

## Laughter and Ethnicity in John Leguizamo's One-Man Worlds

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John Leguizamo's life is the substance of his art. His unflinching and uncompromising look at his own life and the lives of those closest to him provides the basis for his one-man shows, *Mambo Mouth*, *Spic-O-Rama*, the Tony-nominated play *Freak and Sexaholic...A Love Story*. Leguizamo has stamped his stand-up comic style as a playwright and his energetic characterizations as an actor onto the Broadway stage and the Hollywood screen. As the first Latino performer ever to produce a one-man show on Broadway, he is a spokesperson for a minority culture that vies to be heard within a dominant Anglo-Saxon one, and his dramatic sketches are tinged with a political undercurrent that questions the status quo of race relations in America. Leguizamo never allows his content to become too cerebral or heavy, but instead manipulates the comic impulse to bring his characters to life, providing the audience a means of empathizing with these characters and understanding the social and political issues at stake. Nor are his characters stereotypical representations of race and gender, as sometimes occurs in comedy. Rather, as each character confides his or her story to the audience, the façade they have brazenly put forth begins to erode under their frank admissions of fears and doubts. His characters are earnest and quirky, and derive their appeal not only from the stories they tell but also from the vocal and physical skills Leguizamo brings to each character. Possessing a vast storehouse of personalities and ethnic types up his sleeve, Leguizamo peoples the stage with a dozen or so figures, creating what John Lahr calls a "one-man universe." His success as a playwright is due in part to his ability to perform his own material and to imitate a variety of personality types, which has also led to his success in numerous film performances such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything! Julie Newmar*, for which he received a Golden Globe nomination for his performance of a drag queen.

John Leguizamo was born in Bogotá, Columbia on July 22, 1964. His mother, Luz, a Colombian, and his father, Alberto, from Puerto Rico, named him after the B-movie actor John Saxon. Alberto Leguizamo studied film for two years at Cinecittà, a renowned film-making school in Italy, but abandoned these dreams of film-making to have a family; John sees his acting and playwriting as completing the dreams his father abandoned. His parents moved to New York City when Leguizamo was about three, leaving him and his younger brother with their grandmother in Bogotá. Then, in 1969, when Leguizamo was five, he followed them, moving to Jackson Heights, Queens. His family's constant moves – Elmhurst, Astoria, East Village, West Village – required that he assimilate to a different school and a new group of people each year. Visiting Jackson Heights during an interview for the *New York Times*, he recalls how intolerant the neighborhood was for newcomers, and how he always felt like a misfit, moving around frequently, struggling to find friends: "What a confused mongrel I was," he confesses. "So needy, needing to belong so bad" (Sengupta 1). Describing himself as a "gangster wannabe," he recalls spending his teenage years searching for trouble, either by smoking marijuana with older boys in the neighborhood or stealing cupcakes from a parked lunch truck. He was arrested three times: for truancy, for speaking rudely to a policeman, and for jumping a turnstile. His parents, frustrated by their son's behavior, sent him and his younger brother Sergio back to Colombia twice in an attempt to have them learn the discipline and values of their own culture.

An incident that is considered Leguizamo's first stint as a stand-up comedian, albeit illegally, occurred when, at the age of sixteen, he and a friend broke into a conductor's booth on the Queensborough subway line, took over the public-address system, and began narrating the journey to the surprised commuters: "This is *our* train, people." Finally school officials at Murray Bergtrum High School for Business Careers in Manhattan advised him to receive counseling, which had several secondary advantages. By encouraging him to articulate his feelings, he cultivated the necessary introspection for a writer and he also developed an awareness of his own emotions that helped him develop as an actor. When a math teacher suggested he take acting lessons as an outlet for his frenetic energies, Leguizamo picked an acting school, Sylvia Leigh's Showcase Theater, out of the phone book, and paid for the lessons with the salary he earned working at Kentucky Fried Chicken. He entered New York University in 1981, where he studied drama, but dropped out to join a children's theatre company, called Off-Center Theater.

He studied at the HB Studio as well as the Strasberg Institute and was in class the day that Lee Strasberg took ill and later died; he facetiously states that his acting was the cause of Strasberg's death.

He appeared in a critically acclaimed student film *Five out of Six*, which led to his guest appearances on the television series *Miami Vice* as a cocaine Mafia prince. Performing in two plays with The Public Theater under the direction of Joseph Papp (*La Puta Vida Trilogy* [1987] and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [1988]) honed his acting abilities. His work with the improvisation group First Amendment exposed him to a method of writing drama that was both impromptu and experimental rather than textually based. His first play *Mambo Mouth* (1991) won an Obie and an Outer Critics Circle award. The following year, *Spic-O-Rama* (1992) appeared and won the Dramatists Guild Award for Best Play of 1992. His third play, *Freak* (1997), described by Richard Goldstein for *The Village Voice* as "stand-up as stream of collective consciousness," caused a great sensation and was nominated for two Tony awards, for best play and best actor, contributing to the success of his most recent piece, *Sexaholix . . . A Love Story* (2001). He has appeared in numerous films, including *Carlito's Way* (1993), Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1996), Spike Lee's film *Summer of Sam* (1999), and most recently *Moulin Rouge* (2001). His comedy-cum-variety show, *House of Buggin'*, aired briefly on Fox television in 1995 as a Latino analogue to the politically incorrect and ribald *In Living Color*.

