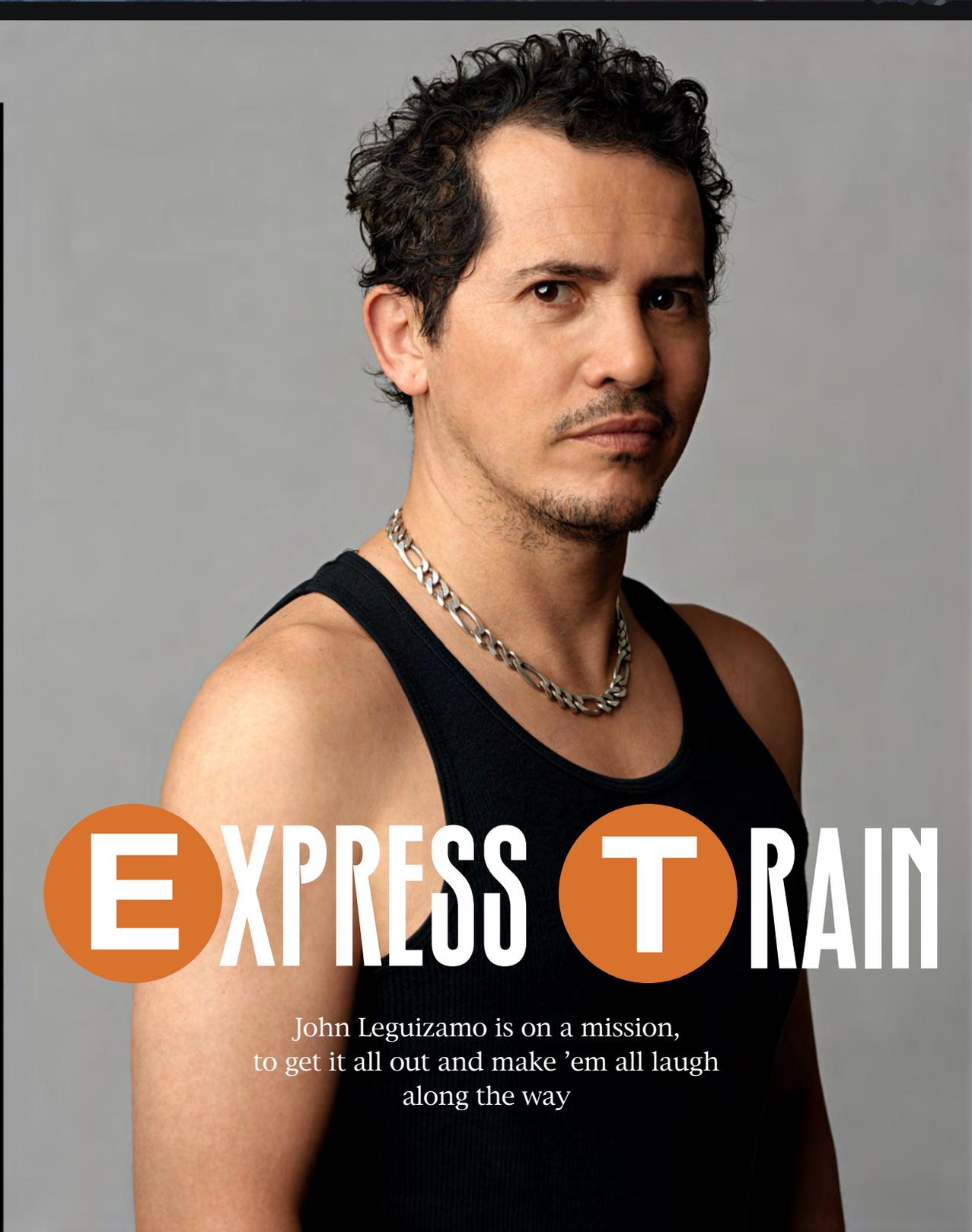


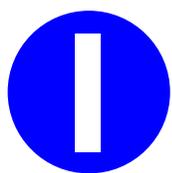
EXCLUSIVE

A portrait of John Leguizamo, a man with dark, curly hair and a goatee, wearing a black tank top and a silver chain necklace. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The entire portrait is framed by a thick black border.

