

# Los Angeles Times

JULY 9, 2007

THEATER REVIEW

## 'NWC' skewers race with wicked humor

A trio of versatile actors wields words that empower in disarming ways.

By Charles McNulty, Times Staff Writer

Don't let the title fool you: "N\*GGER WETB\*CK CH\*NK," which has returned to L.A. after a two-year national tour, is wholesome entertainment. Yes, racial slurs and occasional profanity can sometimes be good for you — especially when they're deployed to make a point about the pervasiveness of prejudice and its denigrating unabridged dictionary.

Three more likable and, for all the tough-talking and street posturing, nonthreatening performers would be harder to find than Rafael Agustin, Allan Axibal and Miles Ellington Gregley, all of whom began working on the piece as students at UCLA, where it was eventually presented at the Freud Playhouse after premiering at the ARTA national theater festival in 2003.

The show, now at the Ivar Theatre in Hollywood, might seem less provocative after the firestorms ignited by Michael Richards' and Don Imus' recent flights of imbecility. But "NWC" provides an educational antidote to the tired ignorance that keeps embarrassingly resurfacing.

As a work of performance art, it's relatively tame. But as a corrective to lingering societal shortsightedness, it's right on the money.

The men, dressed at first as a pimp, gang member and stylish karate master, march out chanting the epithets that dog their

identities. By diving straight into the cesspool of bigotry in America, these versatile comics employ a tactic of subversion by immersion.

Words that wound can be wielded in empowering new ways, and racial caricatures can be flaunted to reveal just how threadbare they really are.

Context changes everything. Those who have been oppressed have the right to co-opt the language of their abuse and turn it into a weapon of self-defense. And if you're an Asian American who has been laughed at for wanting to be Tom Cruise, this is your chance to strip to your underwear and perform a little air-guitar.

Agustin, Axibal and Gregley mostly keep their antics from being offensive, but they don't exactly tiptoe around sensitive subjects either.

(Jokes about the legal status of Spanish-speaking immigrants, the SAT scores of African Americans and the virility of Asian American men come fast and furious.) If you find yourself at times slightly squirming in your seat, it means that the guys are doing their satiric job.

In the equal-opportunity sendup of "NWC," the race card gets played repeatedly to prove that it's the human race that matters most.

