

\$CASINOAMERICA\$

Commenting on the Glorification of Greed



In his NEA award-winning performance piece *\$CASINOAMERICA\$*, Jose Torres Tama examines gambling as a metaphor for life in contemporary America. While commenting on a culture that glorifies greed, he declares that we are all gamblers in one way or another that “taking chances” is an intrinsic aspect of modern existence.

Some people take chances with their lives through sexual gambles in an age plagued by the AIDS virus. Others, such as the millions of immigrants who have descended upon this land for a chance at the

“American dream,” risk their cultural heritage and identity. The working class gamble their meager earnings on lottery tickets and slot machines to achieve instant wealth and prosperity at the expense of their soul and humanity.

Torres Tama weaves these concepts into a multi-layered performance collage, combining metaphoric prose, rituals of fire, and movement and incantations. At channel-surfing speed, he moves with physical and verbal dexterity from poetic drama to the hilariously absurd and delivers the hour-long piece with various personae, sculpting a visceral tableau of haunting images that leave an indelible impression.

JOSE TORRES TAMA

Since 1995, Jose Torres Tama has been touring across the country with solo shows that thrive on a fusion of spoken word prose, bilingual poetry, rituals of fire, symbolic movement, and exaggerated personae, creating spectacles that are visually dynamic and politically charged. Add to this cauldron a heady dose of hilariously absurd observations on consumer culture and you have a unique vision coming from a New Jersey/New York bred Ecuadorian-born brujo performance artist based in New Orleans.

The recipient of a Louisiana Theater Fellowship, he has also received a "Regional Artist Project" Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to develop **\$CASINOAMERICA\$**, his acclaimed piece examining a culture that glorifies greed. His performances have been presented in Mexico, Eastern Europe and extensively across the USA at venues such as Performance Space 122 in New York; El Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, CA; DiverseWorks in Houston, TX; Tigertail Productions in Miami, FL; The Arts Exchange in Atlanta, GA; Cornell, Duke, Louisiana State, Dillard, Spelman, and Rutgers Universities. As an arts educator, he is dedicated to working in minority communities with Latino and African American teens through his **Youth Performance Projects** that introduce performance art and poetry as a means of self-empowerment.

These projects have been profiled on National Public Radio and supported through grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Performance Network, and the Philip Morris Foundation. **Youth Performance Projects** have been realized at centers such as MECA in Houston, TX; The Walker's Point Center for the Arts in Milwaukee, WI; and the Center for Cultural Exchange in Portland, ME. In addition, he is a contributing editor to *ART PAPERS*, a national arts magazine published in Atlanta for which he writes a column on performance art and politics, and he has written for the *Chicago New Art Examiner*, *The Mexico City Times*, and *Urban Latino Magazine* published in New York. His poetry has been published in *From A Bend in The River*, an anthology of 100 New Orleans poets and in the Mesechabe Surregional Press.

Jose Torres Tama - ArteFuturo Productions

1427 Dauphine Street, New Orleans, LA 70116
504.948.4607 jose@torrestama.com

www.torrestama.com



QUOTES FROM REVIEWS

Jose Torres Tama treads that dangerously vague turf of performance art gracefully... He takes Latino life on a magical mystery tour with dexterity and daring.

---The Village Voice (New York)

Torres Tama is both a versatile writer who can be lyrically evocative as well as biting humor, and an impressive performer.

---The Philadelphia Inquirer

a remarkable performance...

---The Shepherd Express Metro (Milwaukee Weekly)

He is a warrior for "gringostroika," the economic restructuring of gringo-land.

---The San Diego Union-Tribune

Torres Tama is a diversely talented performer. He can switch accents in the space of a syllable, emote humor or existential pain in the blink of an eye, recite Shakespeare and rap in the length of a breath.

---The Anchorage Daily News

"CasinoAmerica" knows how to keep the eye and ear stimulated and the mind engaged... Torres Tama's combination of imagination and technique is impressive.

---The Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

Dressed in black but wearing a red cape as he dons the role of El Mephisto Moderno, Torres Tama takes the audience on a ride through human weakness. It is often funny, and sadly true.

---Art Papers (Atlanta)

His dramatic monologues maintain that notion of chance and mirror our culture's exploitation of one another and our apparent oblivion to that invasive cancer of greed.

