

for John Leguizamo, Promoting LATINO CULTURE

IS **KEY** THE STAR OF STAGE AND THE
SCREEN RECEIVES THE LA PRESS
CLUB'S PRESIDENT'S AWARD FOR
IMPACT ON MEDIA
BY CHRIS PALMERI

John Leguizamo has appeared in more than 200 films and TV shows, performed on stage at some of the nation's finest theaters, and written a half dozen books and plays.

His roles have ranged from Romeo's pugnacious rival Tybalt Capulet in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 street-savvy adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* to the mysterious uncle Bruno Madrigal in Walt Disney's 2021 hit *Encanto*. He has worked alongside some of the greatest actors of the era and with some of the best directors.

One constant in his career, however, is a desire to promote Latin culture, have fun with ethnic stereotypes, and show immigrant life in all its complexity. That comes into play in his new project, *Leguizamo Does America*, a six-part streaming series (produced by NBC News Studios) that showcases the contributions that Latinos make to this country.

For his work over the decades, Leguizamo is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's President's Award for Impact on Media. He is being honored tonight at the 65th annual Southern California Journalism Awards.

"I am an Hispanic and an artist," he once wrote for the *New York Times*. "They both are of profound importance to me."

Leguizamo, 62, was born in Bogota,

Colombia, to parents who relocated to Queens, New York, when he was 3. His father, Alberto Rudolfo Leguizamo, had a series of get-rich-quick schemes. His mother, Luz Marina Peláez, worked several jobs, including as a seamstress. His parents often fought, however, and ultimately divorced.

Leguizamo learned to survive in the city's tough public schools and neighborhoods in part by telling jokes. He did impressions, going so far as to take over a subway conductor's public announcement system one time, a stunt that got him picked up by the transit police.

A high school teacher encouraged him to take acting lessons and Leguizamo ultimately landed at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. He also studied under the great Lee Strasberg, the founder of "method acting," and performed in comedy clubs throughout the city.



film, his first major Hollywood production, featured Michael J. Fox, John C. Reilly and Sean Penn. Still, Leguizamo wanted something more.

"I was sick of always playing and seeing two-dimensional Latin stereotypes," he wrote in his 2006 autobiography, *Pimps, Ho's, Playa Hatas and All the Rest of My Hollywood Friends*. "I felt a longing to create some kind of a legacy, a memory about surviving, about people who made it against long odds."

That led to a series of one-man plays that Leguizamo wrote and performed in venues such as New York's Public Theatre and

Leguizamo's first TV appearance was as a drug dealer in the hit *Miami Vice*. He then landed a role as a Vietnam-era Army private who participates in a murder in the Brian De Palma crime drama *Casualties of War*. That

Chicago's Goodman Theatre, as well as for HBO. The plays included *Mambo Mouth*, *Sexaholic* and *Spic-O-Rama*, in which he explored Latino characters that he created.

His first, *Mambo Mouth*, won an Obie award, given to Off-Broadway productions.