Leguizamo's writing, like a majority of Nuyorican theatre, springs from his experiences as a Hispanic growing up in New York City and his extensive training as a stand-up comedian and actor. His specialty is the "one-man-solo-monologue format" because he enjoys the practice of telling stories to the "clan." He possesses a chameleon-like ability to metamorphose from one person to another, as well as a talent for conjuring up invisible interlocutors and making the audience believe he is actually speaking to someone. His introductory essay to *Spic-O-Rama*, written in the dialogic form of the playwright interviewing himself, manifests this schizophrenic quality. He is often compared to the playwright and performer Eric Bogosian (*Drinking in America*), a monologist who satirizes capitalism. Michael S. Bregman, who produced Leguizamo's performances for HBO, describes Leguizamo as bridging "the gap between Richard Pryor and Marlon Brando," attesting to his combination of talents as a stand-up comic and a grounded actor ("Introduction" xvii). Leguizamo likewise considers Richard Pryor as a

role model because of his urbanity, his honesty, and his ability to satirize playfully his own culture through irreverent stories.

Leguizamo's life stories and his acting are closely interrelated; his plays originate from his ability to enact his own memories of growing up. He writes long, work-in-progress monologues, tries them out on his friends and family members, then re-writes the pieces based on his friends' responses. He does not use video or photography as tools to provide him with feedback of his skits, but prefers to rely on what he hears and feels during the performance in order to refine and structure his material (Moss 26). He then takes several props and four or five of his characters to various performance venues in New York City and workshops them before a live audience. His idea for *Spic-O-Rama* came from seeing a young man in military fatigues loitering on a street corner, listening to his boom box. The emptiness of the scene reminded him of *Waiting for Godot* "Latinofied" and grew in his mind, prompting him to imagine what the man might do for a living or how he would act. His characters evolve and grow even after the show opens to the public, as Leguizamo conceives of new jokes, or sharpens their personalities. In fact, the current, published ending for *Spic-O-Rama* where the young narrator, Miggy, is lifted out of his bedroom towards heaven, was not conceived of until the New York production. Although Leguizamo and his director, Peter Askin, were not fully satisfied with the ending during the Chicago run, it was not until moving the show to New York that Leguizamo devised the scene where Miggy voices his annoyance with God. It is this combination of inspiration and risk-taking that Leguizamo prizes most about the theatre.

This candid nature of his work would not be complete without his highly energized stage performance which supplements the characters' monologues. Critics often remark on his dance moves, his rubber-limbed legs, or his repertory of sexual gestures. His body transforms itself into various characters such as a self-satisfied, voluptuous woman, a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair, or a spunky nine-year old child. He is fascinated with human quirk and draws upon the physical mannerisms or idiosyncrasies of the people he observes. His reliance upon dance as a means of non-verbal communication enables him to depict cultural nuances about his characters, whether it be a salsa combination or a breakdance. Dance serves as short-hand to set a mood or make a point. The opening of *Spic-O-Rama* shows an exuberant Miggy spinning about and leaping to music, lit by a strobe light, while the final scene of *Mambo Mouth* reveals how the Crossover King cannot forget his Latin roots as the lower half of his body dances to mambo music in spite of

himself. In *Freak* he shares with the audience memories of the body that he has carried from his childhood and adolescence. Critics perceive this mode of non-verbal communication as an additional narrative to the text. Michael Feingold, writing for the *Village Voice*, translates Leguizamo's gestures in performance: "This is the way my mother put her hand on her hip when yelling at my father; this is the way an Irish drunk holds his head when a Puerto Rican tries to hit his sister in a bar on St. Patrick's Day; this is the exact way I flew across the room as a kid when my father kicked me" (Feingold 147) while John Simon describes these physical movements as his own "lingua franca," composed of "facial expressions, vocal mannerisms, and body language" (Simon 51). This lingua franca, however, is decisively rooted in the rhythms of Latin culture.

Through all his playwriting, Leguizamo is particularly invested in the social and political issues that shape Latino culture, specifically representation in the arts. In an article for the *New York Times*, he speaks about this lack of representation that Latinos have experienced, beyond the staid representations of Latinos with Desi Arnaz, Carmen Miranda, and Speedy Gonzalez. Even though he experienced a very vibrant Latino culture growing up in Jackson Heights with the colors, music and festivals from the various Latin countries, he saw none of it replicated in movies or on television. Latino characters, when they were present, merely added "spice to the story," but were never the central characters themselves. He recalls his own acting opportunities: "In *Miami Vice* I was the cocaine Mafia prince from a big Colombian drug-dealing family; in the movie *Revenge*, I'm a silent Mexican – a gun-toting lackey; in *Die Hard 2*, I'm a terrorist; in *Regarding Henry*, I'm the mugger; I turned four film parts down in February; two were gang members and two were drug dealers" (Leguizamo NYT 5). Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, in his examination of Latino stereotypes on the Broadway stage and the movies, writes that Latinos "exist for the sole purpose of entertaining Anglo-Americans by playing whatever roles they have been assigned: performer, bandit, Latin lover, delinquent, or spitfire. 'Latins' raison d'être is to sing, dance, romance, be comical, and live from fiesta to siesta" (24). This dearth of positive roles for Latinos has had other negative effects; friends have advised him to play non-Latino roles by lightening his skin or by changing his name. These comments and the impulse behind them indicate to him the self-hate in Latino culture that breeds hopelessness. But Leguizamo refuses to see being Hispanic as limiting and fights for the portrayal of Latinos beyond the usual roles of criminals and drug-dealers: "I don't want to see Hispanic actors only on the

periphery of the screen, holding a gun,” he writes. “I want to see them laughing, crying and living ordinary lives.”

He is also savvy to the economics that drive the movie and the theatre industry, understanding that each project must attract large audiences in order to bring in revenue to compensate for the expenses. He believes that the lack of stories about Latino lives is due to the economic risk of losing the mainstream audience, which is understood to be predominantly white. “Hollywood does not think that Hispanic people are of interest to a larger market. We have to prove it ourselves,” he says, explaining the activist intention behind his art. “And if they make money and succeed, people are going to start hearing our voices and that way, we’ll eventually take our place where we belong” (Moss 24). Several critics testify to Leguizamo’s power to bring people to the theatre who do not normally go to such cultural events, audiences who are lured to Leguizamo’s performances in spite of the fact that it is the theatre: “What they’re roaring at isn’t Leguizamo per se,” Feingold explains about the audience’s response, “but the notion that something to do with their lives is being expressed; their culture has arrived in the precincts of high art” (147). Rick Lyman’s review of the season in *The New York Times* notes how *Freak* brought audiences into the theatre who had never been to see a play before, demonstrating that Leguizamo has succeeded at his goal of appealing to a multi-ethnic audience.

