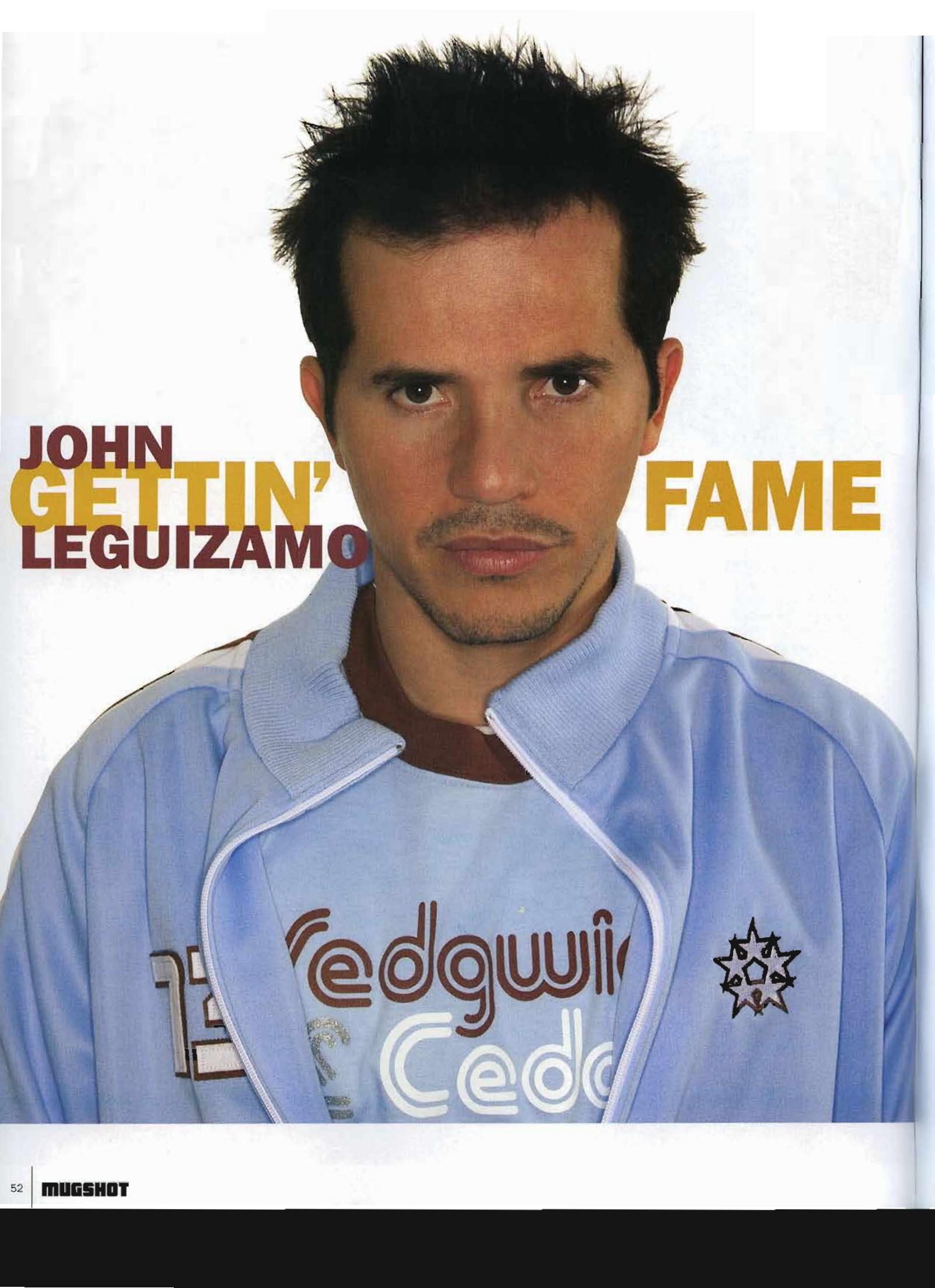


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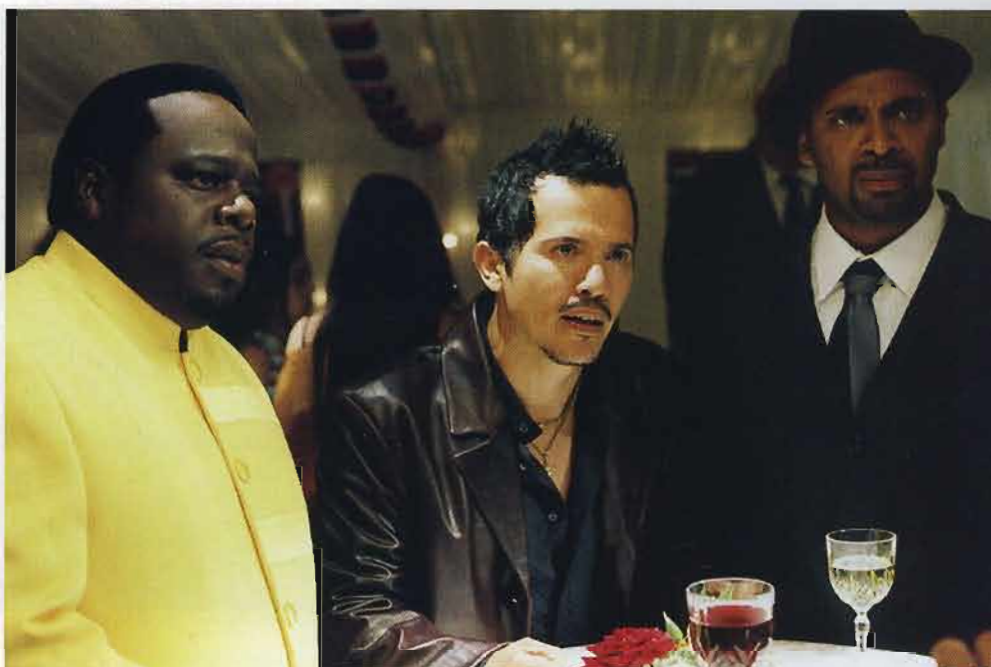
JOHN LEGUIZAMO + JAMEL SHABAZZ + SEATTLE + JENNIFER JOHNS + THE GENERALS

"It's Mary J. Blige, it's Nas, it's Jay-Z, it's Biggie... Those are the people that give me the breadth to do things, to achieve. Hip-hop centers me. It makes me feel like I could do anything." - John Leguizamo



**JOHN
GETTIN'
LEGUIZAMO** **FAME**

Redgwin
Cedo



Honeymooners
(Paramount Pictures, 2005)

LIFE IS A LOOP. It's a theme that runs through the work of actor, writer, comedian, protean artist, John Leguizamo. Speaking to the Colombian-born, Queens-bred performer during a break from shooting scenes and driving back to his Manhattan home from a weekend upstate, one gets the sense of a man who has come to terms with a lot in his life and achieved a certain balance in his second set, as it were.

The recently married 40-year-old father of two appears to have "made friends with the monsters," as he says in one of his autobiographical, award-winning one-man shows.

Forging a career on turning personal anguish into uproarious, poignant art onstage—what he sometimes calls "the loneliest motherfucking gig in the world"—Leguizamo seems remarkably content with his latest, greatest role, that of family man.

Leguizamo was the hyperactive kid who never fit in, voted "most talkative" by his classmates; the failed thug forced to form his own misfit gaggle on the streets of Jackson Heights when the real thugs rejected him on sight; whose major bout with infamy involved hijacking the subway's public address system at the age of 14 to describe his awkward sexual misadventures in explicit detail to commuters variously shocked, rapt or laughing; the dude known for his floundering attempts at wooing the girls with beat-box serenades—or a free TV. It seems that hyperactive kid has grown up.

