

# IN EXILE CLOSE TO THE EQUATOR

*Personal Stories of Universal Truths in a Search for the "American Dream"*



This latest performance piece is Jose Torres Tama's final installment of a three-part series entitled *Trilogy for the North American Dream/Tres Hobras para el Sueno Norte Americano* that also includes his NEA award-winning *\$CASINOAMERICA\$* and the fist solo he toured across the country *We Are Patriots With Dark Faces*, which had its New York debut in 1995 at Performance Space 122.

In this seventy-minute auto-biographical performance collage, Torres Tama combines personal stories and incantations with dramatic movement and visual tableaux to create a dynamic work that explores rites-of-passage in urban American culture. In the process, he manages to create a theatrical experience that is exemplary of a

personal aesthetic form that he calls *minimal mysticism* with a setting that is efficiently surreal and magical.

He recounts coming-of-age stories of his geographical migrations that have transformed him from an immigrant child raised in the urban corridor of the Northeast to a Latino "Yankee" living in the Deep South. As such, he comments on issues of race between the North and the South and the effect geography has on one's identity.

Torres Tama's point of departure is that of a dark-faced passenger in search for the "American Dream," and while he employs the personal tale to comment on the political, he also touches upon such universal themes as the struggle between good and evil, love and hate, and the pen and the sword.

Peppering his montage with American popular culture references and sardonic humor, he delivers this work with the intensity of an urban warrior and moves rapidly from poetic drama to the hilariously absurd--continuously breaking the wall between performer and audience.

# 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.

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## 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

# Coming to terms with his ethnicity

Performance artist's latest show delves into his life as young Latino immigrant in America

By MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER  
 of the Journal Sentinel staff

When he was 13 years old, he looked himself in the mirror and said it out loud: spic.

"I called myself 'spic' a thousand times until the word dropped to the ground . . . and lost its power," said Latino performance artist Jose Torres Tama, recounting a powerful childhood memory during a segment of his new show. "Before, the word bounced off my chest like tiny bullets, tiny bullets."

Trolling the memories of his youth as an Ecuadoran-born Latino growing up in New Jersey and New York, Torres Tama revisits stark moments of fear and prejudice in his new show "In Exile Close to the Equator," which he's performing this weekend at Walker's Point Center for the Arts, 911 W. National Ave.

His direct, intimate monologue is peppered with sung bits of popular music, struts, whispers, sardonic humor, rituals of fire and prayers. All the while, he confesses what he felt — from fear to anger to pride — about being defined as a Latino.

Although he now calls New Orleans home, Torres Tama came to the United States from Ecuador at the age of 7.

"Having come to the U.S. as an immigrant child and seeing my mom, the incarnation of love for me, have to work so hard for a chance at the middle class . . ." said Torres Tama, trailing off in mid-thought. "When you're a kid, at a time when you already feel all out of sorts, that has an effect."

During the show, he tells stories of being the only kid of color in a grammar



ELIZABETH FLORES / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Performance artist Jose Torres Tama rehearses "In Exile Close to the Equator" Tuesday afternoon at the Walker's Point Center for the Arts. Torres Tama will perform the show at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the center. He also will perform "Media and My American Self: A Performance on the Verge of an Identity Crisis" Oct. 27 and 28.

school with 500 students, of running from the police and neighborhood bullies, and of discovering pride in his cultural heritage.

"I am a Latino Catholic," he said, falling to his knees, "and I find myself praying at the strangest times . . . It is who I am. I can't help it."

The show is the final and most autobiographical installment in a trilogy of shows that examines what Torres Tama calls the "American Dream mythology" from his urban, Latino perspective. Through satire and a prism of personal experience, his performance art examines serious social issues such as gambling, the media and racism.

In conjunction with his performances, Torres Tama is artist-in-residence at the Walker's Point Center during October, directing a youth performance project with students from El Puente Alternative High School. The youth performances will be at 8 p.m. on Oct. 27 and 28. Tickets are \$5; admission is free for Walker's Point Center for the Arts members.

The youth project is designed to introduce disadvantaged kids to theater arts as a form of self-expression. Kim Belchere, a performance artist from New Orleans, is co-directing the project. She also directs Torres Tama's main program.