Leguizamo speaks of the Latin community’s emphasis on traditions and values that Americans have lost, which includes care for extended family members, especially the elderly. He tries to tap into specific traits about Latino culture that are funny, very much in the tradition of Desi Arnaz playing Ricky Ricardo in *I Love Lucy*: “the temper, rambling in Spanish – a passionate, jealous man, loving his music, loving to dance” (Anon. 129). Of course, this passion can turn dangerous, and Leguizamo also sees his culture as wrought with violence, pointing to a history of murder, torture and rape during the Spanish colonization of North and South America. He attributes Latinos’ low self-esteem to their national identity that is fraught with racial intermixing, oppression of indigenous groups, and economic disparity. The goal of his works is to attack this self-hatred with an equally violent form of politically incorrect laughter. His portrayal of stereotypes serves as a means of confronting the culture’s demons head-on, rather than allowing them to fester in embarrassed silence: “It’s underneath this mat and rug hidden in the basement, and it’s the beast that wants to come out and chop our heads off. I’m letting out the

monsters" (Garcia 85), he concludes, defining his comedy as a form of social exorcism.

However, not all Latinos agree with Leguizamo's method of exorcising negative self-images through lambasting them in comedies. His plays receive occasional negative criticism from fellow Latinos who are concerned that the representations he offers actually reaffirm negative stereotypes. His skits are replete with men who either beat their women or cheat on them or both, overgrown boys who are lazy and unemployed, and whose only thoughts are about getting high or laid, and women whose belief systems are composites of Catholicism and black magic. His plays pose a problem: is it ethical to encourage a predominantly white audience to laugh at Latino stereotypes? Is it fair to confirm and perpetuate racist images of Latinos and encourage white audiences to laugh at and even mock these images? As Jose Vasquez, who directed Leguizamo in *Hangin' with the Homeboys* explains about *Mambo Mouth*, "The problem was there wasn't one positive Hispanic character." He also attests to his feelings of discomfort and anger as a Latino member of the audience: "When I went, it was mostly a white crowd, and it hurts to have a mostly white audience laughing at Hispanics. Because they *are* laughing at the characters" (Smith 48). Laughter as a human emotion is non-specific and uncontrollable; Leguizamo cannot direct his audience members to laugh only at certain targets. Instead, their laughter can be seen as a tacit agreement that his offensive portrayals are accurate, right-on.

His reliance on physical gestures that are linked to certain ethnic groups seems to perpetuate racist images of Latinos while encouraging audiences to confirm these depictions through their applause and laughter. His portrayals of male-female relationships are barely-veiled illustrations of the sexual dominance within the Latino community. He acts the sex-crazed Latino lover as one who takes pride in his sexual prowess, but he shows how this character type possesses this potency only in inverse proportion to intelligence. Discussing this "refried machismo" and degrading comments about women, Coco Fusco voices her fury at the way in which the white middle-class Broadway audiences have embraced Leguizamo's farcical portrayal of Latinos, and she suggests that this kind of misogynistic humor is acceptable only because it confirms the larger assumption that Latino men are chauvinists. In *Mambo Mouth*, for example, Angel Garcia tells the prison guard that he loves his wife so much, he's "gonna kick her ass," strongly believing in the need to "disciplinify" one's "woman." During a performance, Loco Louie yells "dyke" at a girl who ignores his smarmy compliments and

receives giggles of approval from the audience. Fusco finds this kind of humor harmful to the Latin community and remarks, “when a problem child from Queens becomes poster boy of the month while stomping verbally on the women he shares an ethnicity with, it’s time to ask which kind of desire he’s tapping into” (24). She notes, too, how laughter alleviates the audience’s responsibility to recognize and address troublesome ethnic issues such as domestic violence, illegal immigration, irresponsible sexual practices, or police brutality. Leguizamo’s plays, while warmly received by the majority of audience members, both white and Latino, are not without contentious issues.

Laughter, as an emotional response, defies precise explanations. Reasons for laughter can run from a sense of superiority on the part of the audience, to commiserating over a shared, “been there” experience, to a repressed wish that – when fulfilled – rises to the surface in voiced elation. However, not only the *reasons* for the laughter are in question, but *who* in the audience is laughing and whether they are “of the tribe” or not. Writing about Leguizamo’s choice of politically incorrect humor for *House of Buggin’*, Valerie Menard points out that “Mainstream reviews seem to forget the simple rule when dealing with minorities, which says ‘I can make fun of my family, but don’t you try it’” (16). Michael Omi elaborates this concept of comedy in terms of race and audience response: “the meaning of the same jokes . . . is dramatically transformed when told across the ‘color line.’ If a white, or even black, person tells these jokes to a white audience, it will, despite its ‘purely’ humorous intent, serve to reinforce stereotypes and rationalize the existing relations of racial inequality” (121). This awareness of the color disparity of the audience strengthens Vasquez’s and Fusco’s points – that Leguizamo is treading dangerous waters. However, it must also be said that Leguizamo sprinkles enough Spanish phrases into his performance to signal an “in-group” and “out-group” in the audience, and that the jokes are specifically for his fellow Latinos. In *Sexaholix* for example, he emphasizes the exclusion of non-Spanish speakers in his audience by pointing out their inability to get his jokes: “If you don’t understand something, ask the person next to you.” In this way, he subtly designates those who are “of the tribe” and who have the right to laugh.

