



# LEARNING GUIDE

JOHN LEGUIZAMO'S  
**The OTHER  
AMERICANS**

BY JOHN LEGUIZAMO  
DIRECTED BY RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE PUBLIC THEATER

ON THE FICHANDLER STAGE  
OCTOBER 18 – NOVEMBER 24, 2024

## CONTENTS

The Play  
Meet the Playwright  
From the Director's Notebook  
Meet the Castro Family  
The American Dream  
Setting: From Jackson Heights to Forest Hills  
Culture Corner: Food and Salsa Dancing  
The Modern American Tragedy  
Three Big Questions  
Resources

***"Forest Hills is the upgrade we deserved.  
Nice big house with plenty of room."***

— Nelson, *The Other Americans*

# THE PLAY

**Nelson Castro** is a Colombian-American laundromat owner grappling with a failing business and buried secrets. It's 1998 in Forest Hills, Queens. Nelson and the whole family are excited but on edge as they await his son **Nick's** return home. He's spent the past eight months at a psychiatric hospital recovering from a traumatic encounter.

Everyone wants Nick to "get better." Nelson is determined for Nick to take over the family laundromats, while his mother **Patti** pushes him to finish college. But Nick has his own ideas, and the pressure mounts. Trapped between his parents' conflicting expectations, Nick can barely breathe, feeling the walls of his family home closing in.

Meanwhile, Nelson is drowning in financial trouble—late house payments, Nick's medical bills, and his daughter **Toni's** upcoming wedding. Nelson is desperate to show his family that everything's under control, but the life he's built for them could crumble if he can't convince his half-sister **Norma** to give him another loan or make one last deal.

As he fights to save all he's worked for, will Nelson achieve success for his loved ones, or will the consequences of his choices catch up to them all?



## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The playwright, John Leguizamo, originally named this play *Laundromat* before settling on *The Other Americans*.

Why do you think he chose this title?

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT JOHN LEGUIZAMO

John Leguizamo is a multi-faceted artist with a career and awards spanning theater, film, producing, and playwriting. Born in Bogotá, Colombia and raised in the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens, New York, he began his career playing minor roles in films like *Die Hard 2* and making appearances on TV.

Frustrated by the roles that Hollywood offered Latino actors, Leguizamo turned to the stage and began writing one-man shows. He used these shows as an opportunity to defuse and debunk Latino stereotypes. His first show, *Mambo Mouth*, was filmed for HBO after it debuted off-Broadway. It won multiple awards including an Obie Award and a Vanguard Award.

Leguizamo has written and performed many more one-man shows like *Latin History for Morons* and has appeared in films like *Moulin Rouge!* and *Romeo + Juliet*. Two of Leguizamo's most well-known credits among younger audiences are for his voice acting as Sid the Sloth in the *Ice Age* movies and Bruno in Disney's *Encanto*. In April 2024, Leguizamo launched his own streaming service called "The Network" which he describes as "a platform for diverse, quality stories."



— John Leguizamo  
Source: NPR

# MEET THE CASTRO FAMILY

## ● PATTI, THE MOTHER

Wife, mother, part-time accountant, and amazing dancer, Patti takes care of everyone. She loves her children and wants them to be happy and safe.

## ○ NELSON, THE FATHER

A Colombian-American who owns multiple laundromat locations across New York City, Nelson is always on the lookout for the next business deal to grow his empire for his family and live the American Dream.

## ● NICK, THE SON

Recovering from a recent traumatic incident, Nick is struggling to balance his parents' expectations with his own dreams and his health. He inherited a love of dance from his parents and wants to be a professional choreographer.

## ● TONI, THE DAUGHTER

The eldest child, Toni is a hardworking, bright young woman who is tired of being overlooked especially when it comes to the family business. She is engaged to Eddie.



Photo of the cast of *The Other Americans* by Tony Powell.



— Ruben Santiago-Hudson  
Source: Broadway Podcast Network

## FROM THE **DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK**

“This story is important because it is an American story... So often, the Latine community is treated like the ‘other’ community when in fact, there is no concern or problem that people face in life that doesn’t happen in the Castro house.”