# **E**XPRESS **T**RAIN

John Leguizamo is on a mission,  
to get it all out and make 'em all laugh  
along the way

Words by Vanessa Pascale | Photo Credit: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders



arrive at an unassuming West Village café only to second guess whether I have the correct address. I was told that a reservation had been made for John Leguizamo and me, but I am confused as there are only four tables. I tell the barista I have a “reservation,” and she points to the only vacant table by the door. I take the seat facing the window. The afternoon sky is gray and the rain is steady. A man in his 70s or 80s sits down opposite me, directly between my table and the one beside me on the wooded window seat. The man will literally be arm-to-arm with John when he eventually arrives. He asks if I am waiting for someone, and then refers to my mystery guest as a “lucky guy.” I concur. He is lucky, but not in the way he’s implying, I clarify.

John arrives and takes a seat. Considering the lack of personal space with his new neighbor, I ask him if he wants to stay here. We stay. He chose this place, and tells me it is a local-spot that regularly produces a very long line of patrons, that includes Alec Baldwin and Daniel Day-Lewis, there for the “amazing” coffee. I apologize for dragging him out in the rain. “I do like when it rains, except in the fall,” replies John. [It is fall.] True to his roots, the Columbia-born, Queens-raised, 50-year-old actor is more convincing at still being Johnny from the block than JLo, in his black rimmed glasses, University of Pennsylvania baseball cap (sticker affixed to the bill), gray Nike hoodie, navy blue jacket and black Adidas track pants.

After requisite small talk, he stands up to order a drink from the counter, but not before asking if I want anything [I decline.] and eyeing my business card on the table. “Miss Pascale,” he reads, then chuckles. As soon as he’s out of earshot, the older man nods toward John. “He’s very talented. He has a one-man show.” Many of John’s one-man shows, *Spic-O-Rama*, *Freak*, *Ghetto Klown* (his “masterpiece”), *Sexaholix...A Love Story...* have been performed on Broadway and taped for HBO. When John returns, the man gives us our space, but before he walks out the door he turns to John and says, “Nice work.” “Oh, thanks a lot. Thank you,” John replies.

The prolific actor, who has six films coming out in 2015 alone, has appeared in an extensive list of movies and television shows including, *To Wong Foo Thanks for*

*Everything*, *Julie Newmar*, (which he received a Golden Globe nomination for Best Supporting Actor), *Moulin Rouge*, *Romeo + Juliet*, *Lincoln Lawyer*, *Ride Along*, *Chef*, *John Wick*, *FUGLY!* (the last four were just released this year), a one-year stint on *ER* and a number of guest roles on TV series like *My Name is Earl*. And now there is *FUGLY!* to add to his list – the first film he has written (with Katie DeMarco), produced and starred in. (Though, he co-wrote *Undeclared* for HBO but was uncredited, he tells me.)

Loosely based on his life, *FUGLY!* features John as Jesse Sanchez, alongside Rosie Perez as Zowie and Radha Mitchell as Lara. The latter bears a close resemblance to John’s wife, Justine Maurer, I point out. While Lara is not supposed to be his wife, he tells me, “I definitely picked a very classy, white girl-type. My wife is a very classy white girl-type, Upper West Side, good breeding. So, yeah I picked someone who was like her. Rosie was kinda like the other situation.” He smiles. The idea for the film sprung from an incident that occurred when John was 12-years-old. “Going into junior high school,” he recalls, “I walk into the classroom. I had my ’fro all ready to impress the ladies. It rained like this and it got all soggy. I looked like a wet dog. And the girls starting going, ‘He’s fugly! He’s fugly!’” The name quietly fades out. “It stuck for a year of my life. That was a painful year. It was that incident that kinda shaped this movie.”

A revenge movie of sorts, Jesse sets out to show people that he can make something of himself – and succeeds.

“But now he’s got to fix himself. It turns on you, like everything does. Like, the stuff that helps you get going in life, eventually at some point, becomes what holds you back, too. You gotta keep evolving in life and stay adaptable,” says John. This is the lesson, and the rest is “ridiculously funny.” [*FUGLY!* was released in select theaters and is now available On Demand.] The screenwriting gates have been opened and it’s left John hungry to write his second, third, fourth film.