If he feels compelled to apply the brakes, though, it's not yet apparent. At work on his most ambitious project to date, Leguizamo is compiling his experience with Hollywood into an autobiographical, behind-the-curtains riff meant to render asunder the steady stream of red-carpet Oz fed to the public. His goal is the same as it always is: to distill the essence—this time the car wreck of art and commerce that is show business—using his vintage, rapid-fire candor. It's the same no-nonsense, break-it-down, "you motherfuckers aren't gonna believe this shit," "Latin Dad" storytelling that has lifted his

name onto the Broadway marquees.

Still, Tinseltown can be an unforgiving, fickle, ephemeral cluster-fuck, something of which Leguizamo seems acutely aware. Wooing an industry by taking it to task is a delicate tightrope act performed in the same weightless void where Robert Altman's *The Player* succeeds marvelously, while the published tidbits of Truman Capote's *Answered Prayers* cost the writer his friends, his career and his life.

But whoa! Back up the drama for a second: Who better than a self-effacing, courageous, expert angst-channeler like Leguizamo to turn out film-dom's farcical guts, via his own, while celebrating it too?

Leguizamo's very incongruity—one of his throwaway lines is "look at me!"—has endowed him with a glorious amount of freedom in speaking truth to power, whether it's to Latino culture, himself, his father, the industry or whoever's swinging wildly at him at the time. The ability to pique the status quo by revealing himself, and tweak his demons while never disclaiming his own susceptibility or culpability, is what keeps his game elevated and deep.