— Ruben Santiago-Hudson



## UNDERSTANDING THROUGH VISUAL ART

Identify one image in this mural that symbolizes a piece of the American Dream. Then, as a class, share what symbol you focused on and discuss how it represents the modern American Dream.

# THE AMERICAN DREAM

Nelson Castro, a son of Latino immigrants and a business owner, dreams of financial success and equal opportunity for himself and his family. The play explores the impact of his relentless pursuit of the ideal American life.

The term “American Dream” was first coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America*. According to Sarah Churchwell, author of *Behold, America*, Adams saw the American Dream as “equality, justice, and democracy.” He warned against excessive focus on material wealth that, he felt, made the U.S. stray from these important founding ideals. However, in the 1950s, after the Cold War, the American Dream came to mean something different.

Today, we understand the American Dream to mean that anyone, regardless of background, can achieve success through hard work and determination. Since the 1950s, this theme has permeated American culture, seen in classics like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Great Gatsby*, as well as modern films like *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

American theater also explores this theme in plays like Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, August Wilson’s *Fences*, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and now John Leguizamo’s *The Other Americans*. These works often wrestle with the promise versus the reality of the American Dream.



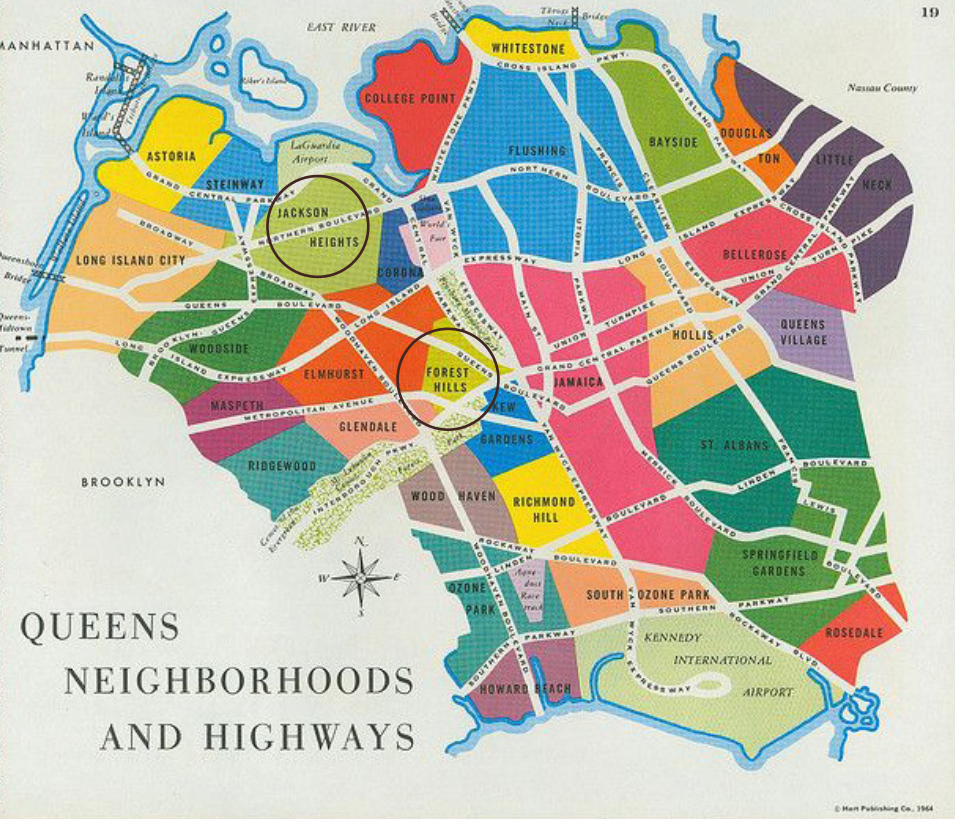
— Notions of the American Dream Today

Source: The National Parks Service, created by Groundswell Youth

## FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

In an interview with *Forbes Magazine*, playwright John Leguizamo spoke about the contradictions of the American Dream.