Our conversation breaks for a moment when the barista sets down a large cappuccino cup and saucer. He motions to the frothy white heart pristinely etched atop it. Pretty, I reply. “Let me get some sugar. I’m used to bodega cafés, ya know what I mean?” He smiles, then walks back to the counter. Like his lead character, John has achieved substantial success in the entertainment industry: acting, writing and producing. “I was never in it for the money or the fame or success. I just wanted to express, man. I had things to say, and I wanted to see them executed -- that’s what’s kept me going and vital and relevant,” he says. And one of his greatest outlets for this is his one-man shows. On stage John reenacts a cornucopia of happy, traumatic --and everything in between-- anecdotes punctuated with his classic grandiose humor. Audiences are exposed to his uncensored thoughts and on-point impersonations. There’s dancing, jumping, accents -- the whole shebang. This platform showcases his remarkable range of talent and allows him a freedom and power not found in the other mediums he works in, aside from indie films and theater --which is why he’s attracted to them.

Though John began acting first, it was comedy that he really gravitated to. I point out that it’s normally the opposite for people in this industry. “Yeah, I went the opposite way, but then I fell in love with acting. I felt like, *Acting, wow, this is my thing.* And comedy seemed further away for some weird reason, even though I’d been really funny at parties, at home and at school.” He laughs. Since his Murry Bergtraum High School days, John, the “outta control” class clown, has fed off of acting out for the sake of entertainment -- locking teachers out of the room, getting the whole class to play hooky. He worked hard to stay on top of his game at his hypercompetitive high school, tactically writing jokes the night before school. “I would have to craft my jokes and pretend like I’m saying them. I had files of jokes I’d written. Everybody wanted to be funny. And look, Damon Wayans came outta there, and a lot of other talented musicians.” He takes a sip of his cappuccino.

The seasoned comedian has built a life out of making people laugh, and transforming into multifarious characters. When I ask him to consider where he might be if he hadn’t become a successful actor-comedian, he says that it’s possible that he would’ve been a cab driver or doorman. “When I was in high school I was working at Kentucky Fried Chicken, that was my future, ya know? Running one of those franchises. I dunno.” He laughs. “I didn’t really have big goals till I got to college and then all of a sudden I really wanted to be madly academic.” John immersed himself in philosophy and literature, got involved with the drama department. He began to make the Dean’s List and swapped out his social life for



Images from *FUGLY!* Photo Credit: 108 Media



studying. “I guess I peaked in high school ’cause I was popular. I was having a blast. Then college, not so much, but it was alright. I was on a mission now,” John says.

His latest one-man show, *Latin History for Dummies* --two years in the making-- is being performed in comedy clubs across the country. The pressure is on as comedy clubs are a new arena for John, who is more accustomed to sketch comedy performance spaces and improv clubs. At comedy clubs the audience expects to laugh at *everything*, he explains, and his act is not typical for this venue. His show is an hour-and-forty-minute-play, which he is reading, loaded with history and lessons. “People don’t know what to make of me,” he laughs. “But they’re loving it and we’re both getting used to each other.” From the comedy club scene, he’ll take the show to Broadway/Off Broadway, HBO then to public schools and jails. “And they have no attention span whatsoever,” he says of the latter, “so the comedy club is getting me there.”

From John’s shows we are given fragments of his childhood. In *Sexaholix...A Love Story*, he recollects the Christmas his father went outside to save suicidal Santa from the roof, but Santa jumped, which meant no Christmas. John’s consolation prize? He could read the encyclopedias! (I’m not doing the story justice --you have to watch it yourself.) There are a myriad of memories John shares that show the type of father his was, I was interested in knowing what kind of father he is to his daughter, Allegra, 15, and son, Lucas (Ryder Lee), 14. “Ya know, I’m pretty great, I gotta say. I’m the dad I wanted to have. I mean, I’m still going to mess them up somehow,

because you can’t help it.” As you might expect, John confirms that he is the fun-loving, jokester kind of dad, who doesn’t take anything seriously --to the point that his kids often tell him to be serious. It’s not all fun and games though; he has high expectations of them, which, he tells me, they’re living up to. While living under his roof they have to be on a team, read a lot, and play two musical instruments each (John doesn’t play any, his parents let him quit).

