VÉLEZ-MITCHELL, ANITA (1916–)

The poet, playwright, stage, screen and cabaret performer not only set records in the entertainment world, but also through the numerous accolades garnered for her writing. Ana (Anita) Vilia Vélez was born in Vieques, Puerto Rico, on February 21, 1916, but did not set foot in New York until 1929 when her mother sent for her. Vélez -Mitchell went from living a life of luxury to cold water tenements in Spanish Harlem. Working as a movie house usherette the precocious fifteen year old learned dance routines, acting and singing from watching Hollywood movies. At seventeen she entered Puerto Rican theatrical circles and married playwright, activist Erasmo Vando. The marriage dissolved and Vélez-Mitchell supported herself and young daughter, Gloria Vando, through a series of jobs. She appeared in the film, *Mexican Hayride*, toured with the Ringling Brothers Circus as an aerialist, landed roles in Broadway musicals, and television commercials. In the1950s she formed the Anita Vélez Dancers; performed on The Ed Sullivan Show and in Carnegie Hall; and acted in "A Night of García Lorca." Her most notable Broadway role was as "Anita" in *West Side Story*. Vélez-Mitchell also wrote stories, plays, poetry and essays, receiving the coveted Julia de Burgos prize for her bilingual book-length poem, *Primavida: Calendario de Amor*. In 1999 she performed her songs at Lincoln Center in a tribute given to her by the Panamerican Symphony Orchestra. In 2000 she was the subject of a documentary, *Anita Vélez: Dancing through Life*, which follows her early career in theater. Directed and produced by her daughter, Jane Vélez-Mitchell, it won four awards at the New York and Los Angeles Film Festivals. In 2002 Vélez-Mitchell costarred in the film *Voice of an Angel*, which won Best U.S.A. Short Film Award from the Silver Image and Los Angeles film festivals. A nonagenarian, Vélez-Mitchell is the matriarch of a talented, artistic family and remains active in all facets of her artistic endeavors.