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'N*W*C' brings race talk up front and center stage

BY DAVID LYMAN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

For an age committed to political correctness, "N*W*C" is a full-frontal affront.

That's because each of those letters in the title represents a heavy-duty racial slur.

"N*W*C," playing Friday and Saturday at the Aronoff's Jarson-Kaplan Theater, was created by Miles Ellington Gregley, Rafael Agustin and Allan Axibal, who met in the debate club at Mount San Antonio College in suburban Los Angeles. From different neighborhoods, backgrounds and ethnicities, this Rainbow Coalition version of "Charlie's Angels" hit it off.

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"We're three best friends," says Agustin, 25, whose family emigrated to the U.S. from Ecuador when he was 7. "It was inevitable that these words would come up. But because we were so close, they didn't have any power."

When Agustin graduated and moved on to graduate school at UCLA, he started writing autobiographical sketches. Axibal and Gregley followed suit. Before long, they were working with their former speech coaches and shaping the material into a stage presentation.

It's not stand-up. And it's not a play, in

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ZOOM Courtesy Of Cincinnati Arts Association
Rafael Agustin (from left), Miles Ellington Gregley and Allan Axibal created "N*W*C," playing Friday and Saturday at the Aronoff.

If you go



traditional sense. But it is raucous and unabashedly upfront when it comes to race.

There are two theories about how to deal with racist language.

One school of thought is that such words should never, ever be spoken.

"We have a different attitude," says Gregley, 25. "We think you should say them over and over - a million times - until they don't have any power at all. We must say (the 'N-word') 600 times in the show."

"We knew this would play around L.A.," says

Axibal, 23, who was just 4 when his family moved from the Philippines. "But when we got to Minnesota, the audience was all white and I thought, 'We're dead.' "

At first it was painfully quiet. The audience was clearly uncomfortable with the banter. Not only were these three guys using forbidden words, but they were also mocking racial stereotypes.

"You can imagine what must have been in their minds," says Agustin. " 'We can't laugh at this. This is wrong.' "

But gradually, it dawned on the audience that it was OK to laugh.

"We set out to create a show that we could be in," said Agustin. "It turned out to be this political statement performance piece. We just didn't know how powerful it was going to be for people."

E-mail davidlyman@gmail.com

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What: N*W*C - The Race Show

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday

Where: Jarson-Kaplan Theater, Aronoff Center for the Arts, 650 Walnut St., downtown

Tickets: \$25. (513) 621-2787, ticketing @cincinnatiarts.org

Also: The cast will present two free preview events: 7:30 p.m. today, Contemporary Arts Center, 44 E. Sixth St., downtown; Noon Friday, University of Cincinnati MainStreet Cinema, second floor of Tangeman University Center, 2766 Main St. Call 556-2831 for directions.