

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Latin Lesson Late in Coming

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 18th, 2019

It's axiomatic: the better the performer, the more difficult it is to give him the respect he deserves. Body language often exceeds the verbal one in expressiveness, because words elude, even when they don't exactly fail. At the very least, they can be hard to find, especially when it comes to someone as eccentric and magnetic as John Leguizamo.

I may be the last critic on the planet to not have seen Leguizamo on stage (or on camera) before now, and when it comes to his *Latin History for Morons*, currently sizzling on the grill at the Ahmanson Theatre, the temptation is to go rogue.

His performance is the most imaginative, rude, funny, coaxing and frank lesson in American history to occupy a major American stage, for which a lot of credit is also due to director Tony Taccone, who helped him create it a few years back at Berkeley Rep and who has shepherded it ever since.



John Leguizamo in a cocky moment in *Latin History for Morons* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

When I use the word “occupy,” I mean it as in “seize,” the military sense. Not the only or the first person to do so. Luis Valdez, in his radical days circa 1970, when his stage was a street corner or an open field in Tulare, had some of his own stinging satire to dish out. One of his satirical *actos* (one-acts) bore something of a connection to *Latin History*. Its title was *No Saco Nada de la Escuela* (*I Get Nothing Out of School*). Luis, meet Leguizamo's son Buddy. All these years later, Buddy gets nothing out of school either, however upscale and fancy the private school he attends might be. What he still gets is bullying and rude awakenings.

Unlike the Valdez sad sacks, however, Buddy has a famous comedian for a father. And when Buddy's Mom decrees that Dad must solve this crisis (“do something, John”), it's Dad to the rescue.

Sort of. Leguizamo thinks he has just the ticket for Buddy: find a major Latino hero to supersede all the others, right? And so begins an assault on America's revisionist past. As his search uncovers more and more of the sanitizing that took place in Buddy's history books, Dad wants to correct the misperception of what *really* has been going on since that famous so-called War of Independence. Explaining it all, however, is another matter. It gets complicated, especially when Dad, guns blazing, fumbles and digresses in his stumble to the rescue.



John Leguizamo at his useful blackboard in *Latin History for Morons* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Watching this unspool is a whole lot of fun — I’m talking broad, blunt, astute, with occasional dabs of sly political fun. Fun, because Leguizamo, like a dog with a bone, never lets go of his truth, his duty as a Dad, his convictions or his reality, which he finally admits he’s not very good at defending (“I’m from the f*****g ’hood, man”). No wonder he’s so spectacularly bad at *explaining* it to his befuddled son.

With the help of a few props, some colored chalk, a blackboard and that bald, unvarnished humor, we eventually get the picture, which necessitates getting the picture of Leguizamo’s now thoroughly manicured upper middle class family life.



There is his very smart, no-nonsense Jewish wife in charge of John Leguizamo sweating it in sending out the family warning signals; there is his teen-age *Latin History for Morons* at The daughter with the headphones sprouting out of her ears like Ahmanson Theatre.

antennae that broadcast everything good or bad that’s going on within the household at any given moment; and then there’s Buddy, still in quest of that hero that Dad keeps promising—and failing—to deliver. Buddy’s last-resort defense against Dad’s dismal disappointments is slamming the door to his room in Dad’s face.

You’ll be amazed at how many fruitless miles of historical malapropism and misappropriation we morons in the audience get to cover in that remarkable intermissionless search led by Fearless John—and how adventurous this journey of discovery turns out to be. There’s plenty of self-flagellation, reconstituted battles, more self-flagellation, stacking up of merits and demerits on both sides—perhaps, let’s face it, a few more than we or Buddy need or deserve. But let it pass.

To call this theatre is not incorrect. It even has a shoehorned happy ending. (No spoilers.) But theatre is a bit of a misnomer. It’s stand-up, pure and simple. Or not so simple. It has the rewards of stand-up with some sideswipes at a whole shooting gallery of other subjects.

Fun? Yes, but don’t say you weren’t forewarned. You do have to see Leguizamo at work and in person to enjoy it. Descriptions alone don’t cut it.

Top image: John Leguizamo at his blackboard in Latin History for Morons at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Photos by Matthew Murphy

WHAT: *Latin History for Morons*

WHERE: Ahmanson Theatre, Music Center, 135 No. Grand Ave., Los Angeles CA 90012

WHEN: Wednesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends October 20.

Exceptions: NO 2pm show Sept. 14. NO 1pm show Sept. 22 & 29. No 8pm show Sept. 28 &

Oct.12. NO 6:30pm show Oct. 6 & 20. Added 2pm show on Sept. 24 & on Oct. 10 (in lieu of 8pm). No public performances at all on Oct. 17.

HOW: Tickets \$35–\$145 (subject to change), available at (213) 972-4400 or online at CenterTheatreGroup.org or in person at the CTG Box Office at The Ahmanson. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf Community: Info and charge at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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