---New Orleans Art Review

2002 SPRING/SUMMER RESIDENCIES & TOUR

New Orleans, LA: DramaRama Theater Festival

At the Contemporary Arts Center

Premiere of *American Mantra & Other Rituals* Performance on January 19

New Orleans: The Ogden Museum of Art/University of New Orleans

Month-long Residency from February 4 - March 2

Youth Performance Project at McDonogh 15 in French Quarter

Miami, FL: Tigertail Productions, ARTEMIS & Abriendo Puertas

Three-week residency from March 4 - 25

Youth Performance Project

\$CASINOAMERICA\$ Performances March 15 - 16

Baton Rouge, LA: The Baton Rouge Gallery

One-week Residency from May 13 - June 1

Premiere of *The Dream Knows More Than You* Performances May 17 - 18
and Dramatic Arts Workshops May 14 - 19

Anchorage, AK: Out North Contemporary Art House

Three-week NPN Residency from June 10 - 30

Youth Performance Project

\$CASINOAMERICA\$ Performances June 13-14

Miami, FL: Tigertail Productions, ARTEMIS & Abriendo Puertas

Youth Performance Project from July 8 - 28

New York, NY: The Nuyorican Poets' Cafe

In Exile Close to the Equator Performances from Aug. 22 - 24 & 29 - Sept. 1



RECENT TOURING HISTORY

2000

- **Performa 2000 International Festival**
Maribor, Slovenia
- **The Nuyorican Poets' Cafe**
New York, NY
- **Touchstone Theatre**
Bethlehem, PA
- **Pregones Theatre**
Bronx, NY
- **MECA**
Houston, TX
- **Walker's Point center for the Arts**
Milwaukee, WI
- **Centro Hispano**
Madison, WI

1999

- **Cornell University**
Ithaca, NY
- **Rutgers University**
New Brunswick, NJ
- **Tennessee Williams Literary Festival**
New Orleans, LA
- **The Nuyorican Poets' Cafe**
New York, NY
- **The Philadelphia Fringe Festival**
Philadelphia, PA
- **Center for Cultural Exchange**
Portland, ME
- **The New Genre Festival**
Tulsa, OK
- **Louisiana State University**
Baton Rouge, LA

1998

- **Dillard University**
New Orleans, LA
- **New York International Fringe Festival**
New York, NY
- **Multi-Cultural Performance Festival**
Maribor, Slovenia
- **Contemporary Arts Center**
New Orleans, LA
- **Teatro Galeria Manny Maldonado**
Brooklyn, NY

1997

- **Duke University Institute of the Arts**
Durham, NC
- **Nuyorican Poets Cafe**
New York, NY
- **Theater for the New City**
New York, NY
- **Walker's Point Center for the Arts**
Milwaukee, WI
- **MECA & DiverseWorks Artspace**
Houston, TX

1996

- **Arts Festival of Atlanta**
Atlanta, GA
- **Theater for the New City**
New York, NY
- **Out North Contemporary Art House**
Anchorage, AK
- **Arizona State University West**
Phoenix, AZ
- **Los Talleres Cultural Center**
Coyoacan, Mexico

1995

- **Performance Space 122**
New York, NY
- **The Public Theatre's Community Arts Festival**
New York, NY
- **Centro Cultural De La Raza**
San Diego, CA
- **X-Teresa Alternative Art Center**
Mexico City, Mexico
- **Tulane University**
New Orleans, LA

ARTIST STATEMENT



I consider myself a genuine citizen of the Americas, a hybrid offspring of cultures clashing on an experimental stage called *El Nuevo Mundo* (The New World). I was born in Ecuador, one of the smallest countries in South America, named after the imaginary Equatorial line that passes through it. My early childhood memories are of big torrential rains, giant pyramids of mangos at the market, and petite Indian women selling ripe halves of avocados at traffic lights.

Like most South Americans, I am a *Mestizo*, the term used to describe the post-Colombian race created by the Spanish Conquistadors' violent fusion with the indigenous people of the Americas. Thus, I am walking cultural mosaic with Spanish, German, and Quicha native blood coursing through my veins.

