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By **Blake Gopnik**

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

From the Darién Gap to 'The Great Dictator'

For his latest art project, Javier Téllez makes eight Venezuelan migrants his collaborators on a film about power.

Some common jobs of recent Venezuelan migrants in New York: delivering meals or washing dishes; cleaning house or minding children.

And then there's the uncommon work that eight such migrants got, for something like two weeks this past winter: watching comedies by Charlie Chaplin about migration, poverty and dictatorship; working up a screenplay that riffed on those movies; finally, playing the roles of both the downtrodden in Chaplin and also their oppressors, in a peculiar art film called "Amerika" that came out of their group effort.



The film is screening in a Greenwich Village space called the Center for Art, Research and Alliances, as the centerpiece in a solo show by the Venezuelan New Yorker Javier Téllez. Although his films and videos have made him a favorite in museums and nonprofits abroad, it's been almost two decades since he's appeared alone in such a space in New York.

It was thanks to Téllez that those eight new New Yorkers, normally under the thumb of DoorDash and Uber Eats, got paid to shape art that's about what it means to have power. "If you can reverse the order, at least even as a representation, you're creating a model that could inspire people to change," Téllez

said. He is careful to refer to his eight migrant hires — Andreina Arias, José Díaz, Luisandra Escalona, Leonardo Mesa, Nazareth Merentes, Jesús Ramírez, Omar Ríos Castellanos, Mariana Vargas — as "collaborators," not as "cast" or "crew," so the reversal he mentions has to do with power in the art world as well as beyond it.

Téllez is 55, a large, jovial man with glasses and a shaggy salt-and-pepper beard who could easily be cast as any Latin American poet or professor. He speaks like a mix of the two, letting out such a torrent of thoughts that his meaning can be hard to catch. Téllez discussed his art and ideas in a cafe around the corner from CARA, which paid the bills for his migrant project and had just finished installing it.

Téllez has always been "an artist stretching what you thought art can be," said Manuela Moscoso, CARA's executive director and chief curator. Although his projects can often have a lovable side — his untrained performers guarantee that — she said they also reveal an amazing ambition. Téllez's repurposing of irresistible movies by Chaplin is also, she said, an effort to look at a past that might let us "reinvent what the future could be."

With the 20-minute run time of a Chaplin short, "Amerika" speaks of tyrants and the downtrodden who resist them. Borrowing from "The Great Dictator" (there's even a globe-tossing scene), the migrant actors play Chaplin's Hitler look-alike and his henchmen, scheming to trample the "rats" who they say "continue invading our country" — and who are played by those same migrants after a costume change.



Omar Ríos Castellanos takes on the role of Chaplin's "Great Dictator" in Javier Téllez's video projection "Amerika." Javier Téllez

The script includes a Chaplinesque chase shot on the battlements of Fort Totten, the Civil War site in Queens. It ends with a meal that blends the boot-eating moment from Chaplin's "Gold Rush" with Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper." The scene is redemptive — the resisters have escaped their tormentors, and can feed themselves — but, as with Jesus' last meal, disaster lurks.



The eight migrant actors Téllez worked with in "Amerika" join in a Last Supper tableau. Javier Téllez

Téllez's collaborators are all here legally, either as asylum seekers or with the Temporary Protected Status granted Venezuelans, but Téllez worries that North America is nevertheless "a continent that welcomes them and unwelcomes them." Téllez wonders what's in store for his actors. "How are they going to be integrated into society, how could they belong?" he asked, and the film they crafted together seems to ask the same.

Sitting in her office at CARA, one floor up from Téllez's projection, Moscoso described his art as "fun and risky but crazy and poetic." It's already made Téllez "a legend for Latin America," Moscoso said. (She is from Ecuador.) But she wonders why that status hasn't been matched in New York. "We all

cannot believe that he's not with a David Zwirner," she said, citing one of the city's mega-dealers who might have brought Téllez onto their roster — but haven't. One aim of CARA, Moscoso explained, is to offer commissions to mature artists who haven't had the art-world "amplification" they deserve.

Téllez could hardly have a better CV. He's appeared in the Venice Biennale and the prestigious Documenta exhibition in Germany. In the 2008 Whitney Biennial in New York, he showed a stunning projection in which six blind men took turns exploring an elephant by touch, and it was a clear favorite of critics, including me. In my Whitney review for The Washington Post, I devoted 12 paragraphs to that one piece, saying it was "a powerful experience we'll need to keep revisiting." The Guardian described it as a standout work — "a great corrective to a depleted world." In his review in The New York Times, Holland Cotter called the film "beautiful."