Leguizamo is not the first to appropriate blatant stereotypes as a means of undermining the racial assumptions about a disenfranchised group. In *Living Color*, Keenan Ivory Wayans’ television show in the early 1990s, encountered similar criticism in its portrayal of African Americans. The problem with enacting stereotypes – even with the aim of exposing them as



reductive – is that it reaffirms the majority’s belief that these depictions are *authentic*. Leguizamo counters this argument by arguing that he humanizes his character types, even while satirizing them, what he refers to as creating a prototype: “A stereotype is a negative portrayal based on other negative portrayals. But a prototype is something invented. It’s the first of its kind. That’s what I try to do” (Goldstein 57). While some might characterize this statement as an evasion, it is important to note the prototypes he portrays – an illegal alien, a macho talk show host – garner laughter because of their superficial details – the too tight pants or the prodigious swearing – but not because of the person who Leguizamo reveals underneath. Comedy has always, since the time of Plautus, relied upon stock character traits to generate laughter and expose human folly; Leguizamo relies upon this comic shorthand to make these characters immediately recognizable to the audience so that he can encourage them to see behind the character’s mask. Melissa Fitch Lockhart, writing about Leguizamo’s production, attests to this kind of identification: “Judging from the enthusiastic reception of audience members during the performance of *Mambo Mouth*, there is an immediate recognition of the machismo of the talk show host and the play’s other initial characters, including the adolescent homeboy and the illegal alien. It is clear that the public identifies with the cultural references readily” (75). The cultural references are the mask that the characters wear; they are the ideological imposition cast upon them by a dominant culture as a way of typifying and categorizing people. Leguizamo starts with the mask, but attacks it head-on in order to discover to the audience the person underneath.

Leguizamo’s objective in portraying Latino stereotypes is to confront certain assumptions society holds and to explore the possible causes of such beliefs. He does not shun portraying such negative role models in his works, but rather explores these deviant or sex-crazed “types” in order to render them more human through their individual stories. *Mambo Mouth*, appropriately subtitled “A Savage Comedy,” introduces us to Agamemnon, the unctuous talk-show host who flaunts his sexual prowess on air, to the Crossover King, a Latino-turned-Japanese businessman who lectures members of an imaginary Latino audience on how they, too, might “cross over,” i.e. “sell out,” by losing their flamboyant natures and becoming somber automatons of corporate America. In between these two characters who open and close the play are Loco Louie, who describes losing his virginity with a bravado that barely covers his disillusionment, Angel Garcia and Pepe, who are both incarcerated for wife-beating and illegal immigration respectively,

and Manny the Fanny, a finger-snapping, knife-toting, hip-slinging transvestite. The Inca Prince, a Peruvian immigrant who is in the process of tucking his son in for the night, is probably the one character who does not threaten violence, seduce a woman, or get caught for criminal behavior. Angel Garcia telephones three different women from his jail cell, pleading for their help, and reveals through these conversations a life of abuse and dysfunctional relationships, an upbringing that teaches men not responsibility but rather how to cajole and to threaten to attain their desires. John Lahr writes that Leguizamo's "characters act out the trauma of changing cultures which has left them fragmented and fractious, unable in the puritan North America culture to sustain its idea of progress or their idea of communion, either" (Lahr 143). While the anger of these marginalized characters is immediately evident in their actions, the hurt, humiliation, and broken dreams are slowly revealed through the course of their monologues.

Leguizamo's penchant for dismantling stereotypes is evident in the opening scene of *Mambo Mouth* where he ridicules whites' creation of Latino stereotypes in the media. The talk show host Agamemnon describes to his audience the Spanish movie in which he has recently starred, where he has emphasized his Latino-identified traits in order to fulfill a white woman's fantasy. An elderly woman alone in Florida is seduced by this Latin King himself, playing a Cuban cabana boy who needs a green card to remain in the country. A typical scenario with all the stereotypical traits: her "gelatinous, buttless body" pressed against his "Amazonian manroot." He paints himself for the audience through her eyes: "I am that sin. I am that forbidden, primitive, savage Caribbean lust-quencher" and acts out these imposed cultural epithets. Even as the characters exchange terms of endearment, they define one another based on their imagined differences: Albino Beauty, Chocolate Eyes, he-slut, Aryan whore. Concurrently, Agamemnon underscores the falsity of these stereotypes by narrating the camera's every move, crouching low and swinging his hips to indicate the dolly shot, or framing his face with his hands to indicate an extreme close up. The layers of representation – Leguizamo acting a talk show host who is acting a movie character – as well as the constant reminder of the camera's position underscore how these stereotypes are mere constructions of the media. Thus, with a subtle sleight of hand, Leguizamo shifts from mocking the macho Latino stud to exposing how these stereotypes and representations are based on perceived notions of the "Other."

The skit entitled "Crossover King" provides the best example of the dilemma of assimilation. The Guest Speaker who instructs his fellow Latinos

on how they might pass as “mainstream” individuals bluntly advises them on how they might eradicate “flamboyant, fun-loving spicy” Latino traits in order to blend. He stiffly admits to his audience that he, too, used to be a “Latinosan” before he turned into a successful corporate businessman based on the Japanese model:

I used to be loud and obnoxious, full of street mannerisms. Constantly holding my crotch for self-assurance. (*Mimes awkwardly.*) I would yell all the time, “Hola, Ramón! I just had a girl with tetas out to here and culo out to there!” (*Mimes.*) But now I zen-out and only speak when I have something really important to say. (*Mambo Mouth* 105)

In addition to the boisterous and vulgar qualities that the Crossover King deplores here, he derides one unseemly Latin trait after another, such as dancing down the streets, being crude to women, starting fights with others. However, with his new Japanese behavior, he listens to lite FM, hardly ever moves, and channels all his hostility into his business arrangements. He shows slides of women whose hair is “bleached to a color not found in nature,” and uses a pointer to indicate the “guacamole hips,” “arroz con pollo thighs,” and “big ol’ cuchifrito butt” of another woman. Not content with these insults, he shows a slide of his aunt Rosa Herrera, “a loud, gum-snapping, hairy-lipped, Bacardi-drinking, welfare-leeching, child-bearing, underachieving, no-good Latina puta-bitch,” (112) hurling together popular misconceptions that Hispanic women endure. He then shows us an “after” slide of “Rose Hara, the timid, self-disciplined, lonely, constipated workaholic,” who has successfully crossed over into the corporate ideal but who has been reduced to an insipid, empty shadow of her former self. Leguizamo reveals the pain that Latinos experience trying to alter themselves to fit into a white, main-stream culture.