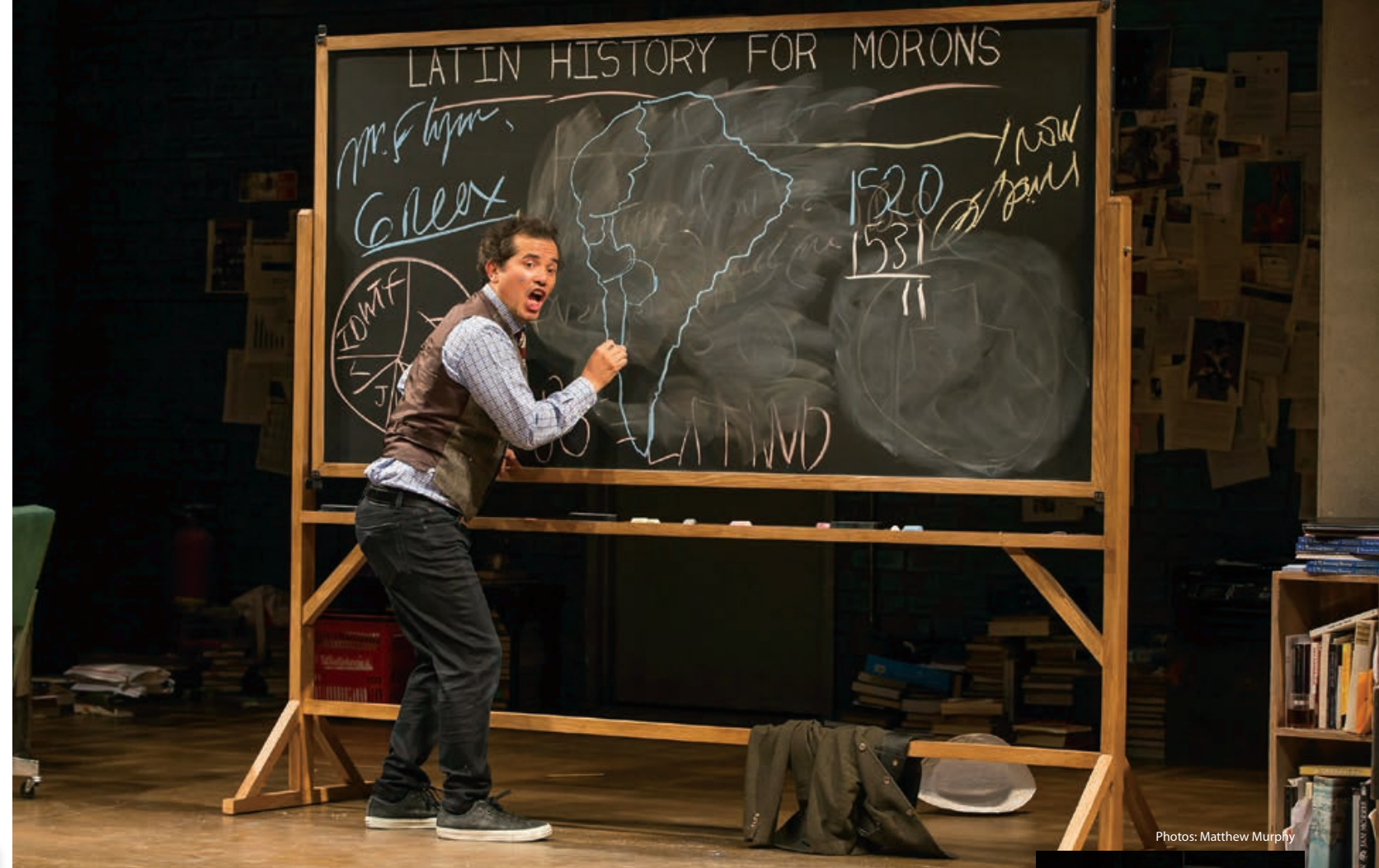
"I love the format," Leguizamo wrote about the shows. "It's the most personal and intimate kind of performance you can do."

Spic-O-Rama, a title he chose for its impact, featured characters such as Miggy, a bespectacled nerd with an overbite; Miggy's brother Krazy Willie, a Desert Storm vet with a highly charged libido; and another brother, Raffael, who dyes his hair blonde, pretends he's white and quotes Shakespeare.

"The rumors are true. I am the love child of Sir Laurence Olivier," Raffi says at one point in the play. Later, he states, "It's hard to be Elizabethan in Jackson Heights."

Leguizamo often mined material from his own family. Indeed, at the start of *Spic-O-Rama*, Miggy tells the audience, "My science fair project is loosely based on my family. And any similarities are just purely on purpose."

The approach has gotten him in trouble with his parents, according to *Ghetto Clown*, a 2015 graphic novel also based on Leguizamo's life. His estranged father confronted him



Photos: Matthew Murphy



Leguizamo's one-man show, *Latin History for Morons*, reveals little known facts of Latino history. He recounts how a Cuban woman named Loreta Janeta Velázquez dressed as a man to fight in the Civil War.

