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

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Keywords: Specific Literature, American literature, Time Period, 1900-1999, Subject Author, Leguizamo, John (1964- ), Literary Genre, drama, Literary Theme, (treatment of) ethnic stereotypes

Abstract

As the first Latino to produce a one-man show on Broadway, John Leguizamo is a spokesperson for a culture vying to be heard, and his dramatic sketches question the status quo of race relations in America. His plays Mambo Mouth, Spic-O-Rama, Freak, and Sexaholix . . . A Love Story reflect his training as a stand-up comedian and his investment in the social and political issues that shape Latino representation. Leguizamo depicts stereotypical Latino characters in an effort to attack ethnic prejudice, but his comedies are problematic. When he enacts racial stereotypes in front of a mixed audience of whites and Latinos, he seems to perpetuate negative images of Latinos in order to mock them. However, Leguizamo's goal is to create "prototypes," characters whose cultural cues make them easily recognizable, and then to encourage people to see behind these characters' masks. Rather than shun negative racial depictions, he renders them more human through their individual stories. (MMC)
When did John Leguizamo become a star? Maybe it was when he was Miggy, the first character audiences met in Leguizamo's 1993 one-man show Spic-O-Rama. He was a precocious, lispy 9-year-old who doesn't know what to do with his hands or when to stop sharing. Standing in Miggy's baggy clothes and stocking cap, Leguizamo tells a story of a boy's first encounter with racism, as a bully much larger than him bellows, "Get out of my country, you stupid, ugly spic!" Leguizamo's son is dealing with the same shit he did as a kid. In his sixth, critically acclaimed one-man show, Latin History for Morons, the point of all the taunting and hatred has the same message: You don't belong in America. "It's crazy how this administration——" he begins, before stepping back a bit.