“The American Dream is full of loopholes and contradictions, but America is still the only place where you can start with nothing and end up having everything... however, there are some rules. Be sure to be self-made, but come from a good family. Or, it’s even better if you come from humble beginnings and make it huge; but then let us knock you down so we can build ya up again. It’s anything goes—as long as you are successful. And you can’t be too successful as long as you are humble and make everyone feel you are equal.” – John Leguizamo



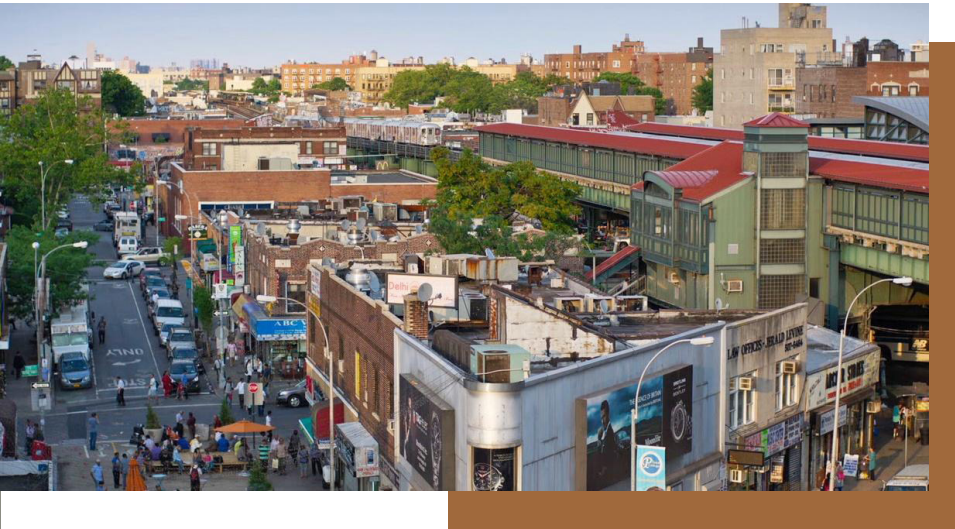
QUEENS  
NEIGHBORHOODS  
AND HIGHWAYS

SETTING:  
**FROM JACKSON  
HEIGHTS TO  
FOREST HILLS**

**“We’re already behind on the mortgage by \$75,000. In Jackson Heights we would have stayed afloat and not had a mortgage.”**

– Patti, *The Other Americans*

— The Castros’ old neighborhood, Jackson Heights



Sometimes the American Dream is symbolized by a single-family home with a yard and a white picket fence. For Nelson, success meant moving his family from their home in Jackson Heights to a house with a yard in Forest Hills, a predominantly white neighborhood.

Both Jackson Heights and Forest Hills were designed as exclusive New York City suburbs with rows of single-family residences. However, in the 1960s, New York City Mayor John Lindsay announced plans to build low-income, public housing throughout the city. The Forest Hills homeowners association fought against the development and succeeded in maintaining private ownership of the properties in the neighborhood. Jackson Heights residents also resisted at first

but eventually the mayor’s project moved forward. As a result, the population of Jackson Heights exploded.



When the U.S. changed its immigration laws in 1965, thousands of immigrants settled in Jackson Heights. Today, Jackson Heights is considered one of the most diverse areas in the country with 167 different languages spoken across the neighborhood. Forest Hills remains a majority white neighborhood.

In 1997, when the Castros moved, a house in Forest Hills cost approximately \$238,000 while Jackson Heights had a median price of \$206,000. The jump of \$32,000 would be difficult for any family to make, especially when taking out a brand-new mortgage.

— The Castros’ new neighborhood, Forest Hills

# CULTURAL CONNECTION: FOOD & SALSA

Two common expressions of culture are cuisine and dance. Patti and Nelson are Americans born in America, and they share their Latino heritage with their children through food and salsa dancing. For Nick's return home, Patti cooks several traditional Puerto Rican and Colombian dishes including:



## SOFRITO

Cooking base that gives most Latino food its flavor; it traditionally includes onions, peppers, garlic, and cilantro

