Robin Williams. In this case, the film allowed Michael to experience and feel part of the camaraderie shared between teacher and student. These seemingly insignificant childhood experiences coupled with a fortunate discovery of raw talent would eventually propel Michael to Hollywood stardom.

If Michael's rise to success contains a message for aspiring actors, it's that you have to believe in your craft and the work you're associating yourself with. Initially, Michael wasn't a believer in his craft. In fact, during one of his early auditions, the casting director asked him if he could act, to which Michael replied, "We're about to find out." This attitude didn't denote dedication and a firm belief in his craft or abilities. However, in Michael's case, the raw talent must have been painstakingly piercing in the eyes of seasoned professionals. It wasn't too long after that first audition that a casting director simply instructed him to relocate to Los Angeles. There was one booking as a featured extra in between, but from Michael's modest description and some basic editorial analysis, Michael just had that raw and pure talent that easily convinced. His belief in his abilities began to solidify when he left his tight-knit community of Chicago to pursue and master his acting skills in Los Angeles.



Once in Los Angeles, Michael's career began to take off. He accomplished all the basic essentials such as getting an agent and booking roles. However, he soon realized that in order to mold raw talent into art, he would have to call upon his personal experiences to engage deeper with scripts and films. Early on, Michael primarily studied and was a fan of actors such as Meryl Streep, Dustin Hoffman, Gene Hackman, Al Pacino, and Robert DeNiro. He then began to admire stories and scripts and the directors capable of telling the stories. When I asked him for advice for aspiring actors, he offered that as an actor you have to be true to the type of writing you like. If an actor is unable to connect to the material and wouldn't enjoy it naturally if it came on television, there lies a fundamental disconnect that won't be overcome. Michael gave the example of Larry David and his show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. To Michael, it's pretty clear that Larry David enjoys the show's dry comedy and would watch that type of show even if he wasn't affiliated with it. So as Michael said, "If that's what you like, that's what you go for." This approach has proven very successful. At the center of all his roles is Michael's ability to leverage his personal beliefs and experiences to breathe life into characters. The deep understanding of what a character would say in any given situation is important and essential to creating an individual that audiences either love or hate, but ultimately remember because of the power of the performance.

The film *World Trade Center* directed by Oliver Stone and starring Nicolas Cage, Michael Peña, Maria Bello, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and Michael Shannon came at a time when the nation was still grieving over the losses of September 11. However, amidst all the pain and suffering, there was a unique opportunity to highlight the amazing heroism displayed during that infamous day. Peña plays Colombian native and Port Authority police officer, Will Jimeno, who was buried under the rubble for 13 hours before being saved by Marine rescue workers. Throughout the progression of the story, the audience can literally see the stress and pain take over Michael's facial expression and body movements. As an audience member, you can see the sweat, sense the fear and feel the terror these rescue workers felt moments before a tower of metal collapsed right on top of them. As Peña and Cage's characters are stuck under the debris, they exchange personal information that brings the audience even closer to them. It is without a doubt that Michael was able to call upon his humble upbringings to put himself in the shoes of Will Jimeno and evoke the type of emotion necessary to give the audience a true front row seat to the tragic events of that day. His performance perfectly encapsulated the American spirit of resilience and honor. Although Michael's character was on the brink of death, he persevered through with the help of his fellow American and in the end, survived. As we commemorate another year since the tragic events of September 11, be sure to catch *World Trade Center* and experience the riveting performances that commemorate the bravery of the day.



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