

## Nasty words, wicked fun

■ Ethnic slurs and prejudices are held up for laughs in a daring, popular student production that was born from experience.

*By Hugh Hart, Special to The Times*

On a cold Wednesday night in February, a line of students snakes around UCLA's Freud Playhouse, waiting to see "N\*gger Web\*ck Ch\*nk."

The student production has sold out every performance since its debut last May by attracting people like Jin Cai, a 24-year-old mechanical engineering student who'd never been to a play before. Cai heard about it from his roommate. Sitting in the 568-seat auditorium next to him is Pablo Rebis, a 25-year-old political science major. "I think people understand the meaning of the name - that it's just a stereotype," he notes.

Minutes later the lights dim, and audience members are bombarded with stereotypes during the show's opening moments. Rafael Agustin makes his entrance decked out in *cholo* muscle shirt and pleated pants, followed by Miles Gregley, who struts on stage in full pimp mode complete with plumed hat. Allan Axibal joins the procession playing the neatly dressed "model minority."

As they chant racial slurs, the actors are greeted not by bricks or rotten tomatoes but by gales of laughter. This audience is in on the joke, and over the next hour and a half, the show saps those slurs of their pejorative power through a succession of group scenes and comedic monologues in which the actors recount personal encounters with racial typecasting.



Allan Axibal



Miles Gregley



Rafael Agustin

UCLA theater professor Jose Luis Valenzuela, the performers' faculty advisor, says the show has become a grass-roots phenomenon. "People are hungry for an experience of this kind because [most] theater is so noninclusive," he says. "When students see this show, they feel free because they realize we have to freely speak about these taboos, and that's what creates that release."

Valenzuela, who plans to present the show next month at the Los Angeles Theatre Center under the auspices of the Latino Theater Company, says that during his 10 years at UCLA he's never seen a stage production hit home with such force. "The audience so identifies with these issues in their daily life, and now they're finally all together - 500 people together in a room - and they're able to laugh about it or cry about it or think about it.

"Young people want to discuss these racial issues from different perspectives, but the theater has abandoned them. That's what makes this piece so powerful."

### **Enthusiasm and outrage**

The three young "NWC" stars, all students at UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television, are of course thrilled - even flabbergasted - at the ruckus surrounding their little three-man show. Gathered with his costars at Agustin's apartment across the street from the UCLA campus, Gregley says, "The first time we performed it together was really scary, because you're putting your own work forward. I was backstage going, 'I love you guys - if I faint and die on stage, just know that.' Then we went out there, and the response was ridiculous. People were laughing way too hard. We were like, 'They must be lying to us.' "

Agustin jumps in: "Last November, people stood in the rain for two hours to watch us! People were literally breaking down the doors so they could see the play."

Not surprisingly, the show's incendiary title has sparked outrage in some quarters. "A lot of people have been upset with the posters," Axibal admits. "What's really weird is the people who will rip only off 'n\*gger' from the flier, or they'll rip off 'wetb\*ck' or 'ch\*nk,' as if to say, 'I don't like that you're calling me "wetback," ' but it's OK if you call them 'chink.' Another time, someone crossed out all the words and wrote 'Cracker Cracker Cracker.' They automatically assume this show is from some white person who's just bashing minorities.

"People ask us all the time, 'Why did it have to be these words? Couldn't you just call it "African American/Latin American/Chinese?" ' My answer to that is, why *not* these words? What is it that people are so afraid of? It's a shame that someone's day is ruined if they see a poster of ours. When people are offended it's because of their own experiences they've had with these words. We're not out to offend anyone, and we're not using these words against people. When the three of us got together, the title just came and it was perfect: These are the words we've been dealing with our whole lives."

It's not surprising that the show's pro-diversity message has struck a nerve at UCLA, where the student body is roughly 32% Asian, 36% Caucasian, 13% Chicano/Latino, 4% African American and 15% other groups. Dr. Robert J. Naples, UCLA dean of students, rates race relations at the

school as "pretty good" but cautions that the passage of Proposition 209, which effectively prohibited affirmative action, has had an impact on the school. "Over the past few years, our numbers of students of color has diminished," he says. "I think the potential is there to cause a little bit more tension around race relations, although we haven't seen too much of it yet, because students of color feel there's fewer of them."

The "NWC" principals journeyed from distant corners of the globe before hooking up as a creative team. Axibal, 21, moved to the United States from the Philippines when he was 4 and grew up primarily in Hacienda Heights. As a child, he fervently believed he could be just like Tom Cruise in "Top Gun."