It's clear from various titles he's given to his work in progress—from "Idiot Savant," to "Pimps, Backstabbers, Whores and All My Other Hollywood Friends"—that he's found the bookends to mine a meaty middle, always the toughest part.

The empathy and intuitive understanding of the in-between—the good, the bad, the ugly, the redemp-



On set with Director Franc Reyes for *Empire* (Universal Pictures, 2002)



Assault on Precinct 13 (Focus Features, 2005)

tive—that permeates his work has seemed to help him dodge what's been a hurdle for colleagues more on the jokie-side of the performance spectrum: He's never been just a comedian. The ruminative pain of this delinquent turned Strasberg student is too acute. Just listen to him; he's obviously lived it. And regardless, the chimera beckons.

"Finding the balance is the trick," Leguizamo says, as he herds his kids inside. "No, put the helmet back in..."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you help?"

"Okay, okay. That's cool man, is that a kung fu outfit?..."

"So I can't burn any bridges before I even cross them," he continues. "I mean I've still got to find my way in Hollywood. I still want to work. I don't want litigation," he adds, referring to his one-man show in progress.

"I also really have to look at myself and see how I am a contributor to it, because nobody's a victim to this. That's what's tricky. I mean, I'm part of the whole disease. So I've got to take my responsibility and figure out how I play in each situation. I don't want it to be just whining or complaining or bitching or gossip. I want it to be real, very edgy and really accurate—a real portrayal of my experience in the business. So that's hard. That's going to take a while."

Most of Leguizamo's critical acclaim has come from

recounting his life's trials onstage. His one-man work includes 1991's off-Broadway smash *Mambo Mouth*, considered his breakout but his least autobiographical; followed by 1993's stereotype busting *Spic-O-Rama*; then 1998's very personal *Freak*, which spurred a surprising reconciliation with his father. He followed up three years later with a 24-city tour of the nation called simply *Live*, which was later transitioned to Broadway as *Sexaholic: A Love Story*. The title is a shout-out to his old Jackson Heights posse, though the material spans his life and covers his transition to married man and father.

Leguizamo is, as he seems onstage, consistently and refreshingly blunt. Describing the dearth of good screenplays: "The majority of the stuff is really, really bad," he says. "Most of it, maybe there's good form, but there's just no soul, no heart, nothing to say. I mean, I need to get paid, I like to work, I like to act, but usually it's about picking the least bad thing. That's usually the task.

"It's not the writers," he adds. "It's the studio system and what they're looking for. The material they're picking is suited to the least common denominator—that which is going to offend or challenge the least amount of people. So the movies being made are like rides; there's nothing about character development or human revelation. It's all about getting butts in seats."

His most artistically satisfying moments have come alone in the theater, onstage, just him, the mic and the audience. "It's just such an incredible forum. You're the loneliest motherfucker on earth, it's like the toughest gig ever, but it's my favorite, and my favorite type of comedy, which is sort of a dark, emotional trauma type of comedy. When I can find

that in the movies, that's what I try to gravitate to. But you know, American comedies... they aren't very adult, yet."

A notable turn was his portrayal in 1999 of the phillandering, guilt-ridden Catholic hairdresser Vinny in Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam*. Tortured ethics act as a magnet for the film's moral compass, which wobbles around Leguizamo's Vinnie, whose counsel the locals seek as they attempt to scapegoat an innocent man for a horrific string of killings.

Similar themes are mined in his first Spanish-language feature, *Cronicas*, directed by Sebastian Cordero and produced by Alfonso Cuarón, director of *Y Tu Mama Tambien*. Leguizamo is a broadcast journalist who travels to an Ecuadorian village in pursuit of boosting his career with a sensational story. The hack must confront his monomania and inability to uncover the truth, much less convey it to the public. Set for American release July 3, *Cronicas* shot three months in Ecuador.

The richly atmospheric, character-driven spirit evident in Latin filmmaking has clearly magnetized Leguizamo. It's also stoked Hollywood, much as the underground has influenced production and created its own echo chamber, and give-and-take rebuttal with the "bling" of platinum hip-hop.

"Economics has a lot to play with, so it splits rawness and passion and excitement into a new way of storytelling," Leguizamo says. "It's not about flash. It's not about just having tons of money and CGI [computer generated imagery]. It's about storytelling.