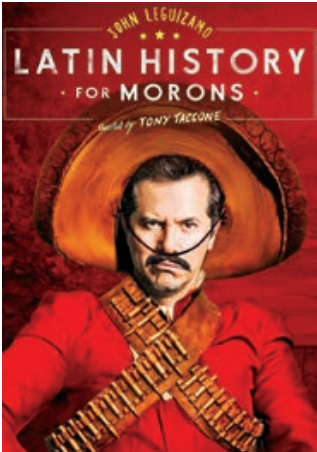
Cover: *Ghetto Clown* was both a graphic novel and Drama Desk Award-winning one-man show.

Poster for *Freak*, a Spike Lee film of Leguizamo's live show on Broadway in 1998.



Leguizamo performs in his show, *Sexaholic*.

PRESIDENT'S
AWARD
JOHN
LEGUIZAMO



A poster for his one-man show, *Latin History for Morons*, written in response to his son being bullied, and to help him find sources of pride in Latino contributions to the world.

For his television series, *Leguizamo Does America*, he visits various cities to explore their Latino/a culture. Above, right: he visits Gala Hispanic Theatre in Washington, D.C. to work with immigrant youth.

Right: Leguizamo high fives Clarissa Martinez de Castro, the Vice President of the Latino Vote Initiative at UnidosUS.

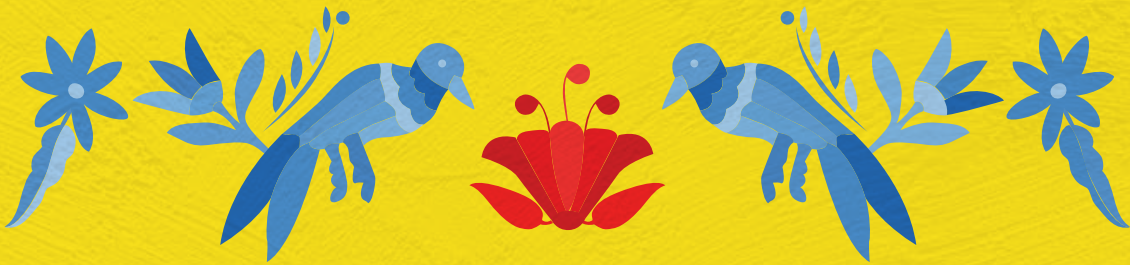
Leguizamo revisits his old apartment in New York.



after seeing a performance of his show *Freak*. "Then I realize my father is crying," Leguizamo's character says in the novel. "I thought though this was the victory I'd been waiting for. The revenge I'd been dreaming about. But it felt so shitty to make my old man cry."

Other than his own family, Leguizamo has said inspiration has come from American tragic plays including Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and Arthur Miller's *Death of Salesman*, where sons, in particular, wrestle with the demons born of their relationships with their fathers.

"John's writing has always been cutting-edge," said actress Sofia Vergara in a blurb for *Ghetto Klown*. "He is a pioneer in theater and comedy, not just for Latin people, but as



THE NBCUNIVERSAL NEWS GROUP CONGRATULATES
JOHN LEGUIZAMO
HOST OF *LEGUIZAMO DOES AMERICA* ON RECEIVING
THE PRESIDENT'S AWARD FOR IMPACT ON MEDIA



LEGUIZAMO DOES **AMERICA**

peacock **STREAMING NOW**





In his television series, *Leguizamo Does America*, he joins a game in Miami's Domino Park.

much as any comic or playwright I've ever seen or read. Nobody makes me laugh louder than this man."

Leguizamo has always had a sense of humor about himself and his career. In his autobiography he joked that the only time anyone has said he looked bigger in person than on the screen was after he played crippled French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in Luhrmann's 2001 musical film *Moulin Rouge!* Leguizamo

hobbled around on his knees when he filmed his part, an arduous shoot that landed him in physical therapy afterward.

Leguizamo lives in New York with his wife, Justine Maurer, a costumer whom he met on the set of *Carlito's Way*, another De Palma film. They have two children.

His new series continues to showcase his high ambitions, as well as his breadth. In *Leguizamo Does America*, which debuted on MSNBC in April and is now streaming on Peacock, he travels across the country and to Puerto Rico to showcase Latino culture, cooking, history and the arts. In each episode he celebrates the contributions that Latinos have made to shaping America—from young actors sharing their stories in Washington, D.C., to immigrants who helped transform Chicago, to a visit to East L.A. It's vintage Leguizamo—part politics, part history lesson, delivered with edge, energy and wit.