George C. Wolfe also examines how minority groups try to repress their cultural identity in *The Colored Museum* (1986), where an African-American, having succeeded in the corporate world, denies his heritage by throwing out all the artifacts that defined his identity as black when he was younger, such as an Afro comb, a can of Afro-Sheen, a dashiki, and the Jackson Five’s album *I Want You Back*. Determined to represent himself only as an African-American businessman, he even destroys “The Kid,” the character representing the person he once was. The outcome of “The Crossover King” mimics that of *The Colored Museum*: one’s heritage cannot be eradicated but will return with a vengeance. In *The Colored Museum*, “The Kid” comes back to life; in “Crossover King,” the Speaker begins to spout words in Spanish and his feet begin to dance a mambo rhythm beneath

the lectern while he desperately struggles to keep his upper body still. In both cases, it becomes evident that one cannot deny one's roots; the façade that one has fashioned in order to assimilate with a dominant culture erodes and the cultural reality comes forth. Ultimately "The Crossover King" reaffirms the need to accept one's cultural identity, not by ignoring the disparaging stereotypes, but by embracing, through self-mockery, all elements of a Latino heritage.

Leguizamo uses comedy to make heroes of his characters. He shows that these outcast individuals who suffer from poverty, discrimination, and feelings of unworthiness are as much a symbol of hope, pride, and integrity by their ability to make comedy. He explains this theory in his introductory essay to *Mambo Mouth*:

But if my years of performing comedy have taught me anything, it's that you've got to be strong to make fun of yourself. In creating *Mambo Mouth*, I felt that mocking the Latin community was one of the most radical ways to empower it. . . . Like Latin life itself, *Mambo Mouth* is harsh, graphic, funny – and at the same time tragic, desperate, and painfully raw. No stereotype could contain the pressure of all those explosive, conflicting emotions. (16)

Even though he is portraying what many consider to be the marginal characters in society, he endows them with a heroic quality by their ability to overcome obstacles with their sense of humor. He finds this self-empowering quality in the real-life people he encounters on the street who later serve as inspiration for his plays. For example, he saw "so much grace and chutzpah" in the transvestites he would meet that they provided him with the model of his character, Manny the Fanny. Likewise, the use of wit indicates an agility of mind; these characters demonstrate their intelligence in their ability to critique their circumstances rather than feeling victimized. This wry intelligence is manifested in *Mambo Mouth*, when Pepe, incarcerated in New York's La Guardia airport for not having proper documentation, uses his wit to try arguing his way out. He insists that his nationality is anything but Mexican, speaking in the appropriate accent – Swedish, Israeli, or Irish – to convince the guard of his performance: "Oh, Lucky Charms, they're magically delicious! Oh, Jesus, Joseph, and Mary! It's cabbage and corned beef time – let me go!" His rapid alternation between nationalities emphasizes how immigration regulations in the United States value certain nationalities at the expense of others, but it is Pepe's comic bravado as he impersonates the various ethnic groups that demonstrates his innate courage.

*Spic-O-Rama* continues the panoramic view of Latino life in New York that *Mambo Mouth* began, but this time the individual characters are connected as members of the same family and the action revolves around the same event – a wedding. The “comic-tragic family” serves as Leguizamo’s paradigm for all relationships. As he writes in the Introduction to his play, “The family is where it all begins. . . . We all have some wretched inner child who’s angry or resentful or traumatized, and that is what drives us for the rest of our lives.” Miggy (Miguelo) Gigante, a hyperkinetic class clown with an overbite, Day-Glo orange jeans, and an over-sized knit cap, introduces his “classmates” – in actuality, the audience – to the various members of his family through a slide show, entitled “Monsters, Freaks, and Weirdoes,” thereby setting the irreverent and disparaging tone for the play. Among these members are his older brother Krazy Willie, who has been to the Gulf War and “shot people who looked like us but with towels on their heads” (34) or his brother Raphael, who wishes to become “an albino white person” in order to get better acting roles, or his father Felix, who defends his violence and womanizing against the resentment of his family during a drunken toast at his son’s wedding. Miggy’s mother, Gladyz, appears in the Laundromat that she runs, making catty comments about the other women who enter (“that buttless, anorexic third world desgraciada!”) and lamenting her missed opportunities to make something of her life. The most poignant monologue is delivered by Javier, Miggy’s third brother. Confined to a wheelchair and abandoned by society, he expresses his frustration about never being able to have sex, which, in light of his father’s code of behavior, seems the sole reason for a man’s existence. The play’s overriding motif is this sense of restlessness and purposelessness created by the limitations society imposes upon Latinos. Or, as Leguizamo describes it, “*Spic-O-Rama* is about the discount dream you get when you come to this country” (*Playboy* 127).

