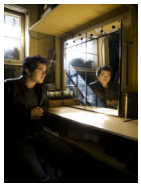

Cover Story - Issue 97

The Show Goes On...

As one of entertainment's lauded figures, John Leguizamo is an expert at causing tears to flow and inciting jeers. So what happens when you put him on stage for a one-man show? Lawsuits abound.

By Georgette Cline

"What did he do? Point his blow dryer at someone?" John Leguizamo asks, after hearing news that his groomer was arrested for an unknown crime. Seated inside Repertorio Español in New York City--a 140-seat theater much like those he performed in during the early stages of his career—the comedian-turned-actor makes light of the hair stylist's case of bad luck with a fitting quip. It's what's to be expected from the 46-year-old veteran entertainer, who's always had a knack for saying the right thing, albeit hilarious, at the right time. How else would he have scored a spot in NYU's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts acting program if he didn't have a way with words.

His years studying there helped shaped the man seen in one-man shows like "Freak" and films like Summer of Sam and Lionsgate March release The Lincoln Lawyer, starring as Val Valenzuela, opposite Matthew McConaughey and Michael Peña. "Having a university experience broadened my point of view of the world and gave me confidence in terms of culture and writing," he shares. "It gave me confidence in my intellect."

Leguizamo, a native of Jackson Heights, Queens, relied on that brilliance to craft “Ghetto Klown”—his third solo Broadway show and one that has already been threatened with lawsuits for its controversial material. Nine years have elapsed since his last theatrical foray in “Sexaholix… A Love Story,” but the Colombian funny guy promises he won’t be rusty during his return; he’s just got to work on his cardio. “I got to start running a lot,” he admits. “I got to get real strong physically. I do a lot of flinging myself around the stage. It may look simple but it’s hours and years of work.”

Just like many aspiring performers before him, Leguizamo, who cites his “favorite” role as playing a homeless family man in Where God Left His Shoes, made a name for himself working the New York comic circuit. Yet, his reception wasn’t always a welcomed one. “Every time I came on stage the people would go [sings the opening verse to “La Bamba”], “Para bailar La Bamba…” he reveals with a sheepish laugh. “I started getting mad.”

These days, Leguizamo has little time to be irate, as his focus is more on putting zing into his Broadway production rather than paying attention to hecklers. While the curly-haired star understands he’s putting himself on the chopping block for critics, he’s just aiming to inspire those in the room. “Whatever their dream… “Leguizamo adds, “This show [should give] them the confidence and the courage to go, “I’m gonna try it, I’m gonna keep going and nothing’s gonna stop me.’” Wise words from an educated clown.

It’s been nine years since you did “Sexholix… A Love Story.” Why do you feel like now is the time to return to a one-man show with “Ghetto Klown”?

Well, I thought I had a show that was great and I felt like I developed it to a point where it was Broadway worthy. I’ve been touring with it for two years trying to get it to this place, from the south to Canada to the West Coast. When I started out with the show a couple years ago, I would just get index cards of my resume kind of, and I would drink a lot of beer on stage. I would try to remember what happened when I did this movie, what happened when I worked with this teacher and this actor.

You're starring in the forthcoming crime-drama The Lincoln Lawyer. You've gotten cease and desist letters from lawyers and your family wanted to sue you in the past. What's that about?

When I did "Freak," my father threatened to sue me. Then my mom thought she was gonna sue me too. But luckily I bought her a brownstone so she stopped. Then, when I was doing ["Ghetto Klown" in its early stages] I was getting calls from [actors'] lawyers to cease and desist. Since I'm impersonating people, they basically said I can't say anything unless it's public knowledge. Or I have to be clear that it's my opinion, because if it's misconstrued as if I'm saying that it's something that happened, and the public doesn't know, I'm liable for a lawsuit. I can't say who it was, but a friend of someone came to the show and then called them up and said I was saying these things about them. The show had to go through a huge legal process. Every line has to be perused by all these lawyers.

Years ago when I first saw "Freak," I was really surprised at your stage presence. What inspired that kind of high energy?

I have lots of inspirations. I'm not really a stand-up [comic] and I never really aspired to that. I'm an actor and I love people who are storytellers. I fancy myself a storyteller. I love making people see things that aren't there when I story tell. The magic of a one-man show is that you can take people to so many places inside of your mind and your experience just with a movement or the way you say something, there's an incredible magic in that. I guess the first few people to really do it up like that I gotta say are Lily Tomlin and Richard Pryor. They were big inspirations for me.

What do you think you bring to your art form as a Latino entertainer?

As a Latino entertainer, definitely it's my perspective of the world, which is a different, unique perspective on life coming from a Latin culture. Our point of view is a little bit of an outsider point of view, with our very intense history that we come from--being colonized and almost genocide. So we have a very interesting perspective on the world. So I bring that. Of course we have an incredible musical history, so that music comes with me in my shows as well.

When you first started doing the comedy circuit in New York City, is there one particular show that stands out?

There are a lot of crazy experiences when you're starting out. There was one time I did stand-up by myself, and these two dudes, I saw them make a pact with each other that they wouldn't laugh at anything. So they sat in the front row and stone-faced me. I didn't think they were gonna break me but eventually they got to me.

There's a ton of aspiring comics and storytellers trying to make it big. What's your advice to people looking to follow the similar path you've taken?

You just got to find as many places to perform and perform your ass off. There's no shortcut.

You just got to do it and do it until it rocks. There's no in between; it's either it's good or it's not. I didn't start up with stand-up. I was more of a storyteller. I performed at places like Gusto House, P.S. 122, The Home, and Dixon Place. Some of those are still around.

Have you ever turned down roles because you felt like you wouldn't achieve anything by embodying a particular character?

Yeah, I've turned down lots of stuff. I felt like it wasn't me at the time. I turned down Blow, Shaft and Sneakers, The Specialist. [I turned down Blow] because I just didn't want to play a drug dealer. I wasn't in the mood for that.

I think everyone has a moment where they say, "I got it" or "I made it," in their respective careers. What moment was that for you?

"I got it," I felt like that when I did Carlito's Way and I saw the film. There I am with [Al] Pacino and Sean Penn, and I'm bringing my own thing that stands up to their thing. When "I made it," that was when I did To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar and I had a Golden Globe nomination. There I am at the Golden Globes sitting there with all the biggest stars, Tom Cruise and Patrick Swayze. That was a huge moment.

Has there been advice a colleague has given you, which has stuck with you throughout the years?

That's interesting. Wesley Snipes, he always said, "Never doubt." Just keep going and to never doubt.

What kind of jobs did you have before people knew you as John Leguizamo the Funny Man?

I did everything, man. I did children's theater; I worked at Kentucky Friend Chicken for a couple years. I worked at some restaurants as a busboy. I worked at a shoe store as a stock boy then eventually got promoted to shoe salesman. They all teach you life lessons—showing up on time and then you got to give it your all. You better learn that lesson fast in life: to bring your all every single time and enjoy it. It was great because it showed me there are politics in everything though. It's not just movies that have these weird, strange things where you have to pay your dues and you're gonna start at the bottom and work your way up. That's in every business, in every career.