Gregley, 23, was born in the United States and reared in Covina, where nearly all his classmates were Latino or white. He idolized George Michael, obsessed over the Ninja Turtles (Donatello in particular) and only became self-conscious about his color in the seventh grade when he was asked to read aloud a passage from "Huckleberry Finn" that included the "N-word."

Twenty-three-year-old Agustin was 7 when he and his parents fled Ecuador. "We arrived here on the Fourth of July," he recalls. "There were fireworks everywhere, the Lakers won the championship - L.A. was so exciting to me. Six months later, the reality hit home: We were unwanted here."

Agustin attended nine schools as his mother and his father, formerly a pediatric surgeon, worked a succession of menial jobs while eluding the Immigration and Naturalization Service. "I didn't have a Social Security card. My parents didn't have regular jobs or anything that they could be stable at. It was a hard ..." - Agustin's voice breaks for a moment - "... very hard times." Then he cracks wise: "Seventy-five percent of all illegal immigrants in this country come legally. They just overstay. Boy, did we overstay!"

Axibal, Gregley and Agustin met 3 1/2 years ago as members of the speech team at Mount San Antonio College in Walnut. "This stuff was embedded in us before the show even came about," Gregley says of their racially themed material. "That first year at college I won [a] competition with a speech called 'Afro-Phobia,' about how people are so scared of the stereotype of black people that we're always getting." Agustin performed "Men on the Verge of a His-Panic Breakdown," a monologue by Guillermo Reyes about gay Latino immigrants, while Axibal brought home a championship trophy for his interpretation of slam poet Beau Sia's satiric rant "Chasing Bruce Lee."

### **Driven to prove himself**

The stories became more personal after Agustin finally became "legal" and transferred to UCLA. There, he found himself damned with faint praise. "I auditioned for a play and someone told me, 'You are amazing, you should audition for the Chicano Festival.' And I was like, 'Oh, my God, that's the way my life's going to be for the rest of my career!' So I decided, 'You know what? I'm going to create a one-man show to show everybody that I can write good material and that I'm a great performer.' "

Working with his Mount San Antonio coaches, Liesel Reinhart and her husband, Steven T. Seagle, Agustin developed what he termed his "Nigger Wetback" performance piece addressing his belief "that Latinos have become the new slave culture of this nation."

Reinhart and Seagle urged Agustin to expand his premise and reunite with Gregley and Axibal, who transferred to UCLA in fall 2002. During their brainstorming sessions, the three friends surprised one another with confessions, fantasies and quirky coming-of-age tales. "We just started throwing stuff out there, and the beautiful thing was, we learned so much about each other, because people don't normally have this racial dialogue," Agustin says. "Allan wrote a poem called 'Make Me Black.' That was the very first thing that got made, and we thought, 'Wow, let's run with that.' "

Adds Axibal: "Then we expanded on that concept and asked each other: When was the first time you realized you were a 'chink?' or a 'nigger?' "

Agustin says he and Axibal were flummoxed when Gregley answered that question by announcing " '1994 - that was the year I was black.' And we all said, 'What are you talking about?' And then Miles told us about how at some point African Americans really get into their skin color. Same with 'The Surgery.' "

As "NWC" audiences learn from Axibal's monologue, which he delivers dressed in a pair of "Risky Business"-style underpants, "The Surgery" is an Asian American euphemism. His mother suggested a cosmetic procedure after a callous classmate said Axibal looked "too Asian" to be a movie star. "You're raised to think it's normal to try to look Caucasian," he says. "Growing up, I didn't think it was a horrifying thing to cut your eyes and disfigure your face for the sake of looking more Anglo. I think Asian kids out there who get that pressure should know that you don't have to be ashamed of the way you look."

Says Gregley, "The thing is, these stories are autobiographical, but everybody has gone through stuff like this. Whether or not I'm talking about being 'black' really isn't the whole concern. But anybody can understand a year when they are really confused about themselves and really trying to find themselves and who they are. And I think that's what all these pieces are about."

Axibal adds, "I don't think we're, like, scholars about race, but I do think we are funny about it. We're just trying to tell our stories and what it was like for us to deal with these words and our own race and culture. We just hope people will come out and be entertained."

### **Confronting stereotypes**

**Where:** Presented by Latino Theater Company and Speak Theater Arts at Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles

**When:** Opens April 15. Thursdays-Fridays, 8 p.m., Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m.

**Ends:** May 8

**Price:** \$20, \$12 for students

**Contact:** (213) 489-0994