

To slur, with love

As black America debates the acceptability of the N-word, a diverse group of performers find racial unity by turning stereotypes and hateful words on their heads.

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As the controversies surrounding comedian Michael Richards and shock-jock Don Imus have reopened the debate over racial slurs and stereotypical imagery, the name of a smash hit stage comedy co-written by Miles Gregley, Rafael Agustin and Allan Axibal is about the most politically-incorrect title imaginable.

A diverse group, the forces behind "N*W*C" — an abbreviated stand-in for a raw title comprised simply of a trio of incendiary words that are, respectively, nasty slurs against the groups represented by its creators, African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans — have been on a two-year national college tour. Their message: Words aren't the problem; rather, it is the enduring racism behind them.

Now, as they prepare to stage a 10-week run at the Ivar Theater in Hollywood, Gregley, Agustin and Axibal understand that recent events in popular culture have made the use of slurs as entertainment, at best, risky. One critic in Seattle called the three-man show "unspeakably funny," and several publications, while applauding their work, refused to run its entire title for fear of losing advertis-

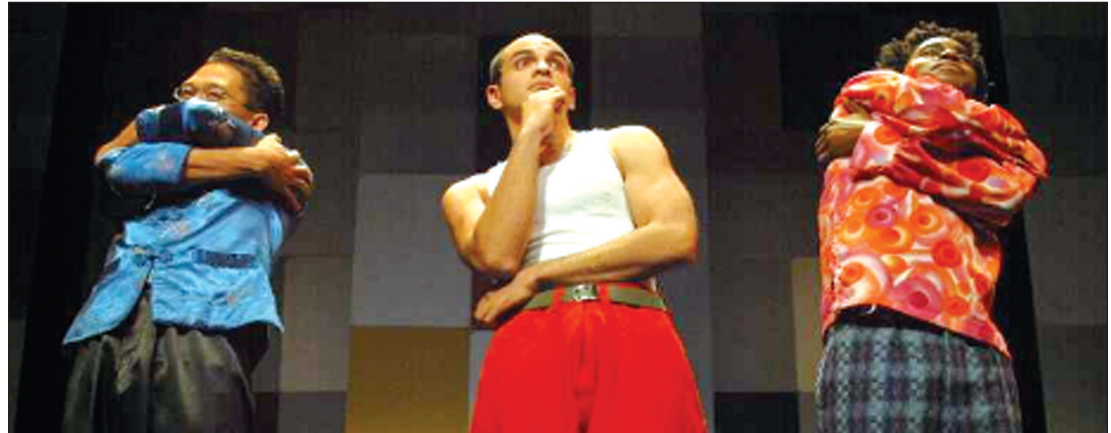
ers and readers.

But just as some believe that these slurs — and many others — should never be uttered in any context, the envelope-pushing trio feels otherwise. They insist that their intent is to bring people together around common experiences, not offend or shock audiences.

"People might be offended by the title, if they're making assumptions about the title," said Axibal. "That means they're making assumptions about the origins of the show and about the writers. But the irony of that is that they're making assumptions about three words that are used to make assumptions about people based on their skin color or ethnicity."

Blending stand-up comedy, slam poetry, theater and hip-hop with their real experiences dealing with hate, Axibal opens the show with a long-ago dream of one day being the next Tom Cruise, only to be told by his mother that it was impossible. Gregley talks about his love for the lead singer of the '80s duo Wham! and how if no one had ever told him that he was black — and that George Michael wasn't — he never would have noticed. Agustin's story is last: He confesses to once changing his name to Ralph August and dyeing his hair blonde, in ill-fated attempts to conform to an American ideal, only to find himself losing his cultural identity.

"Laughter smashes through barriers," the co-creators are jointly quoted as saying in promotional materials for the show. "That's



Left to right: Allan Axibal, Rafael Agustin and Miles Gregley assume their positions in a performance of the controversial stage show "N*W*C."

what we're about. We want people to get over the paranoia surrounding these terms and continue the dialogue about race. What better way to do that than through a forum where everyone can laugh about something that's supposedly socially forbidden?"

Gregley, who grew up in the Pasadena area, was first made aware of the sensitivity of certain words when one of his elementary school classes was reading "Huckleberry Finn." Everything was fine until they reached a page that included the N-word; he looked up, and everybody was looking at him, the class' only black student. The teacher even asked him if it was OK for the word to be said aloud.

"All of the sudden, the world was turning in slow motion," Gregley says in the show. "And when I said 'yes,' the word was read. It was the longest word I'd ever heard. Didn't realize until then ... that word was me."

Why do some African-Americans believe it is OK for them to use the N-word, while others can't? Gregley fields this question often, and remains unsure.

"The dialogue about who can say the words and who can't, got skipped over," Axibal said. "I don't think that the civil rights movement was supposed to suffocate the dialogue. Our show tries to remind people that these words are still out there, that they still exist and they have this underlying feeling — yet everyone is still trying to ignore them."

After two years of taking their show on the road, Gregley, Agustin and Axibal have received very few negative reviews. Most observers see that the words are used in artistically relevant contexts — not just for the sake of it.

"When you step outside of that world, you see that it's not as pretty as you think," Gregley said, referring to those who believe the words are out of common usage. "For people to want to tone them down, it's a good thing. But for a particular cause, then it's important. There's a lot of controversial art out there right now ... but there's a thin line between what is art and what is crap."