

The author, Florence Ferreira (left), with singer Gloria Estefan and actor Andy Garcia.



By Florence Ferreira, ACB, CL

## Making small talk with the stars at the Latin Grammy Awards.

# When Table Topics Are Real

*So you step into the elevator of your hotel and all the way from the 14th floor down to the lobby, the only person crammed inside the tiny chamber with you is movie star Andy Garcia. What do you say?*

Then you go to the ladies room and as you're reaching for the last paper towel, you realize your rival for that towel is none other than singing sensation Gloria Estefan. What do you say?

There was a time I dreaded Table Topics, especially when one specific member of my Boca Raton (Florida) club was the Topicsmaster. Every time she took on that role she would come up with the most twisted and improbable situations for us to talk about, usually related to the jet set. But those were hypothetical scenarios. Now, in

the elevator and in the ladies room, there was no one showing me a green light. It was real.

It was not a coincidence that I found myself face-to-face with Andy and Gloria on the same day. This was last November in Houston, Texas, where I attended the 9th annual Latin Grammy Awards. *¡Sí, Señor!* My dear and longtime friend Barbara Palacios, who was crowned Miss Universe in 1986, was invited to host the pre-telecast awards ceremony and invited me along. The way I imagined the Latin Grammys was the way it is broadcast on TV – basically an awards

presentation ceremony showcasing musical performances between awards. What I didn't anticipate was that before the actual telecast ceremony, for three days in a row, I would be mingling with the stars in different private events, cocktail parties and dinners – sitting at the same tables, sharing the same hotel, walking through the same hallways, riding together in elevators and splitting paper towels in restrooms.

Of course, walking next to a former Miss Universe came in very handy when I wished to remain invisible, especially considering that I'm 5 feet tall. But most of the time there was no way to hide; I just had to make conversation.

That's where my Table Topics experience came to life, especially those times when I was called on by this eccentric Topicsmaster to

expound on her loony fantasies. With Table Topics, we learn to be creative and playful, to pretend, to impersonate, and especially to refrain from taking ourselves and the situation too seriously. So every time I found myself in the presence of somebody who was *Somebody*, I imagined I was speaking on a Table Topic: I decided to play with the situation and just pretend that I also was Somebody. And with the self-assurance I gained from this mindset, I engaged in conversation naturally, the same way I would have with anybody. (“I think the limo is here....Is that your hat on the chair, Carlos [Santana]?”) It worked marvels. Fortunately, nobody asked, “Which Somebody are you?”

One of my tricks, if I had to introduce myself, was to make sure I would do it with my first and last name – Florence Ferreira. I thought it would give more realism to my “character.” After all, among these VIPs were also CEOs, producers, composers, etc., and they didn’t introduce themselves as Peter, Paul or Mary (except, that is, for Peter, Paul and Mary).

And sometimes I would shake hands without pronouncing my name at all. That’s when my character was so famous that there was no need for it, and shame on whoever didn’t recognize me. After enough warm-up, I moved up to the next level and would excitedly blurt: “¡Hola! ¿Cómo estás?” I am sure some of these celebrities are still trying to put a name to my face!

On a more serious note, I discovered once in action that the most useful skill Table Topics had taught me was to come out of my own persona to embody different characters and analyze different situations. In the present circumstance, had I not been through that training, I would have probably felt intimidated to the point of staying quiet, feeling out of place and making it

show. Instead, not only did I naturally step into a character, Señora Somebody – a lovely person (who would have thought?) – but I was also composed enough to put myself in other people’s shoes and explore their respective predicaments and weaknesses.

**“Table Topics taught me to come out of my own persona and embody different characters and analyze different situations.”**

I realized that as famous as they are, celebrities also have their insecurities. Old stars go through the pain of not being recognized any longer, newcomers seek attention however they can find it, tabloid scapegoats take any opportunity to cleanse their image, and ultimately every artist is at the mercy of producers (aside from Gloria Estefan, who is married to one).

This Achilles’ heel of performers became very apparent on the last day, right before the actual Latin Grammy ceremony, and led to another “Table Topics” scenario.

As they come out of their limousines to walk to the arena, celebrities have to cross the “green carpet” – it happens to be green at this event – a long walkway bordered by the Latin Grammy logo-imprinted wall on one side, and myriad voracious journalists and photographers on the other.

The reporters aim to interview the most popular stars, but the artists are also eager to be approached by the most prized TV channels and magazines. This latter quest, contrary to the impression we get on TV, results in the slowest walk I have ever experienced. In order to be noticed and interviewed by the highest number before reaching the finish line, everyone takes extra time by engaging in small talk

to anyone standing around, pretending to be retained and excited by the conversation, but spotting the media in the corner of their eye – “I’m glad we didn’t have to walk as much as last year. Vegas was a killer. Oh, you weren’t there last year? ¡Qué pena! (What a pity).”

That was my moment of glory. Celebrities were even taking pictures with me; I was finally being recognized! By then, I had blended with my character and believed I was Somebody, indeed! *¿Un autógrafo? ¡Sí, claro!*

Table Topics has never been my strength at the club, and I always envied the members who seemed to be naturals. But I discovered on this trip that I had learned more than I thought, and that sometimes it just takes a *real-life* opportunity to be able to assess one’s progress along the road. Of course, there is nothing more motivating than that: applying what you’ve struggled to grasp and discovering you actually got it. I encourage every Toastmaster to throw yourself into real-life Table Topics situations as often as possible. I don’t necessarily recommend elevators and public restrooms, however, unless it’s at the Latin Grammy Awards and you’re ready to live *La Vida Loca*. 📺

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