# Immigrant's travails form show's theme

BY ANNE PRICE  
Advocate arts critic

□ SUNDAY ADVOCATE, Baton Rouge, La. □ April 1, 2001

Jose Torres Tama takes a hard look at his life as an immigrant growing up in America and turns all those cultural conflicts into art.

He is bringing the third and final segment of his series, *Trilogy for the North American Dream*, to Theatre 150 of the LSU Music and Dramatic Arts Building at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, April 3-4.

"This is mostly in the 'I' voice," he said in a phone interview from his studio in New Orleans. "I am telling my personal story about the search for the American dream, using autobiographical experience as a platform to explore different themes."

*In Exile Close to the Equator* is a performance piece, dealing with urban American culture and the problems of an immigrant Latino child raised in the Northeast and now living in the Deep South.

Torres has performed both of his two previous one-man shows, *We Are Patriots with Dark Faces* and *\$CASINO AMERICAS*, at LSU.

"This is my very specific rites of passage story about growing up in New York," he continued. "I felt everything was very segregated in the North, with each neighborhood having people of the same ethnic background and everyone knew the boundaries.

"Being the only Latino child in school where all the others were Irish or Italian, and in an all-black school was part of growing up in the North.

"Then living in the South for a long time gives me different perspectives of race in North and South."

All these experiences and more combine with dramatic movement and tableaux to create a powerful theatrical presentation.

Torres Tama begins the show as a dark-faced passenger in search of the American dream, touching on universal themes of good and evil, love and hate and the pen and the sword. This show carries ideas begun in the first part of the series to a revealing conclusion.

Torres Tama has toured his three shows throughout the country and also conducts workshops and gives lectures for young peo-

## Immigrant/Continued from page 12

ple.

Working with youth is a major part of his career, he said. He is passionate about helping young people and believes that he can use his varied skills to improve their futures.

"I've been working with youth around the country, using performance as a means of self-expression," he said.

He often does a residency in addition to performances and will be at LSU for the entire week, working in the theater department.

He has residencies and workshops scheduled in Atlanta, Brooklyn and Anchorage, Alaska, through July.

"I'm going to develop a youth performance project in Brooklyn," he said. "I will be at the Out North Contemporary Theater to do a youth performance project and perform my show for three weeks in June."

Torres Tama is a multi-talented artist. He writes his shows and sings, dances and delivers powerful dialogue in an intense and often very funny production, revealing the truths of human dig-

nity and weaknesses and making audiences laugh with him.

He has won numerous awards, including a major National Endowment for the Arts award and honors from the Louisiana Division of the Arts and the Arts Council of New Orleans.

A native of Ecuador, he has lived in New Orleans since 1984, saying it is the only place in the U.S. where he feels at peace with his Latino identity.

Admission to performances of *In Exile Close to the Equator* is \$5 at the door. ■

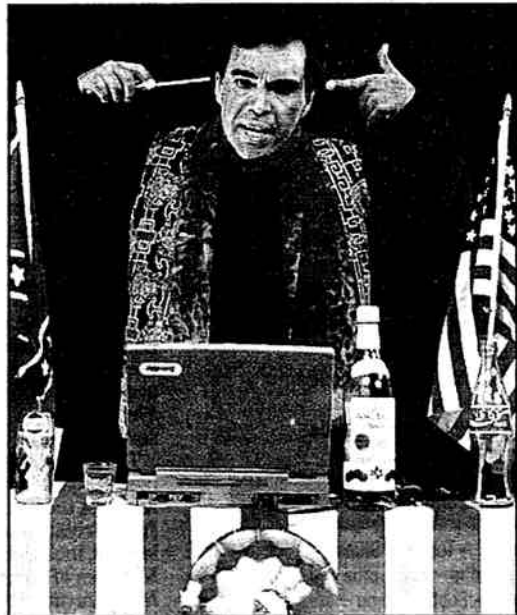


Photo provided by Jose Torres Tama

Jose Torres Tama performs a scene from *In Exile Close to the Equator*, the third part of his trilogy about growing up as an immigrant in America.