

VÉLEZ DE VANDO, EMELÍ (1917–1999)

Among the bright stars of the Spanish speaking entertainment world in New York's Puerto Rican community, Emelí Vélez de Vando was known as much for her performance skills as for her fiery political activism. Born in the Canas barrio of Ponce, her early schooling took place in her hometown and in Santurce. She came to New York in 1934. Her first job in the city was at the Pilsen Brothers Curtain Factory where she earned ten dollars per week. From the start, she became involved in the cultural and organizational life of the Puerto Rican colonia. Known as an effective public speaker, Vélez de Vando joined la Junta Nacionalista de Nueva York, a branch of the island's Nationalist Party, vowing to seek independence for Puerto Rico. From this point on in her life, she dedicated herself to the independence movement. She became part of a circle of women experienced in political organizing who formed a women's group called el Comité Femenino del Partido Nacionalista (Women's Committee of the Nationalist Party). Her playwright husband, Erasmo Vando, was the first to present Puerto Rican theater in New York. Many of these productions served as fund raisers for political events. Together they formed La Asociación de Escritores y Periodistas, and the Asociación Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico en la Ciudad de Nueva York. They also worked in the political campaigns of Vito Marcantonio. Upon her return to Puerto Rico in the late 1940s, she joined the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP) and in 1960 was the party's candidate for mayor of San Juan. Disenchanted with the PIP, Vélez de Vando helped to found the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI), was secretary of Acción Femenina, the women's division, and coordinated public events and other activities.