In 1968 at the tender age of seven, I arrived in the United States with my mother, and just as many immigrants before us, we made the journey from Third World to First World in search of a better life--in search of a dream. We migrated to the New York City area, where my rather harsh and dramatic rites of passage through urban American culture began. I passed from South America to North America, from a metaphoric reality to one where function dictates form, and from romantic Spanish to business English.

Since 1984, I have lived in New Orleans. It is the only place in the U.S. where I feel at peace with my Latino identity. Its Caribbean sensibility feeds my cultural heritage, and my creative work has been nurtured by this profound sense of belonging. Above all, I hold steadfast to a romantic notion that as an artist I can initiate dialogue with my work and be instrumental in raising consciousness for social change.

Jose Torres Tama

THE MORNING CALL

SATURDAY
NOVEMBER 4, 2000
No. 39,479

50c
©2000
The Morning Call Inc.
All Rights Reserved

THE LEHIGH VALLEY'S GREATEST NEWSPAPER

Theater Review

By **GEOFF GEHMAN**
Of The Morning Call

'Casinoamerica' pays off with big entertainment at Touchstone

"Casinoamerica" is a high-stakes gamble that pays big, and often. Gambling with stereotypes, language and body language, writer/performer Jose Torres Tama leads a savagely funny, savagely provocative tour through the purgatory of gambling.

One gamble is mixing archetypes with autobiography. As El Mephisto Moderno, a Zorro-masked Satanic guide illuminated by flashlight, Tama recites prose poetry of twisted song lyrics ("Sympathy for the Devil") and cultural slogans ("I'm just a rebel without applause"). Playing himself, he jokes about the risk of being an Ecuadorian teen among Anglos in Jersey City, N.J. "I learned to speak English with a perfect accent," he recalls, "but my permanent suntan fooled no one."

Another gamble is disarming charged material with detached impressions. A gifted mimic, Tama nails Rod Serling's melodramatic gloominess, and Mae West's lazy sultriness. He speak-sings "American Pie" dryly, haughtily, as if he's dismissing the American Dream with martinis in a mansion on the hill.

Excellent technique makes another gamble less so. Tama often changes voices as easily as dialing a radio. What keeps him from speaking in tongues is crisp articulation and efficient gestures. Particularly remarkable is his portrait of his common-law aunt, a fellow Ecuadorian whose three children died in a fire in her Hoboken apartment. To simulate her broken body and shrunken spirit, Tama drags his knees across the floor. The choice is uncanny and unnerving.

Tama's willingness to go for broke makes him less a performance artist than a performance terrorist. He parodies Latino cliches broadly, indicating that "ole" derives from a Muslim prayer. He likes to improvise, guessing which spectators understand his jokes, reacting to reactions to his pain. After awkwardly assuming the cross-legged position of a sham guru, he insists: "You're laughin', and I'm hurtin'."

Director Kim Belchere is just as keen about details. Her fine tuning of sequences is exquisite. She makes sure that everything — voice, limbs, props, lights — ripples. Even something as old-fashioned as a hat-and-hand trick seems balletic, and resonant. Strangely enough, it links Tama to Sammy Davis Jr., a master of song, dance and gun twirling.

Jose Torres Tama will perform "Casinoamerica" at 8 p.m. today and Thursday through Nov. 11 at Touchstone Theatre, 321 E. Fourth St., Bethlehem. Tickets: \$15, \$12. 610-867-1689.

■ Contact Geoff Gehman
610-820-6516
geoff.gehman@mcall.com

Artist looks at the great American gamble

BY MARK WEDEL
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Jose Torres Tama will be coming to Kalamazoo College Saturday to ask us all to "just give sleaze a chance."

Actually it won't be him preaching the values of sleaze, it'll be "El Mephisto Moderno," a red-caped devil Tama portrays in his performance piece "\$CasinoAmerica\$." It's a one-man show by Tama detailing a land of casinos and gamblers where people are conned into getting something for nothing and where culture promises but never delivers instant gratification.

El Mephisto is "a combination of Dr. Fank-N-Furter (from 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show'), Joel Grey and a Latino game-show host," Tama said from his home in New Orleans. El Mephisto is the comic narrator but gives way as Tama plays other characters, such as a working-class Southerner tempted by easy casino winnings, the slick "Uncle Suave" and a character based on himself, the offspring of South American immigrants who gambled on the U.S. way of life.