All in all, it is another Leguizamo window into the fastest-growing demographic in the nation.

"I wanted to do a show where people watch this and go, 'I wanna be Latino,'" Leguizamo says in a trailer for the show. 🍷

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—from a 2019 grant recipient

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2023 PRESENTERS



ALIMI BALLARD recently joined the cast of Peacock's YA drama "One of Us Is Lying" as the impassioned Kevin Clay. He also plays enigmatic and ruthless Marcel Dumas on the Netflix series "Queen of the South." Additionally, Ballard is known as debonair Dr. Robert Dubois on the drama series "Queen Sugar" on OWN. Additional roles include portraying Detective Kevin Crawford on the CBS hit "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," and six seasons as a series regular on the crime drama "Numb3rs."



CHER CALVIN joined KTLA in 2005 and anchors the station's 5, 6, 10 and 11 p.m. nightly newscasts. The 10 and 11 p.m. broadcasts earned the Best Newscast Emmy, making Calvin a nine-time Emmy Award winner. Additionally, she created, produced and anchored the KTLA "Breaking Bias: AAPI Hate" special, which brought to light the fears the AAPI community has experienced. Calvin is active in the community and hosts the yearly event for Forgotten Children Inc., YWCA's Racial Justice Breakfast and Miss Philippines USA. She is the vice president of the Los Angeles Press Club.



CHRISTINE DEVINE is the longtime news anchor on Fox 11 News and has won 16 Emmys. She is on Fox 11 at 5, 6 and 10 p.m. and is known for her "Wednesday's Child" foster care segment, resulting in more than 500 children being adopted. She was honored with the Los Angeles Press Club President's Award at the Southern California Journalism Awards in 2022.



CHERYL KUNIN FAIR is the President and General Manager of KABC-TV. She joined the station in 1994 to lead the local Eyewitness News operation. As Vice President and News Director for more than 20 years, she helped Eyewitness News become the top operation in Southern California. Under her leadership, Eyewitness News set the standard for excellence in news coverage on broadcast and digital, as well as reinforcing a strong tradition of commitment to the community. During her tenure the station has achieved many milestones in technology and news coverage, including being the first

HD newscast, having the first HD news helicopter, and being the first station to have Skymap aerial helicopter mapping technology. Additionally, during her time the station created a team of community journalists assigned to both live in and cover underserved sections of Southern California. She is a member of the Board of Directors for Children's Hospital Los Angeles and sits on the Board of Trustees for the CHLA Foundation.



GENE KANG is an Emmy Award-winning general assignment reporter for KTLA 5 News. Kang has 20 years of experience as a broadcast journalist, on and off camera, and has worked as a reporter, anchor and producer in newsrooms across the country, including Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago, Texas, Indiana and Kentucky. He is an advisory board member for the L.A. chapter of the Asian American Journalists Association and also is a volunteer leader with the SGI-USA Buddhist peace movement.



JOE MANTEGNA has appeared in more than 200 films and TV shows. He is also a producer, writer and director. He is probably best known for playing Joey Zasa in the Francis Ford Coppola epic *The Godfather Part III*, in which he stars alongside Al Pacino and Andy Garcia. Mantegna was born in Chicago to Mary Anne (Novelli), a shipping clerk, and Joseph Anthony Mantegna, Sr., an insurance salesman. He obtained a degree in acting from the Goodman School of Drama and took to the stage early in life. He has a strong relationship with the playwright, screenwriter and director David Mamet—they have collaborated on several projects. He also stars as SSA David Rossi on the long-running TV drama "Criminal Minds."



JACK MAXWELL hosted "Booze Traveler," "Booze Traveler: Best Bars" and "The Trip." His TV appearances include "Lost," "24," "House, M.D.," "Without a Trace" and "Beverly Hills 90210." He has shared the stage with Al Pacino, Jessica Chastain and Dianne Wiest in *Salome*, and has appeared in other theatrical productions. He hails from South Boston and is a lifetime member of the Actors Studio.

JUDEA PEARL is the father of late *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl and president of the Daniel Pearl