"*Amores Perros*, *Y Tu Mama Tambien*, *City of God*—the first one wasn't a big hit, but it opened the



Cronos (Palm Pictures, 2005)



Land of the Deaf (Universal Pictures, 2005)

path—all the directors are using DPs [cinematographers] from those movies and bitin' on the styles of those, it's crazy. Latin Cinema's really coming into like a revolutionary forefront, so I want to be a part of it."

At the time of this writing, he was engaged in lighter fare, having spent the last seven weeks listening to loops of early-80s FM-radio hits and pronouncing his "g's" as "g-uh." He's filming scenes in New York for Ed Burns' *Groomsmen*, a sort of "Long Island *Big Chill*," in which Leguizamo makes his singing debut, fronting a band of the groom's longtime buddies. It should be worth the wait to see his rendition of Eddie Money's "Shakin'," "The Break Up Song" by the Greg Kihn Band, and Billy Squier's "My Kind of Lover."

"I'm having a lot of fun. I'm not a singer, so it's a lot of fun to try. But nowadays you don't even have to be a singer, as many pop stars have proven. There's so much technology, if you get the right computer, all of a sudden you're singing like Elton John."

He's been listening to K-OS in his off time, a rising Toronto MC known for his genre-splicing arrangements and socially conscious lyrics, and Miami's Pitbull, who guests on a remix of Lil' Jon's "What U Gon' Do," which has been getting heavy rotation on L.A. radio.

When asked about running in late-70s New York, Leguizamo describes a scene of summer block parties with James Brown and Al Green pumping through the Hi-Fi grills, when the city was blossoming artistically and musically, just as it was being neglected by the powers that be.

It was house parties and Latin Freestyle later in the 80s, as hip-hop increasingly flowed into Queens from the Bronx. Leguizamo recalled the doe-eyed Safire, a Puerto Rican-born, East Harlem-bred chanteuse who reigned with "Don't Break My Heart" and "Let Me Be the One."

"Latin freestyle was a big thing in my community especially," he said. "You know, all those girl groups and whatnot, they all had like a little bit of a hip-hop beat. It was the music that Madonna took. Jelly Bean [Benitez] took all the Latin freestyle and gave it to her. Sort of like a poppy, hip-hoppy 80s version of the Supremes."

"But I was mostly listening to James Brown, man. James Brown and Al Green, I mean, they'll always be with me, and then all the new hip-hop that was starting to happen: Afrika Bambaataa and Run DMC. It was such an exciting place to be."

Leguizamo recalls hitting clubs like the Red Zone, the Tunnel and Eso, back in the day. "Eso was more of a Latin club, it was fun and crazy," he says. "It was like two floors: one floor was all dancehall and the other floor was hip-hop, and they would throw salsa here and there, you know? I used to go to Mars too. Red Zone had the best dancers, and Mars too. I mean they had people who could move. I would just stand there in a circle and just watch some of the best dancers in New York, you know, comin' up with stuff, improvising. It was hot."

Manhattan acted then as the pooling point into which all the city's musical and cultural lifeblood poured from every direction. While this is still true, the intervening, gentrifying years have culminated in much more of a creative diaspora, locally, in which rising

rent has pushed aspiring artists to Brooklyn and beyond, leaving Manhattan less accessible for, or even aware of, burgeoning talent.

"New York is still happening," Leguizamo says. "Manhattan isn't. Manhattan used to contribute a lot to culture and to hip-hop, it sort of merged everything. But there's nothing going on in Manhattan except money. Manhattan has sort of become an investment-banker capital, so you're not going to get any flavor."

Since having kids—"one of each species," he jokes—with longtime belle Justine Maurer, an estate planner and economist whom he wed in 2003, Leguizamo has hung up his club shoes. His recent one-mans were written to "get out the house," he quips.

In *Live* he describes finding his soulmate: "I searched and searched until I found a woman... who wasn't an actress, who kissed me with her eyes closed, and who was sane... completely sane."

"I love it man, my family life," he says. "That's what feeds me. So that's something that I'm trying to navigate, you know. That's why my choices for movies now have to be really, really specific, because I don't want to be away from them, unless it's something really amazing, worth the sacrifice. Then I'm down, but if it's not, I'm not going to do it."

While the performance aspect of Leguizamo's work is remarkably similar to the hip-hop art of freestyling, in which he's got to hit beats, hone a rhythm, take cues and match wits alone with the audience, writing for theater is a more lengthy, less lyrical process, involving constant revision and fidelity to storyline. It

takes Leguizamo a novel's worth of material, he says, to develop each show, most of which later gets cut or edited down, then tweaked further with each performance. He calls it "joke-smithing" or "distilling the nonsense."

"It's storytelling," he says. "How do you economize the moment, so it's still hilarious, still poignant."

He sits down to write "whenever I've got the time," he says. "I'll jot down my notes and stuff like that during the day. But mostly I'll just keep them in my head. Then I come home and just type like a maniac."

"So there's been like a theme happening in my head for a long time about what I want to do. Then I just start writing stuff down, and I write a lot, a ton, like almost 200 pages' worth. And then I've got to condense, you know, like I guess 50 pages for a two-hour one-man show. A lot of it doesn't work. A lot of it's useless and repetitive."

But most of what's left kills. And it's everybody that ends up getting lampooned, celebrated, taken to task, understood, taken care of. "Nobody's lost at my show," Leguizamo says.

It's inspired some unlikely moments. After one of his *Freak* performances, Leguizamo's father showed up backstage, feeling betrayed about having portions of the family's life laid bare in public. While no transgressions were forgiven, nor forgotten, the confrontation led Leguizamo and his father to reach an understanding.

He describes in *Live* when his son had gotten colicky after his wife and daughter left for a girls' day out. He calls the only person he knew "who's been in this mess before."

"'Jone, put 'im down,'" Leguizamo says, imitating his father. "'Close the door, and get the hell outta that room. Now break open a bottle. Not for him, for yourself!'"

Finding solace in such priceless, thoroughly warped, old-school counsel has brought the loop full circle. Of course, Leguizamo says, he's highly selective in how he applies such guidance.

"My parents damaged me," he says in *Live*. "And I love 'em for that, because they made me who I am today. But my kids don't need to be that successful."

Check out Leguizamo in the black/Latino version of *The Honeymooners*, due in theaters June 10; the horror, action, apocalypse film *Land of the Dead*, out June 25; and *Cronicas* in early July.

By Shane Kite
Photo by Stefan Nyvang
Grooming by William Williams

LONGPLAYLOWDOWN

THE MUSIC THAT INSPIRES JOHN LEGUIZAMO.

To prepare and pump up for his one-mans, Leguizamo spins hip-hop exclusively. "It's Mary J. Blige, 471, it's Fat Joe, it's Nas, it's Jay-Z's *The Black Album*, it's Biggie Smalls, anything by Biggie. Those are the people that give me the breadth to do things, to achieve. I don't know. Hip-hop just gives me confidence. It centers me. It makes me feel like I could do anything."

Regarding his hometown's contribution to the art, favorite Queens artists include: "Nas, the album with 'you a slave to a page from my rhymebook,' ['Made You Look', *God's Son*] Queen Latifah's "U-N-I-T-Y," anything by Run DMC, LL Cool J's "Going Back to Cali," and anything by A Tribe Called Quest is just genius."

When last in L.A., Power 106 had the Pitbull remix of Lil' Jon's "What U Gon' Do" spinning "twenty-four seven on the loop," he said. Audible influences of Pitbull's include Cuban poet José Martí and Queens' own Nas.

"The Cuban kid from Miami is slammin'. He's got crazy skills. I'm tellin' ya, brothers wouldn't know the difference, then you find out he's a Cuban kid. The boy can rap, he's incredible."

Leguizamo can slip easily into the reggaeton vibe in the car culture of L.A.—he's there about once a month. "Reggaeton is fun, man. If you want to hang out with your friends, just put on the reggaeton. That's the kind of music I would be listenin' to in my car. Power [106] was playing it on the loop so I could hear it 24/7."

The Fania All Stars, whose disc Leguizamo picked up recently in Puerto Rico, is getting a lot of spin time. "This is like the heyday of salsa music, the late 60s and the early 70s—Hector Lavoe, Eddie Palmieri, all those guys. It's jazzy, it's New York City. It's being Latin and being in New York City growing up in the early 70s."

He taps the soul, jazz and blues for the moody scenes on the film set: "Like probably a Nina Simone best of, or go into some Jazz, Miles Davis' [*Sketches of Spain*]." If I need to be mellow and cool maybe some Sade, like *Love Deluxe*, you know, and blues. Blues, it's Robert Johnson, Leadbelly. Music, definitely, definitely, helps me out.

"I've also got to say Al Green is one of the greats," Leguizamo says. "I mean, his music just, it just makes me speechless, you know? It's so deep, soulful, profound, so free. I don't know. It rocks me."

"When I'm creative or have to write, it's got to be classical—Chopin, Beethoven, Dvorak, Liszt, Mahler. I can't write to hip-hop or not even jazz. Jazz takes too much of my focus or attention. I start to move to the beat and I can't focus. You know how your mind just wants to start running away when you write, it just does not when you want to...It's a big struggle. Classical music just lets my mind wander."

By Shane Kite