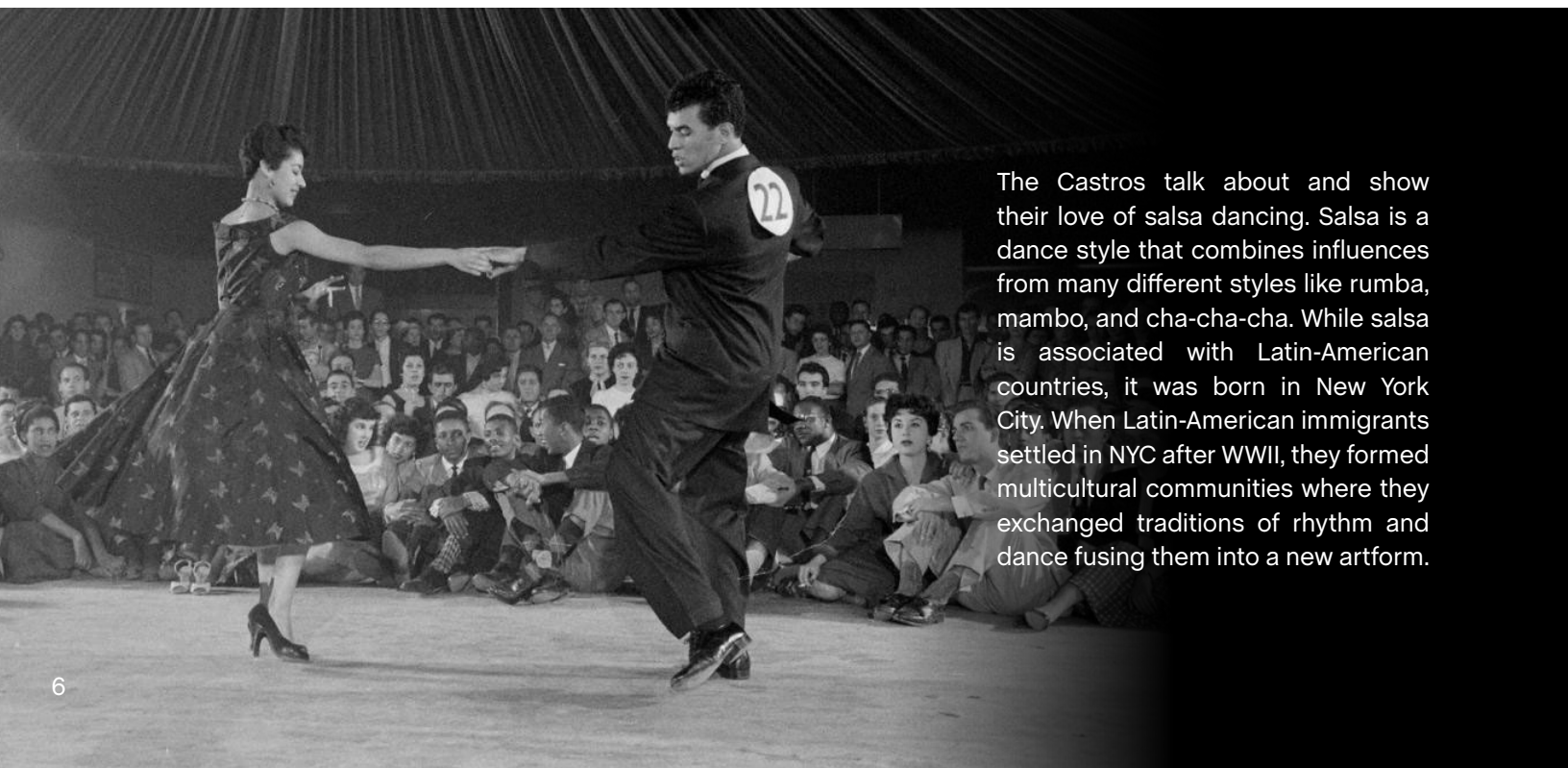
## PERNIL

Slow roasted, dry rubbed pork-shoulder often served with rice



## CHICHARRON

Crispy fried pork-belly typically enjoyed with a squeeze of lime



The Castros talk about and show their love of salsa dancing. Salsa is a dance style that combines influences from many different styles like rumba, mambo, and cha-cha-cha. While salsa is associated with Latin-American countries, it was born in New York City. When Latin-American immigrants settled in NYC after WWII, they formed multicultural communities where they exchanged traditions of rhythm and dance fusing them into a new artform.