In addition to observing the heroic qualities of these disempowered characters, Leguizamo explores the identity of the Latino culture and how that identity can be at risk. As discussed earlier with the Crossover King, the desire or the need to assimilate can often cause individuals to disparage their own culture or lose their sense of self. Leguizamo offers the character of Raphael as such an example, a would-be actor in the play *Spic-O-Rama* who has negated his own Hispanic identity to such a degree that he no longer knows who he is. Realizing that roles for Hispanic actors do not exist, Raphael has re-created his identity as the love child of Sir Lawrence Olivier; he speaks with a British accent to match his (bleached) blond hair and his blue eyes

(contacts); he even goes so far as to deny that he can speak Spanish: "I was working at Tele . . . Tele . . . How do you say it? Telemundo?" (43). He re-works the cultural icons of Anglo-Saxon literature, mis-quoting Shakespeare in an attempt to open up literature for Latino characters: "If you pricketh (*Stabs air with saber*) a Latino doth he not bleedeth?" He ultimately isolates himself from his own community; when the music and noise from Spanish Harlem seep into his room, he shuts this world out by closing the window in disgust, complaining how hard it is to be "Elizabethan in Jackson Heights." His identity crisis (and crisis it is, for as his Freudian slip reveals, he is on the verge of a "breakdown," and not "breakthrough") is further reflected by his schizophrenic practice of addressing himself in the mirror as an admiring fan and inquiring whether he isn't that "famous actor," at which point he turns to the audience with a sly, unabashed grin: "Guilty as charged" (44). The metaphor of the actor is the perfect paradigm for examining identity formation through self-deceit; the belief that one can change who one is by merely changing external appearances allows Raphael to fool himself into negating his own biological and historical background. For Raphael, and for the audience, the practice of dressing up and becoming a new person in order to "pass" for someone else puts into question what it may mean to "act white" or to "act Hispanic." As audience members we can safely ask these questions, but the risk is too great for Raphael because of how society defines identity based on color. When he questions what color he is, his composure breaks down: "I'm not black. I'm not white. What am I? (*Sudden horror*) I'm urine-colored, I'm actually urine-colored" (44). But true to the comic spirit that rectifies itself even as it falls, he insists that self-knowledge is not worth the psychological effort, for "It's hard enough to know what to wear" (45). The audience applauds Raphael for his Wildean flair and his indomitable spirit, even while perceiving how a mainstream white society makes it difficult for minorities to embrace their cultural identity.

Tangential to the issue of identity is the subject of language, for the Spanish language unifies the members of its community even while it distances them from the dominant culture. For first and second generation Latinos, the sense of being part of two cultures manifests itself most visibly in their ability to speak two languages. The program notes for the plays as well as the text versions contain a glossary of the Spanish terms used, for Leguizamo's characters sprinkle their dialogue with Spanish expressions with which an English-speaking audience would be unfamiliar. Gladysz, in *Spic-O-Rama*, intersperses Spanish into her dialogue with the other women at the Laundromat,

endearingly calling them “nenas” or completing her sentences with “Tu sabes?” as a means of suggesting intimacy. In *Mambo Mouth* Angel, in a prison for beating up his wife, tries insulting the guard first in English (“You’re just a pimple on my ass”), and then in his native language to better express his violence and anger: “Tú eres un mugre, un moco, una cucaracha” (63). Pepe, imprisoned for sneaking into the country without documentation, starts pleading with the Hispanic guard to let him stay, and uses Spanish as a way of reminding him of his roots: “Hermano, cousin, brother, primo, por favor dejeme ir que somos de la mismita sangre.” Leguizamo’s characters lie on the border between two cultures, a Hispanic culture that they have brought with them to America as well as the Anglo culture they wish to join. Their use of both languages suggests the complex political and social negotiations those of Hispanic descent experience in their attempts to remain true to one identity while assimilating with another. The younger generation of Latinos in Leguizamo’s play has also learned that the meaning behind language can be manipulated. When called “Spic” by a playmate at camp, Miggy turns the word around to mean something valuable: “Yes, yes, yes, I *am* a spic. I’m . . . I’m spic-tacular! I’m spic-torious! I’m indi-spic-able!” (*Spic-o-Rama* 22). By sheer cleverness and spunk, Miggy empties the word “spic” of its negative connotations and revises its meaning as a way of giving himself and his culture value. His quick-wittedness also demonstrates his intelligence, showing how comedy provides a non-violent means of overcoming racial prejudice.

The confessional nature of these two plays requires that the actor interact closely with the audience. Leguizamo incorporates the audience members, bringing them into the action as specific characters and making their very reactions a part of the play. *Mambo Mouth*’s Agamemnon treats the audience like the audience of his own talk show, encouraging them to applaud his act, while Miggy of *Spic-O-Rama* talks to the audience as if they were his classmates, accusing someone of calling his father a drug-dealer or referring to his teacher, in the back of the auditorium, as “Suckerbutt” under his breath. These one-man productions also involve numerous costume changes as the actor transforms himself from one character into another and often pose the problem of keeping the audience entertained during these changes and maintaining the momentum of the show. In *Mambo Mouth*, Leguizamo solved this problem by having his costume-changer, Theresa Tetley, cast a silhouette of one of the characters dancing upon the screen, whether it was Agamemnon, straight off the “arroz con pollo circuit,” Loco Louie returning from his first sexual encounter at Nilda’s Bodega y Bordello, or the transvestite

Manny the Fanny “voguing” to the rhythm. For *Spic-O-Rama*, he alleviated the “dead” time during the costume changes by showing videos of the different characters that connected one scene to another, which propelled the plot forward and added different voices to the one-man play. The audience’s awareness of the character’s costume changes signals how fluid identity is and emphasizes how these stereotypes are only a mask of the character’s true self.

