

Rocky Mountain News

Name-calling

'NWC' play packs punch lines with slurred speech



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Cast members of *N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk* swear the show is a comedy. Miles Gregley, front, created the show with Rafael Agustin and Allan Axibal.

By Erika Gonzalez, Rocky Mountain News

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The trio of performers behind the controversially-titled show, *N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk*, swear the play is a comedy.

But people don't always get the joke.

Posters for the show have been torn down and defaced.

Radio stations and newspapers have refused to carry advertisements for the production.

Even audiences attending the typically sold-out performances are occasionally slow to respond to an opening act featuring a rhythmic chanting of racial slurs.

"We are trying to de-power these words and make people understand that there's a difference between calling people these words and having a dialogue about them," said Allan Axibal, one of the show's three creators.

But Axibal and his castmates - Miles Gregley and Rafael Agustin - are also determined to inject a bit of humor into the conversation. They kick off the show attired in clothing representing the stereotypes with which they are often associated. Gregley, who is black, sports pimp gear. Axibal, who emigrated from the Philippines to California when he was 4, wears ancient-looking, Asian silk pajamas. Agustin, a native of Ecuador, shows up in baggy cholo pants.

"There's also this point in the show where we tackle mythic figures. We say, 'What happens if we mix things up and put things where we don't belong - like having a Chinese Superman or a Black Santa,'" says Agustin.

Axibal even delivers a monologue about how his dream of becoming the next Tom Cruise was crushed, while donning *Risky Business*-style briefs.

That scene, like much of *NWC* (the shorter, more politically correct title for the show), is based on the threesome's real-life encounters with racism. The actors, who met on a speech team at Mount San Antonio Community College, had all explored stereotyping in individual performances. But they didn't begin sharing

their stories until their coaches, Liesel Reinhart and Steven Seagle (who serve as directors of *NWC*), urged them to collaborate on a production two years ago.

Axibal's first exposure to a certain ethnic slur occurred on the playground.

"I went up to a girl I had a crush on and I said, 'Hey, I look like Tom Cruise and she said, 'You look like a chink,'" recalls Axibal. "That's where it starts - when you're young."

Gregley also was awakened to his outsider status at an early age.

"It happened in seventh grade, we were reading *Huckleberry Finn* aloud and we got to the word, 'nigger', and then everyone starts looking at me. At that point I realized that everyone saw me as that," remembers Gregley. "Before that, I just saw myself as a kid running around on the playground."

Like Gregley, Agustin considered himself no different than his classmates until his college applications got rejected from four-year universities because he lacked a legitimate Social Security card.

"I lived in the country for 14 years not knowing how serious our undocumented status was," says Agustin, who came to the United States when he was 7. "I ended up in community college and I walked in depressed that I was not an American for the first time."

The immigration debate has certainly made Agustin's situation a bit more relevant.

"It's such a human story that people can't help but relate to it," says Agustin, who has a green card and is on his way to becoming a citizen.

Although there have been a few protests outside some performances, the tour has been selling well and has received good reviews. In Cincinnati - the site of race riots five years ago - the cast held diversity programs. Axibal said one African American woman attended one of the forums speech in hand, ready to lambaste the actors. Instead, she left feeling positive about the production and its aims.

"The most common comment we get is, 'Thanks for doing a show about race that has nothing to do with blaming people,'" says Gregley.

Agustin says the trio have flirted with the idea of turning the production into a television show or movie. For now, however, they're committed to touring through at least next spring. They've also been invited to perform at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education.

"We really hope that we get as many people to see it as possible," says Gregley. "We didn't think this would play outside L.A. Now we realize people are hungry for this dialogue."

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