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The minorities are coming'

Show confronts offensive names

BY MOLLY GILMORE-BALDWIN FOR THE OLYMPIAN

If you're shocked or offended by the name of the show printed in the accompanying box, please read on before you call The Olympian.

"The title of the show is to confront these words, because they have a certain power over people," said Allan Axibal, one of the show's three creators/ performers. "There's a big difference between calling people these words and trying to have a dialogue about them."

And if you're shocked or offended, it might comfort you to know that you're not alone.

"We'd put up posters, and people would rip them down or rip off one word or cross them all out and write, 'honky honky honky,' so we're experienced with the resistance," Axibal said.

Axibal and fellow creators/ performers Miles Gregley and Rafael Agustin are a funny bunch, but they're funny with a message, as Axibal mentioned at least four times during a phone interview. The message: "There is actually no such thing as race."

"People are always put off by the title, and they're always afraid," he said. "We want them to know that they'll have a lot of fun."

In Olympia, where the show will stop Wednesday at The Washington Center for the Performing Arts, some businesses and government offices didn't want to put up posters for the event at all -- even the discreet ones that said only "N*W*C" in big letters. In one office, a poster for The Washington Center's season had one square cut out.

"Can you guess which show was censored out?" said Kevin Boyer, the center's marketing director.

Here's an alternate title idea, courtesy of Agustin: "Just put: 'The minorities are coming! The minorities are coming!'"

The question "What's in a name?" is an appropriate one for this show, which begins with an exploration of the first times the performers were hit with those ugly words.

Axibal's childhood story focuses on the eyelid surgery some Asians have to make their eyes look bigger.

"My mom had always recommended that I get the surgery," he said. "It's normal to her, but it always got to me. It made me feel there was something wrong with the way I looked."

"My mom came to see the show," he said. "I started bawling because I wasn't just telling my mom, 'What you're saying hurts me,' I was telling her in front of 500 or 600 people. It helped clear the air about some things. ... She wasn't mad at me. She liked that I came up with something honest and sincere and powerful to tell other people. She didn't realize what she was saying had impacted me the way it did."

"When we first experienced these words, we were between the ages of 6 and 14," Gregley said. "This show is made for people of not only all cultures but all ages."

"The bottom line of the play really has to do with friendship and identity and getting to know other people's cultures. Kids get it just as much as the adults do, if not more because they're open to new things."

But the performers admitted that their own families took time to warm up to the idea.

"My parents have disowned me," Agustin said, laughing. "No. It's really transgenerational. When our families and friends come out -- my cousin who's 6 years old and my grandfather who's 79 -- they all enjoy it."

"After he saw Miles's pimp dance, my grandfather was at home trying to do it."