# THE MODERN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, most dramatic works can be divided into two categories: comedy or tragedy. In his work *Poetics*, Aristotle outlines some characteristics that differentiate the two styles.

Tragedies are serious works that analyze the complexities of the human condition.

A tragedy's protagonist is known as a tragic hero. Modern tragedy centers around everyday characters, typically from the middle or lower class, as they deal with societal pressure as well as their own flaws. A classical tragic hero has an obvious flaw that motivates the gods to bestow a tragic, inescapable fate on the hero. The flaw is less clear-cut in modern tragedy. Often, the modern hero's tragic flaw is a combination of external and internal conflicts mixed with unfortunate timing.

Nelson Castro meets the definition of the modern tragic hero. The son of immigrants, he comes from a humble background, running laundromats for a living. He has plenty of ambition. He also has flaws. He is stubborn and refuses to listen to his family, forcing them to watch or go along with his vision for the future. However, he is not entirely responsible for his fate. There are multiple societal factors at work in *The Other Americans*.

Rick Foucheux and Nancy Robinette in *Death of a Salesman* (2008).

## MENTAL HEALTH

A mental health crisis is difficult for a family to navigate. As you watch the play, notice the variety of factors—generation, culture, gender, personal experience, denial, etc.—that make it difficult for the members of the Castro family to speak openly about Nick's struggles with mental health.

**If you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health or thoughts of suicide, help is available. Speak to someone today. Call 988, the national crisis and suicide hotline.**

# THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

Why do we watch or read dramas?

2

To what degree is the American Dream achievable?

3

Where do you see love in *The Other Americans*?

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience.

To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the seat indicated on your ticket.
- Ushers are there to help you!
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms, and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games, pictures, or recording.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry, and gasp. However, don't distract the performers onstage.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Intermission is the best time to discuss the show and visit the restroom.
- If you must leave during the show, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Be sure to applaud at the end! During a musical, audiences sometimes clap after a song or dance. If you love the show or a performer, you can give a standing ovation. The actors bow to thank you.

# RESOURCES

Beachy, Grant. 19 Dec. 2018. *Edible Michiana*, [https://ediblemichiana.ediblecommunities.com/sites/default/files/styles/recipe\\_banner/public/images/recipe/cuban-pork-shoulder-recipe-with-skin.jpg?itok=kd\\_YSa\\_S&c=d93e1aac6db73ffa2adb5316a16cce2b](https://ediblemichiana.ediblecommunities.com/sites/default/files/styles/recipe_banner/public/images/recipe/cuban-pork-shoulder-recipe-with-skin.jpg?itok=kd_YSa_S&c=d93e1aac6db73ffa2adb5316a16cce2b). Accessed 25 Sept. 2025.

Borelli, Gabriel. "Americans Are Split over the State of the American Dream." *Pew Research Center*, 2 July 2024, [www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/02/americans-are-split-over-the-state-of-the-american-dream/](http://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/02/americans-are-split-over-the-state-of-the-american-dream/).

Freedman, Max, et al. "School Colors Episode 3: 'The Battle of Forest Hills.'" *NPR*, 20 May 2022, [www.npr.org/2022/05/19/1100253582/school-colors-episode-3-the-battle-of-forest-hills](http://www.npr.org/2022/05/19/1100253582/school-colors-episode-3-the-battle-of-forest-hills).

Garcia, Maria. "The Roots of Salsa Dance." *CONTRA*, Activist Dance Theater, 28 May 2024, [www.contra-tiempo.org/blog/2024/5/28/the-roots-of-salsa-dance](http://www.contra-tiempo.org/blog/2024/5/28/the-roots-of-salsa-dance).

Hardy, Fred. 30 Aug. 2023. *Serious Eats*, [https://www.serious-eats.com/thumb/w1lW4fRncDaOEX6vw6UtiTxIPxk=750x0/filters:no\\_upscale\(\):max\\_bytes\(150000\):strip\\_icc\(\).format\(webp\)/20230724-SEA-Chicharrones-FredHardy-001-23b06c524d914932a8ae12e2be8c565a.jpg](https://www.serious-eats.com/thumb/w1lW4fRncDaOEX6vw6UtiTxIPxk=750x0/filters:no_upscale():max_bytes(150000):strip_icc().format(webp)/20230724-SEA-Chicharrones-FredHardy-001-23b06c524d914932a8ae12e2be8c565a.jpg). Accessed 25 Sept. 2025.

