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` N*W*C' energetic, poignant look at race

3-man play doesn't cover much new ground, but it has heart and positive message

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I wanted to see what the hubbub was all about with N*W*C -- The Race Show.

The title of this show, created by three ethnically diverse friends, stands for three racial slurs. Yes, the language in this show is rough. But that's part of the creators' goals: To jolt viewers into thinking about race relations and at the same time defuse the power behind both the racial epithets and the stereotypes that go along with them.

N*W*C played at Playhouse Square's Ohio Theatre on Friday and Saturday, presented by Cuyahoga Community College. The show was a sold-out hit at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, produced by the Latino Theater Company in 2004.

The N*W*C tour features black performer Miles Ellington Gregley, Latino Rafael Agustin and Asian Allan Axibal. All three are UCLA graduates.

These young men, who met on their community college speech team, co-wrote the show with former professors Liesel Reinhart and Steven Seagle. Through a blend of theater, hip-hop, slam poetry and true-life stories, these actors are trying to get audiences -- especially young folks -- to see people as human beings instead of judging them by their color.

As artists, this is the trio's way of trying to change the world. This show isn't about anger and lashing out. Their ideas are nothing earth-shatteringly new, but the show has heart and a positive message.

N*W*C is billed as an explosive comedy about race. It is youthful and highly energetic. But explosive? No.

The performers told an anecdote about protesters outside their show who ended up staying to watch it, after seeing the crowds who attended. They ended up loving N*W*C and apologizing for misinterpreting its intent.

These actors -- all from middle-class backgrounds -- are keepin' it real as they share their personal stories about racial stereotyping. Gregley, who grew up a California valley boy in a largely white community, says he was always an ``exceptionally tan white guy." He's the most infectiously entertaining actor in the show.

All three begin the performance with a beat box, vocal percussionist number featuring only the three racial slurs. The audience is in on the joke immediately when it sees Gregley in an outrageous pimp ensemble, Axibal doing jujitsu moves, and Agustin wearing a cloth around his head as a fruit picker.

Axibal has a purposefully nerdy appeal as the overachieving Asian, the ``model minority." He's surprisingly funny.

Agustin holds our attention when he talks about growing up as an illegal alien in this country, and about his experiences ``playing the race card." The funny thing is, although everyone assumes Axibal is Chinese, he's Filipino. And everyone assumes Agustin is Mexican, but he's from Ecuador.

Onstage, N*W*C had some weird pauses, and at times it came across as juvenile. A running penis joke got old quickly. Neither a scene with a black Santa who smokes pot nor a vignette about one of the guys spending time in a gay bar fit the show's context well, either.

Ultimately, N*W*C is an audience-friendly show, complete with a question-and-answer session after the 90-minute, intermissionless performance. Gregley and Agustin said they were frustrated at UCLA by the lack of roles for actors of color, so they decided to create their own play.

Good for these guys for making a difference. The trio's finest messages are that we're all part of the human race and that we must love our own cultures before we can appreciate differences in others.

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