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'N*W*C*' puts spin on racial issues

By Liz Kohman, *Staff*

lkohman@stcloudtimes.com



Before "N*W*C*" premiered at the University of California in Los Angeles, it already was causing a controversy. Posters for the show, which was written by three UCLA students, were ripped down or written on and a few people even protested the opening of the show.

What was the issue?

N*W*C* stands for three racial slurs that are so offensive and loaded, they spark a visceral response in people of all colors.

But that's what "N*W*C*" is about - addressing racial stereotypes directly with no candy-coating or talking around them. It's about feeling offended and dealing with it.

"We've been called these words," said **Allan Axibal**, who wrote the show with two of his friends. "We have an ownership about them."

Axibal, 23, Rafael Agustin, 24, and Miles Gregley, 25, wrote "N*W*C*" because they couldn't get cast in shows.

Now they're bringing their own show to towns and cities nationwide, including three performances this weekend in Collegeville. The original title of the show was turned into an acronym - "N*W*C*" - so that potential audiences would take time to find out what the show was about before organizing a protest.

The show is a series of skits, poetry and songs addressing stereotypes. While racism is discussed, the core of the show is about identity and the struggle to find it, the writers said.

"The show is very autobiographical," said Agustin, who immigrated to the United States from Ecuador. "It's amazing how many people relate to it."

In one segment, "The List Game," each of the men - who come from different ethnic backgrounds - rapidly shout out the various stereotypes that are associated with them. It's funny and sad at the same time.

But the skit isn't designed to perpetuate stereotypes or inspire feelings of hopelessness.

By addressing the stereotypes directly, it's meant to create a forum for the audience to feel comfortable discussing them.

"It attacks stereotypes right away," Agustin said of "The List Game."

The show steps right into some weighty issues, but the writers/actors handle them with a light touch. They use humor - not lectures - to get people thinking.

"It's going to be a great time," Gregley said of the show. "We all need to face this and we all need to talk about it."

By the end of the show, the audience is exhausted from laughing, **Axibal** said. The Los Angeles Times said the show was reminiscent to "the comedy of Chris Rock." And hopefully it gives audience members a new perspective on race relations, even though its architects know it won't be the first show, and probably not the last either, to address racism and stereotypes.

"A lot of us were inspired by previous people before us," Gregley said, noting that race issues have changed through the years, from physical harassment to verbal harassment. People of all colors and ages have enjoyed the show, the men said.

A few of the people who initially protested the show when it opened in 2003 changed their minds after watching a performance.

"It's been a pretty positive response overall," Gregley said. "People have said it's the first show about race that didn't make them feel bad."

The creative team members are not only actors, writers and comedians - they're also role models.

"When we do see our faces in the media, it's usually not very empowering," **Axibal** said, adding that it probably would have been inspiring to see a show like this growing up. **Axibal**, Gregley and Augustin met in community college and transferred to UCLA. They were good friends - and self-described speech geeks, but they'd rather not see the geek part in print - before writing the show together.

Working on the show gave the friends a deeper understanding of each other's identity - as well as their own, **Axibal** said.

"It's about recognizing each other's culture," Gregley said.

The fact that their differences didn't stop them from finding enough similarities to become friends helps reaffirm the show's ultimate message.

"We believe there's only one race, and that's the human race," Gregley said.

If you go ...

What: N*W*C*

When: 7 and 9:30 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Stephen B. Humphrey Theater, St. John's University, Collegeville.

Tickets: \$18 for general admission, \$14 for senior citizens and youths, \$9 with a CSB/SJU ID. Buy tickets by calling 363-5777 or visiting www.csbsju.edu/finearts.

Information: www.speaktheaterarts.com.

The Sunday performance will be interpreted into American Sign Language.

N*W*C* features language that some people might find offensive.

Local resources

Whether you feel you've been discriminated against or you'd like to learn about cultural activities in the community, here are some organizations to start with:

Minnesota Department of Human Rights

The Human Rights Department's mission is to fight discrimination in Minnesota. Find information about Human Rights Day, information about the Human Rights Act and other resources on its Web site, www.humanrights.state.mn.us.

Multicultural Children's Art Connection

An after-school program in the Paramount Arts District that is dedicated to teaching children about other cultures using art. Call 257-3118 for details.

St. Cloud Human Rights Commission

The Human Rights Commission was formed in 1973 and is dedicated to promoting a multicultural community. It's also a resource for victims of discrimination. Contact St. Cloud Human Rights Director Baba Odukale at 650-3133 or baba.odukale@ci.stcloud.mn.us.

St. Cloud State's Multicultural Student Services

Offers academic support, tutoring, communitywide activities and more. Call 308-3003 or visit www.stcloudstate.edu/mss for information. The Web site also provides links to cultural organizations for students.

University of Minnesota Human Rights Resource Center

The center is attached to the University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, and it offers educational resources, information about advocacy networks and training opportunities. Visit www.hrusa.org for information and a calendar of human rights events in Minnesota.

Photos courtesy of College of St. Benedict/St. John's University Fine Arts Series

Nice pants! Miles Gregley (left) and **Allan Axibal** rock some interesting outfits for a sketch in "N*W*C*." The show - which addresses racial stereotypes through poetry, songs and humorous skits - plays this weekend at the Stephen B. Humphrey Theater at St. John's University in Collegeville.

Allan Axibal (left), Miles Gregley (center) and Rafael Agustin (right) look like they're literally ready to fight racist stereotypes. The men wrote and star in "N*W*C*," a sketch show that highlights their personal struggle to find identity.