Tama has lived in New Orleans since 1984, where he once juggled flaming batons for tourists in the French Quarter. He has worked as a street performer, visual artist, writer and art critic and has concentrated on performance art for the past seven years.

"The (performance art pieces) that I do are a mixture of spoken word, visual tableaux, rituals, incantations and dramatic movement," he said. "A lot of my themes deal with the mythology of the American dream."

He's taking "\$CasinoAmerica\$" on tour across the country. The one-man show is very multi-layered, Tama said. "Sometimes it looks like it could be a stand-up comedy piece, and then it gets rather conceptual," he said.

Tama wrote and began performing "\$CasinoAmerica\$" three years ago, inspired by the promise and



Jose Torres Tama stars as El Mephisto Moderno in "\$CasinoAmerica\$."

failure of legalized gambling that was offered the state of Louisiana in the early '90s as a way to bring in income lost through the state's declining oil industry.

Casinos are offered as a panacea to struggling communities, Tama said, but they can be a curse. The casinos in Louisiana were "shrouded with tremendous amounts of corruption," he said.

In May of 2000 the FBI indicted former Louisiana Gov. Edwin Edwards on 17 counts, including the selling of casino licenses, extortion and money-laundering. Harrah's in New Orleans filed for bankruptcy in 1995, closed its doors, and reopened in 1999. In January of 2001 Harrah's threatened to close again until it got a \$50 million tax break from the state. It got the break and then angered elected officials by cutting 148 jobs in July.

Casinos were to bring in jobs and tourist income, Tama said, but legalized gambling failed at that. Instead, residents became some of the casinos' most frequent customers,

he said. "The casinos prey upon the weakest, the classes that may find themselves in a situation where all they can hope for is that the dream of prosperity will come through the numbers, winning something in a slot machine. And if that's the case, it's a really sad situation," Tama said. "This is really a symptom of a culture in desperate need."

Then again, in his show Tama looks at how gambling is part of how people came to America, including his mother, who took a chance when she brought him from Ecuador to New York City in 1968. She married a man of Peruvian descent, and they saw Tama through Catholic schools and college.

"I'm a product of the American dream. My parents, through their hard work, were able to buy their home, own a car, own property. I know that that can work."

Casinos, on the other hand, symbolize the selling of an idea that one can get something for nothing, he said. He adds to this theme of spiritual bankruptcy "The Mickey

THEATER

\$CasinoAmerica\$ – A one-man show about greed, gambling, and consumerism in contemporary society, written and performed by Jose Torres Tama, professional performance artist born in Ecuador, now based on New Orleans, who explores the effects of media on race relations. 8 p.m. Sept. 29, Balch Playhouse, Kalamazoo College. Free, but tickets must be picked up in advance from the Theatre Arts office in the lower level of the Light Fine Arts Building. September is National Hispanic Month. Post-play discussion chaired by Dean John Fraire, director of admissions at WMU, and featuring members of the local Latino and Latina community. Tama will also meet with Kalamazoo Latino and Latina high school students. 337-7333.

Mousedom Culture, the Disneyfication of culture," he said. In other words, prefabricated culture.

"It's like feeding a starving army with Cool-Whip. That's happening across the country. Where's the real authentic experience? A lot of people come to New Orleans looking for an authentic experience, and they can still get that if they know where to look. But the Bourbon Street scene is just as polluted."

Tama also looks at aspects of race, sex and class in "\$CasinoAmerica\$," he said. "I examine the gamble for the American dream, that we're all basically descendants of immigrants and we're in a gamble for this dream. And also at the same time I explore what it means to have this proliferation of casinos at this point in time in our culture, and how that may be the result of a culture that thrives on instant gratification, and whether the American dream has really for many retreated into the possibilities of the long shot of the slot machine."

Fringe Festival Reviews

Rantings by an impressive talent

By Douglas J. Keating
INQUIRER THEATER CRITIC

Jose Torres Tama has a good reason for beginning *CASINOAMERICAS* dressed in the red cape of Mephistopholes. He believes that the rise of the gaming industry amounts to America's making a deal with Satan, trading corruption of the populace for jobs and tax revenue. As the devil, he urges us to "give sleaze a chance."