And then — crickets, at least in New York. Until the offer from CARA, this city's curators haven't seen fit to grant Téllez even one solo show despite the three decades he's spent living and working here; ditto curators at any of this country's largest museums.

The politics Téllez wears on his sleeve may have something to do with this neglect.

For the 2001 Venice Biennale, Téllez contributed a harrowing video installation about remote villages in Venezuela awash in Huntington's disease, the fatal brain condition — which, he pointed out, had been mostly ignored by the government. Chosen to represent his nation in the following edition of the Biennale, Téllez ended up resigning his spot, citing the "corrupt and undemocratic" government of President Hugo Chavez.

In Téllez's best-known pieces since then, he's invited members of disadvantaged groups — the mentally ill, the blind and of course migrants — to work with him to turn out films that, one way or another, put a spotlight on how they are "somehow disenfranchised because of their condition," he said. "What is really important — I mean, I'm not saying that I'm doing this fully — is to actually give agency to people."

His collaborators on "Amerika" feel he has done that.

Speaking through a translator, Nazareth Merentes, a 25-year-old mother of two who crossed the jungles of the Darién Gap to arrive in this country, said that getting this first chance to try acting left her "feeling powerful because of that opportunity to illustrate something larger than myself." She sat in one of the eight theater seats Téllez has installed in front of his projection at CARA — they define its eight actors as the work's most important audience — and spoke of how she "discovered something in myself I didn't know I really had the capacity to do."

Sitting next to her was Omar Rios Castellanos, 26, who spent a month traveling from his Venezuelan home to the U.S.-Mexican border; he now lives in the same Brooklyn shelter as Merentes. A glued-on mustache turned the slight farmworker into an astonishing match for Chaplin. In “Amerika,” he appears as both Chaplin’s Tramp — he mastered the flat-footed walk by practicing in his room at night — and also as the comedian’s Hitler avatar. Rios Castellanos said that by playing the dictator, he got to hold a mirror up to “those in Venezuela who simply follow instructions or do what the dictator tells them to do. Because I sincerely believe that they should accept that they’re acting out of self interest, and that they’re not thinking about the people.”



Jesús Ramírez in a scene from “Amerika.” When Ramírez isn’t playing an oppressor, he plays one of the oppressed — as here. Javier Téllez



Nazareth Merentes, who crossed the Darién Gap to get to this country from Venezuela, playing an oppressive officer in “Amerika,” Javier Téllez

Jesús Ramírez, a shelter-mate of the two actors, described fleeing Venezuela barely ahead of the military assassins who killed his brother, and the seven months of tough travel that followed. Strangely, he found himself reminded of those hardships in a scene from “Amerika” in which he and his fellows play brutal storm troopers, marching to the real army chant in which Venezuelan soldiers declare themselves “war machines.” That chant had Ramírez thinking, he said, of the “war machines” migrants have to become to reach safety, “because we need to focus so hard, so intensely, and to just keep going and going and going and confront all kinds of danger.”

A migrant mother trading food delivery for acting, at least for a few weeks; a former farmworker doubling as one of history’s comic geniuses; a man who has fled death, and now finds an echo of his flight in the chant of those who caused it — these are the kinds of reversals that Téllez sees as central to his aims as an artist. He traces his awareness of their potential to a moment, at the age of about 8, when his psychiatrist father took him to the Lenten carnival held every year at the mental hospital near where they lived in Valencia, Venezuela.

There, for one day, as Téllez recalled, “the patients would trade their own uniforms with the white coats of the doctors,” overturning the normal balance between powerful and powerless. That image from his youth continues to yield “a very strong potential of liberation,” he said, and he channels it into his work. The disenfranchised can gain insight, maybe even a moment’s release, by playing those who rule over them, Téllez said, whereas the mighty can’t afford the same upending, for fear of succumbing to that “dangerous thing,” empathy.

Téllez acknowledges that the reversals staged in his art, however compelling, are unlikely to bring about much in the way of actual change. After all, only eight migrants, out of New York’s thousands, got a brief moment of empowerment as collaborators on his latest work of art. But Téllez still believes that projects like his stand for the very possibility of radical transformation. Society “needs to be cured,” he said, and its artists can’t afford to give up on the treatment.

Javier Téllez: Amerika

Through Aug. 11, Center for Art, Research and Alliances, 225 West 13th Street, Manhattan; cara-nyc.org.