



(L-R:) Gustavo Ruelas, Anne Betancourt, Julia La Riva and Robert Covarrubias confront their heritage in "Latins Anonymous."

THEATER REVIEW

Lotsa Spice, Little Bite

'Latins Anonymous'

In the new era of multiculturalism, examining racial stereotypes has become a virtual subgenre.

One example is Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle*, a film in which racism and stereotyping are explored through a black performer's dilemma over whether to accept a role as a gang leader. Sacramento Theatre Company's "Latins Anonymous" covers much the same territory, but from a Hispanic perspective, with similar send-ups of pop culture, explorations of identity and self-deprecating treatments of stereotypes. It's nearly as funny as Townsend's comedy. But it lacks two elements that made *Hollywood Shuffle* a success: a narrative story and emotional depth.

Without plot, the 20 comedic sketches of "Latins Anonymous" come off like a tame version of "In Living Color." In taking on issues of assimilation and identity, the show skirts tough questions, nearly always opting for laughs over poignancy.

Not that the humor doesn't come readily. As directed by co-writer Rick

Najera, even the half-baked, overlong skits are crowd-pleasers. STC's first-ever Latino production is utterly hilarious in its portrayals of macho men, Latina aerobics instructors, effusive Puerto Rican poetry buffs and would-be "American-Aryan" Mexican teenagers.

But where most theater-goers want the equivalent of a meal, "Latins Anonymous" provides hors d'oeuvres. And despite discussions about spicy Mexican food, much of the fare lacks bite; it simply pokes fun at Latino attempts at assimilation.

First performed in 1989 by the four co-writers, the continually evolving show suffers from rough edges and visible seams. As on "Saturday Night Live" or "In Living Color," too many of the skits begin with solid premises and then fall flat.

Six of the 20 sketches are set at a meeting of Latinos Anonymous, where confused members learn to accept their heritage. Early on the focus is on one Nicolette Sauvignon Blanc (Julia La Riva), who finally concedes she is, in fact, Latino. Everyone, onstage and in the audience, cheers.

At one point, members make amends for offenses against both their Latino and American identities. One confesses to ordering a grandmother to "speak English!" Another apologizes for forcing a polysyllabic Aztec name on a young cousin.

Switching costumes furiously and racing on and off Jeff Hunt's colorful set, each of the four actors is allowed to carry a handful of skits.

The solid Gustavo Ruelas stars in "Menudo" as a former member of that Mexican boys' pop group, who's been kicked out of the band at age 17 and is now working as a busboy.

"Machos of Omaha" has Ruelas and Robert Covarrubias, with shocks of hair taped to their chests, dueling (like a Hispanic Hans and Franz) over whose exploits have been more death-defying.

In one inspired sequence, four males square off, attempting to divide up TV's available roles for hoods and drug dealers. Another has the elaborately costumed Mayan Defense League arriving at the house of a woman who refuses to acknowledge her heritage. To revive her memory, the team chooses not information about the Mayan legacy, but a large tortilla.

At these points "Latins Anonymous" reveals itself as an unfinished collection of skits lacking depth. But the sheer number of laughs the show deserves and receives proves that its source material is rich. Add a little passion and analysis, and the show might give viewers something to think about on the way home.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN