

## Interview: John Leguizamo Reflects on ‘Tales from a Ghetto Klown’ in PBS Doc

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CHICAGO – From Toulouse-Lautrec in “Moulin Rouge” and Luigi in “Super Mario Bros.” to Sid in “Ice Age” and Chi-Chi in “To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar,” John Leguizamo has made a career out of playing a wide array of colorful and challenging roles. In 2010, the actor made a celebrated return to the stage and tackled his trickiest role to date: himself.

In “Ghetto Klown,” Leguizamo dug deep into his own tumultuous past, examining everything from his early journeys through Hollywood to his troubled relationship with his father. Ben De Jesus’s PBS documentary, “Tales from the Ghetto Klown” offers a candid look at the performer’s creative process as he writes the show, workshops it in snow-bound Chicago, garners cheers and mixed reviews on Broadway and spends a year transforming it into a Spanish-language show for Columbian audiences. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Leguizamo about the challenges and benefits of tackling such personal material, the latest screen projects he’s excited to explore and the reason why he’s definitely not voting Republican this election season.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Were there certain chameleonesque comedians who inspired you to tackle multiple characters in your stage shows?

**John Leguizamo:** Oh yeah, absolutely. Richard Pryor and Lily Tomlin and Whoopi Goldberg were big, big inspirations in terms of people who transformed themselves. The two people that inspired me to do autobiographical stuff would be Richard Pryor and Spalding Gray. They really tackled it like nobody else.



John Leguizamo in Ben De Jesus’s Tales from a Ghetto Klown.

*Photo credit: PBS*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did your stage experience assist you on the set of “Moulin Rouge”?

**Leguizamo:** Yeah, definitely. It’s a luxury to be onstage because you can try something different every night. Even when you think you’ve got it down, a month later you’re going to go, “Oh, I didn’t know anything, and now I really know the truth.” You really learn how to explore and that helped me while doing “Moulin Rouge” because Baz Luhrmann wanted us all to be as full and passionate and free as possible.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Was it difficult to spend an entire film on your knees?

**Leguizamo:** That's how I get most of my jobs.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Boy, did I walk into that one.

**Leguizamo:** [laughs] Yeah you did. It was tough. I don't think my back has ever recovered from the abuse. When I was on my knees, the problem was that in order to stand up straight, I compressed my lower back. They brought a special therapist, Ann Dugan, from LA to work on my back. Nicole [Kidman] injured her knee and Ann worked on her as well. That show was taxing, man. We were there for eight months shooting "Moulin Rouge," and Baz wanted us to give our all. You want to do it for him because he's that kind of inspiring director.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did you go about interpreting Toulouse-Lautrec?

**Leguizamo:** I didn't really base it on anybody. I just read everything I could and saw all of the photographs. He dressed up in costumes—even dressed up as women. The camera had just been invented and he took a poop in front of it. And they filmed it. He's just a crazy man and I love his spirit. I read all of his biographies and there was enough information about his problems—how he talked and his speech impediment—that I was able to use.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your one-man show "Freak" was also autobiographical.

**Leguizamo:** "Freak" followed my life from birth to 16 when I lost my virginity. "Ghetto Clown" is the most personal of all my shows because it's about me right now. I wanted to be as raw as I could be. What inspired me to do the show was a series of college trips I had done where I went through my résumé. The kids responded so incredibly to the material and I realized, "There's a show here."

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In the documentary, your writing process seemed to be a constant series of revisions. Do you thrive on that sort of experimentation?

**Leguizamo:** Oh, I love that. That is one of the most fun parts of the whole thing. You're not chasing results, you're chasing feeling and telling the truth. You're revealing what the truth of the play is, and every play will reveal itself to you. During the Q&A, you'll see whether you're in the right ballpark. People can help you and they can steer you wrong too. Sometimes people want everything to be over-explained, and you can get tripped up on that. But if you know how to listen to them correctly, it really helps.



John Leguizamo in Ben De Jesus's *Tales from a Ghetto Clown*.

*Photo credit: PBS*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What made you want to probe deeper into some of the more emotional material?

**Leguizamo:** I really wanted to inspire people, particularly kids. I found out that 50 percent of black males and 45 percent of Latin kids drop out of high school. It's such a tragedy, and I wanted them to see that somebody who came from where they came from actually made it. It's not easy and it's never going to be easy, but if you believe in yourself or if you have a mentor, then you can make it. Success, of course, is relative. It doesn't have to be Oscars and red carpets. Just ending up doing what you dreamed of doing is success.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** When you put yourself through the emotional wringer every night, does it help that the material is so personal, or does it provide an added challenge?

**Leguizamo:** It's got its pluses and minuses, I gotta say. It definitely makes me get over that stuff, but at the same time, I have to keep those wounds open, so that becomes a bit of a problem. It becomes a little bit depressing sometimes because I'm dealing with a lot of heavy, heavy stuff in my own life. You can't really run away from it because you're digging deep every night to reach those places. I feel a little stuck in those traumatic moments. Of course, the applause and the standing ovation at the end make you feel a lot better. That's the payoff. You go, "It was worth it. There is a value to this."

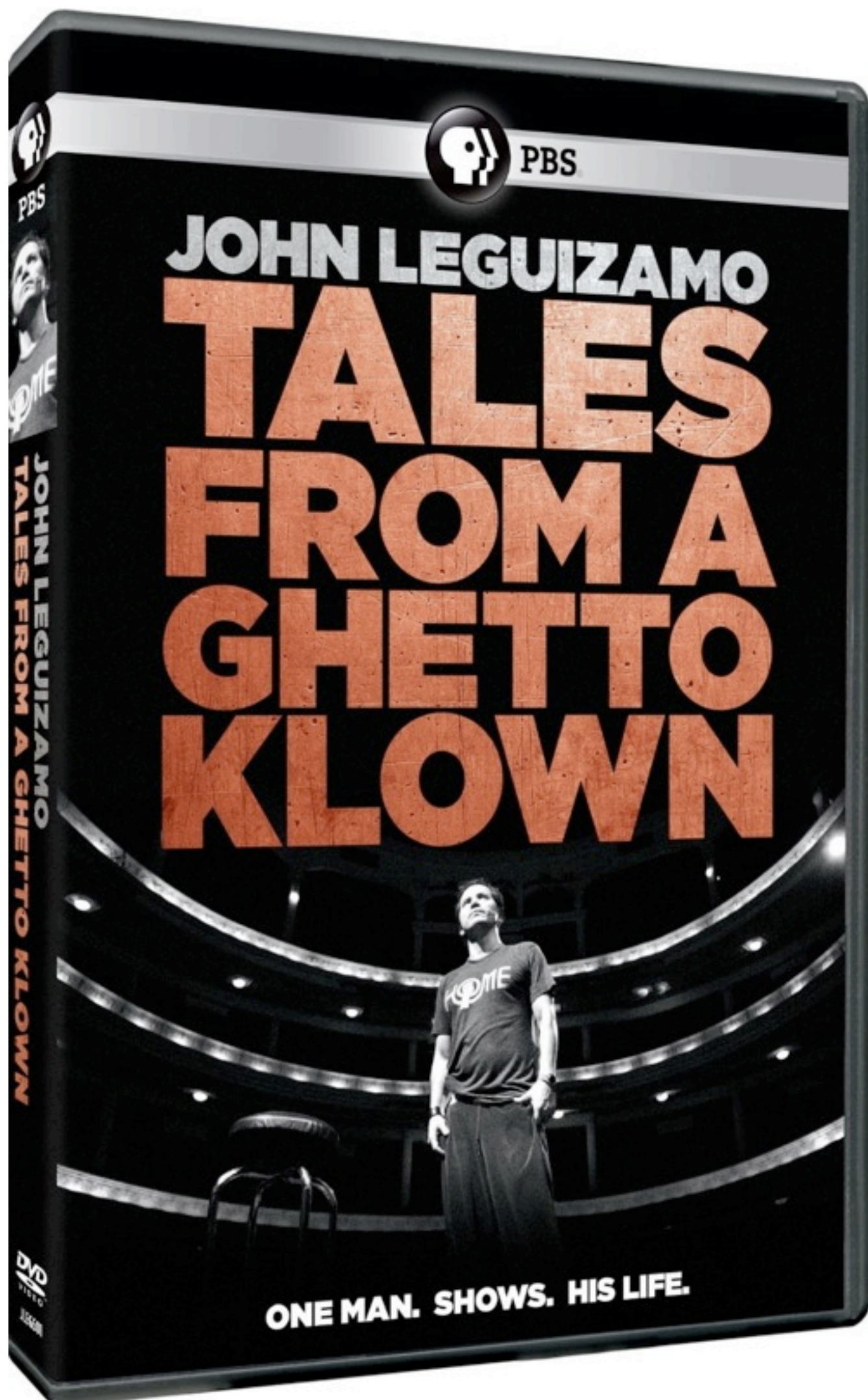
**HollywoodChicago.com:** Was the process of translating the show to Spanish for its Colombia tour part of your efforts to probe deeper?



**Leguizamo:** You get to a certain age and you want to give back but you also want new challenges. I felt like I was comfortable enough and that I could take the risk. That's why I spent a year preparing to go to Latin America and do that show. It was brutally difficult but totally worth it. Hopefully now when I tour it will be a lot easier the second time. The first time around, I lost ten percent of my jokes because I couldn't figure out how to translate them. I grew up [in America] so my humor is pretty much American. They gave me huge applause for certain things that weren't that funny here and visa versa. There was a lot of stuff that killed here that they just didn't laugh too much at. Plus, they don't know me down there so they don't know what to expect. There's no expectation. But all of the famous comedians and actors and politicians came out to see the show, so it felt very successful.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There's some brief yet touching footage of your relatives that saw the Colombian show. What was their reaction?

**Leguizamo:** It was very touching for me because they had never seen me perform live and they can't really understand the shows in English. They were just very moved and were like, "Oh my god, now I understand what you do and what you go through." It brought us very close because I don't talk to my father and the show made them finally understand why.



Tales from a Ghetto Klown was released on DVD on September 11th, 2012.

Photo credit: PBS

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There’s also footage of the blizzard that hit Chicago when you were workshopping “Ghetto Klown” at the Royal George Theatre.

**Leguizamo:** The audience members would come to the theatre on skis. We had like 15 or 20 people in a 300 or 400-seat theater. But that workshopping was so important. I trimmed it down a lot and certain things became a lot stronger. I became freer in the darker moments. A lot of great things happened at that moment. By the end of its six-month run on Broadway, it was a masterful piece. It was so aerodynamic and there was no fat whatsoever at that point. Once I did the show enough times, I could see that I had to reduce it and the reduction was really good for the show.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Would you consider writing your own material for the screen?

**Leguizamo:** Yeah, I would love to write for film or TV. I’m developing a TV series with Chris Sheridan from “Family Guy” for ABC. It’s been a blast working with that writer, he’s such a brilliant guy. I’m also developing a film version of “Ghetto Klown”—not the actual performance but a film with real people portraying my family and friends and managers and actors. I’m going to try to figure out how to play myself in it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of your quotes that materializes online during every election year is, “‘Latins for Republicans’ is like ‘Roaches for Raid.’” Do you still stand by those words?

**Leguizamo:** Oh, absolutely. A lot of Latin Republicans feel that it’s unfair but it’s not. Latin people are the working class of this country and we need to be protected and taken care of. The immigration issue is a big deal and the Republicans just want to deport everybody and not give amnesty to anyone and kill the Dream Act. They want to kill Medicare and Medicaid and social security and unions. That’s not for us. Latin people need unions, as do all Americans. I just don’t understand how Latin people can be for Republicans. Voting for them is a vote against your own needs and your own values.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You have big movies coming up, including “The Counselor” and “Kick Ass 2.”

**Leguizamo:** Cormac McCarthy wrote “The Counselor,” and it’s an original screenplay. It’s not based on one of his novels. You’ve got Brad Pitt and Michael Fassbender—who’s one of the great actors of the moment and possibly of our generation. And then you’ve got “Kick Ass 2.” The first one was a big hit and now they’re putting crazy money into the sequel. The kids are all superstars now too: Christopher Mintz-Plasse from “Superbad,” Aaron Johnson from “Anna Karenina” and Chloe Moretz, who’s in every movie these days. I play Chris’s guardian. It’s been a blast and I think this one is even funnier than the first.

*‘Tales from a Ghetto Klown’ features John Leguizamo. It was directed by Ben De Jesus. It was released on DVD on September 11th, 2012. It is rated TV-PG.*



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [12]

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