This December, the Leguizamo household will be filled with music. They celebrate both Christmas and Hanukkah (John is Catholic and Justine is Jewish), so they’ll be spinning the dreidel, lighting the menorah, and singing Christmas songs. “My cousin has them [songs] all printed and we all sing by the piano. My daughter is playing [the piano] so great now. We get the whole family together --a lot of dancing for Christmas, the Jewish end and the Latin Catholic, all together. Latin people dance a lot longer. We just keep that going,” he says with a smile. It sounds like John has created the warm and loving household he sought as a child.

Next year, John has six movies coming out, including *The Nest* with Tiny Fey and Amy Poehler written by *Saturday Night Live*’s Paula Pell. In it he plays Tina Fey’s “first” and basically becomes her stalker after. “It’s going to be funny as hell. Amy and Tiny are two sisters, one was the goodie-goodie, one was the bad, naughty girl and now they’re trying to switch up later in their lives.” This was his first time working with the *SNL*-ers. “They’re the funniest ladies I’ve ever worked with in my entire life.



And they're a pleasure. Hanging out with them is like dying and going to heaven. They're funny all the time. I had the best time ever," he says. John has reprised his role in the *Ice Age* franchise as Sid the sloth and is currently working on that, in addition to a number of other projects he's balancing.

Show business has embraced John and granted him a stage to act out the show he was born to present. So, what's the best part about it all? "There's a lot of good things. But I say the top three are, when you do great work, I mean, it's like religion, man. There's no other high in the world that meets it for me. Secondly, working

with great artists, man. That's always such a beautiful thing. I feel so lucky and privileged when I work with great artists and I'm hanging out with them. People who are questioning the world, people who want to make the world a better place than when they came into it. And three, it's fun, man," he laughs. "When you're doing great work it's so much fun. When you're doing bad work, there's nothing worse either." Acting out has acted in his favor, considerably. John has spun his humble beginnings into a fruitful career making people laugh and sating his inherent desire to perform – I would say that John has definitely gotten the last laugh.

Follow John on Twitter @JohnLeguizamo. [ML](#)

## One for the books

"*Ghetto Klown* is coming out (fall of next year) as a graphic novel. I'm so excited." Are you going to go to Comic-Con? "You bet! I wanna be at all the Comic-Cons! [We laugh.] Wherever there's a Comic-Con, you'll see me there in my booth. I'm very proud of that, because I think that's my masterpiece of my work, the one that lent itself to the most, too... Onstage people had to imagine everything, but in a graphic novel you're going to see all these little details that you never expected. I can't wait." [You can watch *Ghetto Klown* on HBO On Demand.]



# ENCORE! ENCORE! ENCORE!

## Where do you go when you're in Miami?

"Miami Beach! I gotta eat my Cuban food when I'm down there. I gotta get my Cuban on. We shot *Chef* there, too. I always go to Versailles. I've been doing a lot of press there for all the movies, like *Ride Along*. Universal learned that it's an important demographic, so you do a but I did it

with Kevin Hart and Ice Cube. I went on every Latin TV show -- it was so much fun. And then I did it with Keanu Reeves [for *John Wick*]."