Tama's views on officially sanctioned gaming are hardly original, but don't let that prevent you from seeing him. Tama is both a versatile writer who can be lyrically evocative as well as bitingly humorous, and an impressive performer. He delivers his vivid monologue with passion and stage savvy.

A native of Ecuador who was raised in this country, Tama is both thoroughly American and conscious of his heritage. He intersperses his anticasinio rants with biographical material that, to me, provided the most interesting and heartfelt sections of the show. With or without the Mephistopholean cape, Tama is devilishly good.

CASINOAMERICAS plays today at 11 p.m. and tomorrow at 7 p.m. at Mum Puppettheatre, 115 Arch St.

■ **TEATRO/REPORTAJE**

'\$Casinoamérica\$', la otra cara de NY

REGRESA A ESCENA '\$Casinoamérica\$', un monólogo inspirado en el sueño americano y de las oportunidades que tienen todos los inmigrantes para venir a este país en busca de una mejor vida. La obra la presenta e interpreta el escritor y poeta ecuatoriano, José Torres Tama en los espacios del Teatro Galería Manny Maldonado, de Brooklyn.

GREYZA BAPTISTA

NUEVA YORK

Inspirada en el lujurioso sueño americano, José Torres Tama, director de la compañía de espectáculo *ArteFuturo Productions* dijo: "La obra cuenta de esas ilusiones y oportunidades que tomamos todos los inmigrantes para venir a este país, y tratar de reeditar un sueño que a veces para muchos de nosotros se ha convertido en una pesadilla, más allá del racismo y del choque cultural".

El lado oscuro de la Gran Manzana

Entre comedia, poesía, cuentos personales, poesía, ritos de fuego, y una alta carga de crítica social, el director cuenta su propia experiencia y el de muchos latinos inmigrantes que un día llegaron a un país muy diferente de donde habían venido.

También, será un homenaje a la memoria de las víctimas que perecieron en los siniestros incendios provocados en

GUÍA

CUÁNDO: 16 y 17 de noviembre, 8pm.

DÓNDE: Teatro Galería Manny Maldonado, 227 Roebling St., Brooklyn. Admisión gratuita.

INFORMACIÓN: 718-218-7640.

en los 70's y 80's, para obligar a que miles de inmigrantes negros, latinos, asiáticos se vieran en la necesidad de abandonar sus hogares.

Bajo esta línea, el comediante y poeta presenta la obra como una forma de reclamo y un tributo póstumo en memoria a esas víctimas que aún permanecen ignoradas. "La comunidad latina para esa época no tenía la voz, y mucho menos el voto o poder político que hoy día afortunadamente tiene para hacerse sentir y protestar contra las injusticias".

¿De qué se inspiró para titular la obra '\$Casinoamérica\$'?

El título es una especie de metáfora. En este país insisten en



■ **JOSÉ TORRES TAMA PRESENTA '\$Casinoamérica\$', un monólogo que muestra la realidad de los inmigrantes en Nueva York.**

solución para lograr el 'sueño americano', en caso de que no lo consigas con el sudor de tu frente. Es bastante triste y desolador que mucha gente caiga en esta trampa. Todo el tiempo este sistema insiste en matar tu verdadero espíritu. La ciudad se ha convertido en un ente tan comercial donde lo único que importa es el dinero. Es importante pero la vida no se resume solo en eso.

José Torre Tama es autor de varios cuentos. Por más de 14 años ha estado involucrado en el teatro experimental y siete años en la docencia. "Actualmente me encuentro promocionando *The Youth Performed Project*". Es bastante

nar el talento latino. El proyecto enseña técnicas de como los jóvenes pueden expresar su creatividad, y que pueden hacer ellos mismos para conseguir la manera de expresar sus poemas y escribir sus propios monólogos."

'\$Casinoamérica\$' se presentó en Pennsylvania el año pasado en distintos centros estudiantiles y en el *Nuyorican Poets Café* en Manhattan. Este fin de semana se presenta en dos únicas funciones en los espacios del Teatro Galería Manny Maldonado, y del 5 al 24 de noviembre se estará presentando gratis bajo la dirección de Torres Tama *The Youth Performance Project* en

Sagaz artista latino sacudirá audiencias



El artista José Torres Tama da vida al personaje "El Mefisto Moderno", en el monólogo "Casino Américas".