*Freak* moves away from the snap-shot structure of multiple characters and instead follows the young Leguizamo from his childhood and adolescence to his present day career as an actor. A kind of dramatic *Künstslerroman*, *Freak* shows the young Leguizamo being educated through a variety of social, sexual, and familial experiences, his realization of himself as different from others, and his maturation into an artist. As Leguizamo explains, it is “the story of not fitting in, being an outsider, feeling freakish wherever you go” (Vellela 14). Although attorneys insisted that Leguizamo include the clause “the characters in *Freak* are wildly exaggerated for comic effect and bear little or no resemblance to actual people,” David Bar Katz, Leguizamo’s director and co-writer, attests to the fact that the “Semi-Demi-Quasi-Pseudo Autobiography” is in fact true and Leguizamo even thanks his mother and brother for allowing him to “expose dirty laundry” to the public. During the performance, Leguizamo mutates into more than 40 different characters from his childhood, adolescence, and college years, such as the swaggering group of Irish men who threaten to beat him up, or the “trustafarian” fraternity brothers from whom he hides his ethnicity. He also includes his family members: his grandmother who believed *The Exorcist* was a documentary; his gay, deaf uncle who would sneak John and his younger brother into the theatre, only to get thrown out for lip-synching too loudly; or his mother, who discards her way to empowerment. Within the space of three lines, Leguizamo recreates the immigrant variety of his Jackson Heights neighborhood, from the Hindi man who sells him candy, to the Jamaican rasta who calls all Puerto Ricans roaches, to the Korean newsstand owner who threatens them for treating his wares like the reference section of the library (5).

*Freak*, as a partial autobiography, lacks some of the aesthetic distance that art requires, for it does not probe behind the different character’s façades as the other plays do. Leguizamo mentions that “Most writers start with the personal and move away from themselves and I’m doing the opposite. I started away from myself, and I’m moving closer and closer with each show to who I am” (14). Perhaps focusing on his own formation as an individual and comic



actor prevented some of the insightful character analysis that he skillfully portrays in *Mambo Mouth* and *Spic-O-Rama*. That the current text of *Freak* is only an adaptation of the performance for reading purposes may explain its unfinished quality. That it was inspired by Richard Pryor's comedy performances also accounts for the lack of development and the crude quality of the humor that is suggestive more of stand-up comedy than dramatic performance. Controversy arose surrounding *Freak's* nomination for a Tony award, as it was debatable whether it was a play or not, but critics compared the play to Lily Tomlin's tour de force *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1986) which did garner Tomlin the award for best actress. Ultimately, Leguizamo works to define a new kind of drama. Even while his mixing of genres may make him difficult to categorize, as he plays with the line between drama and stand-up comedy, he develops a realm conducive to those very qualities he values in Latino culture: a strong sense of humor, an exuberant story-telling style, and wild impersonations, which work towards unifying the people in the audience.

This search for his identity as a Latino and as an artist looms behind the stories that comprise the play *Freak*. Leguizamo at one point admits "I went on my own to find myself. And I found out that I had a hard time being myself. I would rather be anybody than be myself" (*Freak* 100). The talent behind his mutable personality clearly had its repercussions: it made it difficult for him to develop a sense of self. The various scenes he enacts show how his identity was formed on the acknowledged differences between himself and the rest of society. Rather than seeing positive role models of other Hispanics, Leguizamo only encountered dissimilarity and he tried to take on the qualities of others rather than develop his own sense of self. Spending time one summer with a wealthy New England family, the young John discovers that the men born in the United States are circumcised, whereas he is not. He regards the boys as "mutilated mutants," while the father explains John's foreskin to his sons by referring to John's "primitive" background. The WASP father uses this contrast as a threat to his sons to behave properly, get good grades, and be accepted by an Ivy League school; if not, he warns them that their foreskins will grow back, covering their entire bodies and possibly even the rest of the family (42). Leguizamo exploits male circumcision as a site of cultural difference, suggesting that the whites appear to be scarred both literally and metaphorically by having something removed from the very appendage that makes them men, while the whites in turn see John's culture as untidy and dirty. Not only does the example reinforce difference between

white and Hispanic cultures, it cleverly reverses the value system. Rather than indicate wealth as desirable, as the white family does, Leguizamo introduces sexual pleasure and comfort with one's body into the equation and makes it a priority.

Other differences follow him into young adulthood. The Irish woman he tries to pick up at a bar thinks he is too dark, and his first girlfriend, his "ebony princess," thinks he is too white ("Oh, my god, you are the whitest motherfucker I ever saw. You glow in the dark. . . . I can see your intestines, like a guppy. I can tell what you had for lunch" [78]). He pretends to be a surfer from Malibu in order to fit in with his fraternity brothers at college, which ultimately leads him to reject the friendship of a fellow Latino. Unfortunately, this "militant orthodox feminist vegan radical Latino separatist" does not prove to be a successful model for John and further erodes his sense of self by criticizing him for referring to himself as Hispanic ("It's Latino, you colonized eunuch"[102]). In scene after scene, Leguizamo shows how he was taunted or teased for being Hispanic and how his identity was formed in opposition to the other ethnic groups, races, and social organizations in his neighborhood and schools. These differences, whether invented or real, caused Leguizamo to feel odd or abnormal, experiencing what he refers to as "toxic shame" that leaves a virulent and harmful imprint on a child's psyche.

Even acting, the ideal activity for someone who enjoys trying on other selves, did not provide him solace, at least not at first. In trying to imitate the known icons within the theatrical world, he fashioned himself on such models as Sir John Gielgud and Marlon Brando, albeit without much success: "Is this a dagger which I see before me? Yo, waz up with dat?" When he does audition for a Latino part, the director dictates how he should play a Latino on drugs, directing him to emote "the agony and patheticness of [his] people," congratulating him only when Leguizamo plays the stereotype to the hilt: "I'm outta veins, I'll stick it in my neck, how about my eyeball? La metadona está cabrona" (119). *Freak* therefore, is a play not only about trying to grow up, but about the different ways in which one individual altered and disguised his true self in order to fit in, to pass, and to please a dominant culture. His closing speech, in which he discusses how he accepted himself, is a testament to Leguizamo's own story of success. Only by an acceptance of self can an individual from a disenfranchised group develop the confidence to identify and attain certain goals in life.