Hevesi, Dennis. "In All 5 Boroughs, a Robust Market." *The New York Times*, 28 Mar. 1999, [www.nytimes.com/1999/03/28/realestate/in-all-5-boroughs-a-robust-market.html#:~:text=The%20average%20price%20for%20a%20three-bedroom](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/28/realestate/in-all-5-boroughs-a-robust-market.html#:~:text=The%20average%20price%20for%20a%20three-bedroom).

IMDb. "John Leguizamo - Biography." IMDb.com, [www.imdb.com/name/nm0000491/bio/?ref=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000491/bio/?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm). Accessed 25 Sept. 2024.

"John Leguizamo on the American Dream." *Forbes Magazine*, 19 June 2013, [www.forbes.com/2007/03/20/john-leguizamo-dream-oped-cx\\_mlm\\_dream0307\\_0322e-guizamo.html](http://www.forbes.com/2007/03/20/john-leguizamo-dream-oped-cx_mlm_dream0307_0322e-guizamo.html).

"The Original Meanings of the 'American Dream' and 'America First' Were Starkly Different from How We Use Them Today." *Smithsonian.Com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Oct. 2018, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/behold-america-american-dream-slogan-book-sarah-churchwell-180970311/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/behold-america-american-dream-slogan-book-sarah-churchwell-180970311/).

Murphy, Emma. "10 Films That Represent the American Dream." *The Culture Trip*, 15 Nov. 2016, [theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/california/articles/10-films-that-best-represent-the-american-dream](http://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/california/articles/10-films-that-best-represent-the-american-dream).

Murtoff, Jennifer. "American Dream". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 3 Sep. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Dream>. Accessed 24 September 2024.

Nevious, James. "The Transformation of Jackson Heights." *Curbed NY*, 19 Apr. 2017, [ny.curbed.com/2017/4/19/15328342/jackson-heights-queens-history](http://ny.curbed.com/2017/4/19/15328342/jackson-heights-queens-history).

Neysa. 7 Dec. 2016. *Latin Mom Meals*, [https://latinamommeals.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/IMG\\_8704.jpg](https://latinamommeals.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/IMG_8704.jpg). Accessed 25 Sept. 2024.

Reyes, Raul A. "John Leguizamo Was Ready to Lead a Dramatic TV Series - so He Helped Create a Platform to Stream It." *NBCNews.Com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 18 Sept. 2024, [www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/john-leguizamo-was-ready-lead-dramatic-tv-series-helped-create-platfor-rcna171459](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/john-leguizamo-was-ready-lead-dramatic-tv-series-helped-create-platfor-rcna171459).

Sewall, Richard B. and Conversi, Leonard W. "tragedy". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 Aug. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature>. Accessed 24 September 2024.

Woelfle, Alice. "Actor John Leguizamo's New TV Docuseries Spotlights Latino Culture." *NPR*, 13 Apr. 2023, [www.npr.org/2023/04/13/1169130814/actor-john-leguizamos-new-tv-docuseries-spotlights-latino-culture](http://www.npr.org/2023/04/13/1169130814/actor-john-leguizamos-new-tv-docuseries-spotlights-latino-culture).

(Front Cover) Photo of John Leguizamo and Trey Santiago-Hudson for *The Other Americans* by Tony Powell.

(Back Cover) Photo of John Leguizamo and Luna Lauren Velez for *The Other Americans* by Tony Powell.

# CREDITS

Written by  
Esteban Marmolejo-Suarez, School Programs Fellow

Edited by  
Grant Emerson Harvey, Learning Engagement Manager  
Rebecca Campana, School Programs Manager

Designed by  
Kristopher Ingle, Graphic Designer

Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

*The Other Americans* is sponsored by  
Decker Anstrom and Sherry Hiemstra.



1101 Sixth Street SW  
Washington, DC 20024  
Phone: 202-554-9066