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Putting race in your face

By Esther Chou, Staff Writer

During the question and answer portion of 'N*gger W*tback Ch*nk,' one woman asked: 'Aren't you supposed to have accents?'

From the performers' appearance and dress, the three cast members were clearly African American, Latino and Asian American. And if anything, they had California accents. But the woman's question, perhaps unusual, wasn't taboo. Considering the title of the show, there are few questions about race and identity that could be more provocative.



Controversial and comedic, 'N*gger W*tback Ch*nk' is a mix of comedy, drama, slam poetry, stand-up and hip hop. Returning to Mt. San Antonio College's Clarke Theater on Tuesday, the show confronts underlying racial tensions people don't necessarily want to talk about.

Co-written and performed by former Mt. SAC students Allan Axibal, Miles Ellington Gregley and Rafael Agustin, the show brings all the ugly racial slurs and stereotypes to the stage and explores race issues through real-life stories, beginning with the title. It may be offensive, but 'there's a difference between calling people these words ... and using them in conversation and discussions,' Axibal said.

All natives of the San Gabriel Valley, the trio met on the speech team at Mt. SAC about six years ago and transferred to UCLA. The show grew out of frustration that Agustin, 25, felt when he was typecast for Latino parts in theater productions. At an audition for a Tennessee Williams play, the director told Agustin that he was fantastic, yet nudged him toward Latino parts. In fact, the only lead role he got was for a prison drama called 'Short Eyes,' Agustin said.

'For people in general, it's hard to see a lead man being Asian or a lead man being different,' said Gregley, 24.

'We challenge that in the show,' Axibal said.

'N*gger W*tback Ch*nk' opened in May 2003 at UCLA and the three have since formed a production company, Speak Theater Arts, with their former Mt. SAC debate coaches Liesel Reinhart and Steven T. Seagle. They've brought the show to colleges and performing arts centers around the country. Part of a two-year national tour, the Mt. SAC engagement is the first performance of the year.

In one scene, 'Sticking your ethnic faces where they don't belong,' the actors run through a list of stereotypical oxymorons: Latino basketball player, Black Santa Claus, Chinese Superman. Like a roller coaster ride, the show starts fast by throwing all the negative stereotypes out into the open and slamming them right into your face, said Gregley. The tension keeps building and building, and when you think it can't get any worse, it does.

It begins with the list game. Axibal, Agustin and Gregley throw out stereotypes commonly made about their ethnicity.

'Rice eater.'

'Bean eater.'

'Watermelon.'

Offensive, maybe. But there's reality behind the drama. Each of the three have been called the names they use as their act at some point in their lives. (Axibal is Filipino.) 'The reason why our show has validity is because we talk about our own stories,' Axibal said.

Education and realization about race, identity, diversity is a major part of the show. Axibal said that an Asian guy sitting next to an African-American guy in the audience might be thinking, 'Is it really OK to laugh a joke about being black?' (Yes, it is.)

After the show, the cast takes questions from the audience to promote discussion about race. There are the usual questions about how the three met and how they started. But the debate often takes a political and philosophical turn.

'Are racism, stereotypes necessary?'

'Does race exist?'

'Aren't you supposed to have accents?'

Because of the title, the show has seen its share of controversy. At the first performance, there was a huge line of protesters but an even bigger line of people going to see it, Agustin recalled. Eventually, the protesters went inside to watch and later told the cast they loved it, he said.

'The title creates buzz. By the time we get there, they're already talking about these issues,' Axibal said.

At another show in Olympia, Wash., there were rumors that a neo-Nazi group was planning to protest, but nothing happened.

'The show is called N*gger W*tback Ch*nk,' Agustin said. 'How can they be mad?'

Because of the performers' willingness to talk frankly about race issues, they're sometimes viewed as ambassadors of their cultures or spokesmen of ethnic identity. But Axibal does not consider himself an expert or an ambassador.

'(The show) makes us experts of our lives, which have been affected by race,' Agustin said. A graduate of West Covina High School, Agustin said a defining moment for him came during his freshman year. There was a substitute PE teacher who told the class to play football, and students divided themselves into the Mexicans versus the Filipinos. Agustin, who's from Ecuador, remembered a distinct 'us vs. them' mentality. He decided to go against convention and joined the Asian team.

'We got our a-- handed to us that day. I have never gotten hit so hard,' Agustin said. 'So the moral of the story is always play with the Latinos,' he joked.

Axibal, who attended the predominantly Asian and Latino campus of Wilson High School in Hacienda Heights, found himself wondering 'Which Asian?' There were lots of Chinese and Korean students, but Filipinos were a small minority.

'Being Filipino, you're drifting a lot because Asian is such a big umbrella,' he said. 'I didn't find that out until I got to UCLA because there is a big Filipino contingent there.' For Gregley, who graduated from Charter Oak High School, there's a part in the show about the year he learned to be African-American.

It's about the two years during middle school he moved out of a mostly-white neighborhood in Covina to an almost all-black neighborhood in Georgia. There, Gregley wasn't accepted until he walked a certain way, talked a certain way and dressed a certain way. So the California 'dude' wasn't proper slang. Gregley added colorful pants blue, green, purple, yellow to his wardrobe and wore necklaces, earrings and boots.

When he moved back to California, Gregley said he started to hang out with other African-American students and noticed, for the first time, the color lines.

And that's one reason why they have taken the show its controversial name and all on the road and perhaps to Broadway or Hollywood one day.

It's to open up that dialogue about why some people are supposed to act a certain way, why others are supposed to dress a certain way, and why they're all supposed to have accents.

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