## Favorite TV Show

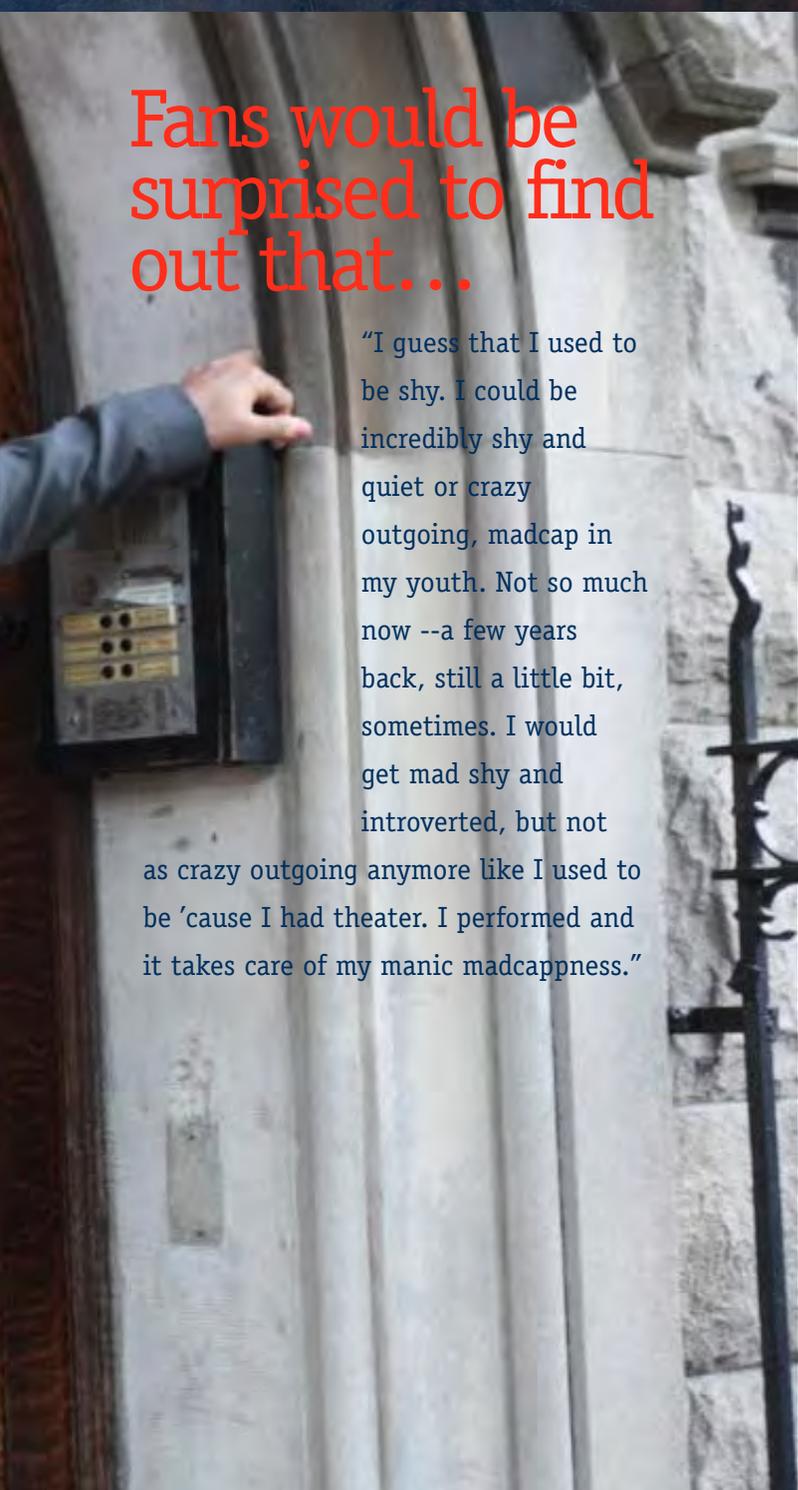
"*Breaking Bad* -- that was one of the greatest things I've ever seen. I'm doing a movie in London with Bryan Cranston in January for about two months. I love *Mad Men*. I love the first year of *The Walking Dead*. I like a lot of what I saw on *Girls*. I love what she's doing with that. So creative. *Modern Family* with my kids is always a hoot. I watch *The League* with my son," he chuckles. "It's funny. Definitely a kid show. *Tosh.O*. I like movies more. I love movies and plays."

## Favorite Movie

"Of the new batch, I guess, *Force Majeure* -- the one that won Cannes. It's unbelievable. You gotta go see it. It will blow your mind. I think that's the best right now. And plays, I love *This is Our Youth*, it's fantastic. Kieran Culkin is incredible. I really enjoyed the hell outta it."

## I read you were really unhappy doing *ER*.

"It was hard. I loved the writers, the talent, the directors. I had a great time. It was too much work. I'm used to doing theater, independent films, and films and you give 1,000% for a month. This. Was. Every. Week. (He bangs his hand on the table after each word.) Every. Day. I was getting depressed. It was 16 hours every day. I didn't see my family... Those people earn their keep, man. That is the hardest gig I ever had in my life."



Fans would be surprised to find out that...

"I guess that I used to be shy. I could be incredibly shy and quiet or crazy outgoing, madcap in my youth. Not so much now -- a few years back, still a little bit, sometimes. I would get mad shy and introverted, but not

as crazy outgoing anymore like I used to be 'cause I had theater. I performed and it takes care of my manic madcappness."