All of his plays, but in particular *Freak*, explore the lasting repercussions of Leguizamo's hurtful relationship with his father. Through a

variety of father-son relationships, Leguizamo shows the harmful influences fathers can have on their sons' development, even while he recognizes that the cause of this abuse comes from the insecure and tormented visions fathers may have of themselves. Fausto, the father in *Freak*, is an intense, angry, and threatening force in the house, denying his children their basic privileges and making them feel as if they have no right to exist:

Don't use my television and don't sit on my furniture unless we have important guests. Use the floor for sitting and the kitchen sink for eating. And we're not gonna buy any more food if you keep eating it! Food, I repeat, is for the guests and the animals. And I just brushed the dogs, so don't pet 'em! And get the hell off the rug, I just vacuumed it. And stop sucking up all my oxygen – I'm breathing it. (15)

Their home life is not only painful and abusive, but their father's violence causes Leguizamo and his younger brother Poochie to become deceitful and cruel as they try to outsmart their father or even betray one another. Leguizamo offers poignant memories as well, but they are always undercut by his father's determination to cultivate macho personality traits in his son. His father asks his son for a kiss, only to insult him: "Not on the lips, you little freak!" Having heard his father brag about being the head waiter at a chi-chi French restaurant in Manhattan, John and his brother go to the restaurant only to discover that his father is really a dish-washer. The disbelief and shame Leguizamo experiences for his father also indicate his growing awareness of how his father took a demeaning position in order to provide for his family. The final battle between John and his father occurs when John, trying to prevent his father from choking his mother during a domestic dispute, wields a butcher knife at his father, ordering him to leave the house before they kill one another. The father takes out his frustration with his work and his life on his sons, who in turn rebel against him, learning that violence and aggression is what defines them as men. While this dramatic moment of father-son conflict has all the elements of an Oedipal battle, Leguizamo never allows the play to become tragic. His mother decides to dance out of the apartment to Gloria Gaynor's disco hit "I Will Survive" in a final gesture of self-empowerment, forgetting the ironic fact that since the house was under her husband's name, her newfound freedom had essentially rendered her homeless. The final scene of the play, though not in the least an attempted reconciliation, shows his father in Leguizamo's dressing room, interested in seeing his son's show. A blown-up photograph of Leguizamo and his father taken when John was a boy hovers over the stage at the play's end; coupled with Leguizamo's final words

dedicating the play to his father, this photograph suggests that the play is a peace-offering to his father, an attempt at understanding his father and their fragmented relationship. Leguizamo, like most artists, uses his art as an attempt to return to a confused childhood and a volatile relationship with his father, hoping to find, if not answers, at least some catharsis through the process.

If *Freak* showed Leguizamo moving away from the dramatic arrangement of his material, then *Sexaholix . . . A Love Story* (2001), his latest piece, breaks with any semblance of theatricality altogether. Starting with his use of a microphone during his performances which limits his ability to gesture, to the fact that there is very little conceptual through-line to the performance, his piece resembles stand-up comedy rather than drama. Unlike the earlier pieces *Mambo-Mouth* and *Spic-O-Rama* which offered a view of life from a variety of Latinos' perspectives, the entire evening consists of Leguizamo narrating unrelated bits and pieces of his own life to an audience screaming with laughter. The earlier plays marked his creative abilities in not only understanding what makes someone tick, but in narrating a life-experience in language that is true to the character, whether it be a nine-year old boy or a street-wise prostitute. In *Sexaholix*, Leguizamo merely talks about himself and his sexual peccadilloes, and he recycles material that he used in his earlier piece, *Freak*. No real trajectory shapes the performance except for his chronicling various relationships with women until he discovers "true love." In his interview with himself in the *New York Times*, he describes the show as an odyssey through all of his relationships, "from puberty and a relationship with myself, then trying to lose my virginity – a relationship with a woman's body – to serious relationships – a relationship with a woman's soul – marriage, divorce and finding true love" (5). This noble mission to represent one man's search for true love is often undercut by crowd-pleasing comments. For example, he admits that he and Justine, the mother of his two children, *are* soul mates, but "soul mates on a permanent booty call." Likewise, his honest pronouncements on love and fatherhood ("love is the scariest shit in the world") may be moving to an audience raised on talk show candidness, but they lack the artistic depth his earlier characters showed as they struggled to find self-expression. As a father now himself, Leguizamo is reminded of how his own father damaged him growing up, but he also realizes what it is to walk in his father's shoes. The success of the piece is due to the emotional intimacy of Leguizamo's performance, the clever one-liners, and the energetic salsa and hip-hop dances and occasional phrases in Spanish that encapsulate the Latino identity of his audience. His opening dance in which he imitates

the various styles of Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Mexicans, and Dominicans simultaneously celebrates and unifies the ethnic variety of Latinos in the audience. Thus Leguizamo still fulfills his mission to honor Latino culture and experience. However, in his earlier works he represented a variety of Latinos' lives on the stage, and in this present work he has reduced that number to one.

Leguizamo's future ambitions concern his fellow Latinos as well as his immediate family. He plans to direct films about Latino characters, roles that he himself will create and produce so that he can do "for Latinos what Woody Allen did for Jewish people in films like *Annie Hall*, bringing everybody into that realm, holding it up proudly, and still showing its weaknesses, too." Critics sensing an element of the surreal in his work suggest that he will borrow from the tradition of magical realism that is so much a part of his heritage, as seen in the work of Gabriel García Márquez. As Richard Goldstein characterizes it, "If Leguizamo can bring that tradition together with the tropes of stand-up and hip-hop, he really will invent a new Latino prototype" (57). As it stands, Leguizamo has re-invigorated the genre of the one-man show and pushed the boundaries of performance, showing the limitless possibilities available to those wishing to explore the Latino culture and themselves. And, by using comedy as a political force, he prompts his audience to examine their own cultural assumptions and encourages them to formulate new models of community and self identity.

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