—Alberto Brown Rodríguez/
MH

Un artista latino que utiliza las artes escénicas, la literatura y sus propias experiencias visitará Atlanta para ofrecer sus puntos de vista sobre la inmigración

hispana, la avaricia, la codicia, el racismo, y la manipulación de la cultura consumidora estadounidense sobre los habitantes de EEUU.

Escritor, dramaturgo y actor ecuatoriano José Torres Tama estará en Atlanta del 23 al 28 de abril, gracias a la labor conjunta de Alternate Roots y Mundo Hispánico, entre otras

organizaciones, para ofrecer dos presentaciones del monólogo "Casino Américas", que integra varios pequeños capítulos, en los que trata sobre la proliferación de los casinos en Estados Unidos, sobre cómo la cultura

estadounidense promueve la lujuria.

Entre otros temas, el artista, radicado en Nueva Orleans y Nueva York, discutirá en su monólogo, que ha recibido aplausos de críticos en el país y en el extranjero desde que lo presentó por primera vez en 1998, los riesgos que toman los latinoamericanos al venir a EEUU en busca del sueño estadounidense; los peligros que enfrentan todos aquellos que son de piel oscura y que son objeto de un racismo recrudescido.

Para el artista, el monólogo examina una cultura obsesionada con la gratificación instantánea y la adoración a las celebridades.

Torres Tama subraya que su experiencia propia del racismo que sufren los latinos en el país aún sigue viva. Siendo un niño emigrado de Ecuador, su familia se estableció en Nueva Jersey. En los años 1970 y 1980, los latinos y afroamericanos residentes de Hovoken, Nueva Jersey fueron obligados a la fuerza para

abandonar sus viviendas.

"Centenares de latinos y afroamericanos murieron calcinados debido a incendios provocados por inversionistas que deseaban derrumbar los viejos asentamientos para construir nuevos", manifiesta Torres Tama. "En el monólogo, hay un capítulo que titulo 'Dreams on Fire', en el que narro la historia de cómo Nelly saltó de varios pisos de

un edificio para escapar del fuego. Se quebró los brazos, y lo peor de todo, sus dos hijos murieron calcinados", remarcó el artista.

El artista dará dos presentaciones, el viernes 27 y sábado 28 de abril, del monólogo "Casino Américas", en el Teatro Paul Robeson del Arts Exchange, localizado en el 750 de Kalb Avenue en Atlanta. Ambas funciones iniciarán a las 8:00

p.m. La admisión es de \$15, y de \$10 para estudiantes, ciudadanos de la tercera edad, y para grupos mayores de 10 individuos.

Para más detalles, llame al 404-577-1079.

Interesados en saber más sobre la labor educativa, política y social del artista Torres Tama, se puede visitar el sitio en la Internet www.torrestama.com

Charlas y talleres educativos

Además, Torres Tama ofrecerá charlas y talleres en diferentes sitios de la Ciudad. El lunes 23 de abril, a las 7:00 p.m., formará parte del foro de discusión "Libertad de expresión: ¿Qué libre es?", que se llevará a cabo en la Auburn Research Library, en el 101 de Auburn Avenue en Downtown. Esta actividad es gratis y abierta al público.

El martes 24 de abril, a las 7:00 p.m., el artista dará la charla "Prensa y mente estadounidense: Explorando la representación de las culturas latina y afroamericana por la prensa, auxiliado de vestuario y otros artículos. También es gratis y abierta al público.

El miércoles 25 de abril, a las 7:00 p.m.,

Torres Tama llevará a cabo dos talleres de teatro "Compromiso corporal y teatro improvisacional", en el Arts Exchange; el jueves 26 de abril, dará otro taller diseñado para la investigación de la utilización de material autobiográfico para explorar asuntos universales, incluyendo raza, religión y la identidad sexual.

El costo de los talleres es de \$15. Se puede llamar al 404-577-1079.

El sábado 28 de abril, Torres Tama ofrecerá, a la juventud latina, el taller "Explorando la experiencia del inmigrante", que se llevará a cabo en Doraville.

Para más detalles sobre este taller, llame a William Rodríguez al 770-416-0123.