

“N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk” travels by word of mouth

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Words matter. That’s the message of a play receiving a repeat-showing at Kirkland Performance Center (KPC): “N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk” is billed as a piece that confronts prejudice by “taking an empowering shot against racial stereotypes.” But, according to Vic Valdez, KPC marketing director, the play’s title has provoked both loud controversy and deafening silence. Currently, as well as in November 2005, when the play was first presented in a limited engagement at KPC, Valdez reports that KPC has encountered great difficulties in promoting the show through typical marketing channels. “No radio stations would consider playing a spot with the ‘N’ word,” Valdez says.

In 2005, word-of-mouth communications that developed out of a student workshop at Everett Community College boomed against a backdrop of virtual silence on the part of traditional media outlets, such as newspapers and radio. Valdez is hoping to capitalize on those lessons from two years ago in order to increase audience attendance for its May shows.

“N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk” is an original 90-minute piece that deploys multiple kinds of comedy and performance in order, as its creators say, to “deconstruct the notion of race in America.” Exploring the words in the play’s title, performers and co-writers Miles Gregley, Rafael Agustin, and Allan Axibal trace the origins and evolution of “three derogatory terms that shaped our lives.” As an African American, an Asian American, and a Hispanic American, these three men share aspects of their personal experiences as people of color growing up in the United States. Seeking to “smack [these] racial slurs into submission,” the performers combine drama, hip hop, slam poetry, and stand-up comedy in a bid to reclaim their power over the words that have been utilized as a means of division rather than reconciliation.

“N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk” is the winner of the 2003 award for “Best Play” from the American Readers Theater Association. But KPC is banking more on the educational workshops offered by the show’s

artists, including director/co-writers Liesel Reinhart and Steven T. Seagle. The "N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk" team, which works together in Los Angeles as Speak Theater Arts (STA) theatre company, talks to student groups in schools about topics of racism and racial tolerance. These workshops have in turn motivated theatre attendance by audience members younger than those who typically attend KPC performance events.

KPC has scheduled six workshops at Cascadia College and local high schools and middle schools, all to be held before the show's May 9 opening night, in hopes of generating even greater word-of-mouth enthusiasm than in 2005. Valdez also reports that "N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk" will enjoy a longer performance run this time, in order to allow firsthand verbal reports of the show by its spectators to develop into greater ticket purchases.

KPC has also recruited members of the community to serve as Artist Sponsors for the show. Sponsor Shelly Schermer says of her participation: "I choose to sponsor this performance because I felt the show did more than just entertain, but was also socially relevant and addressed the increasing diversity of the Eastside."

KPC and the show's cast hope the controversial words will generate more debate that will eventually lead to changes in both attitudes and behavior. Each of the artists, staffers, and sponsors involved aims to support "N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk's" overall message: "There's only one race: the human race."

*"N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk" runs May 9 – 19 at Kirkland Performance Center, 350 Kirkland Ave., Kirkland.*