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FILLING THE ROOM: Arigon Starr as one of the many characters she plays in "The Red Road," set in an Oklahoma cafe.

THEATER REVIEW

Caught in 'Road's' comic whirlwind

Native American stereotypes take a licking in Arigon Starr's lively one-woman show.

By **LYNNE HEFFLEY**
Times Staff Writer

It's gettin' a mite crowded at the All Nations Café in Sapulpa, Okla.

Country music star Patty Jones has arrived at this casual Native American gathering spot to do a live TV special, local radio host Clyde is on hand to broadcast the goings-on, and a self-reverential Indian activist and his militant sister have made an unwelcome entrance.

Verna, the financially strapped owner, must cope with the chaos as well as with her angst-ridden 13-year-old niece; the fry cook, Emmitt, and his 9-year-old, Beatles-crazy son; and assorted other visitors. The latter include a punk rock star from England, the only non-Native American in the nutty bunch.

Add them all up and you get ... Arigon Starr, rollicking through a near-tour-de-force performance of her rowdy, witty, big-hearted, one-woman comedy, "The Red Road," a world premiere Native Voices production at the Autry National Center.

Set against a backdrop of the emerging Native American activism and resurging tribal populations of the 1970s, Starr's fast-moving show, directed by Randy Reinholz, weaves a wispy story of loss and love around original country songs and wicked jabs at white and intertribal stereotyping and cultural quirks.

Comic barbs fly as Starr moves her various alter egos around Craig Dettman's cafe set — a red booth, checkerboard floor, TV show mikes and lights, and a radio sound-effects table.

Grist for her comic mill are prejudices regarding the superiority of geographic location — "real Indians" live in Minnesota, claims militant Bonnie — and how members of different tribes view one another's idiosyncrasies (with snickers and a jaundiced eye).

One of Starr's most wicked takeoffs is inspired by how some nonnative people see Native Americans as otherworldly and as quaint remnants of the Old West — a viewpoint embodied by punk star Danny's penchant for mythologizing all things Native American while keeping an eye out for tomahawks.

Throughout, Starr plays a mean guitar, with showstopping hot licks that match her rafter-raising vocal stylings.

She varies her satiric and soulful country songs according to character, from Patty's twangy country ballads and Danny's howling "Indian Eyes" to Emmitt's loving and loud rendition of the cafe's down-home menu.

Costume designer Christina Wright keeps things simple. Starr slips into character with a change of hats or the flap of a kitchen towel, aided by lighting designer Leigh Allen's shifting patterns and washes of blue and red, black and white.

Before a passing tornado clears the air, Verna is betrayed by her ne'er-do-well sister, then unexpectedly finds herself pursued by three suitors and the rumor that she was an adopted white baby.

Emmitt is moved to reveal his hidden passion, and activist Richard channels Elvis.

No, not all the jokes will resonate deeply, but Starr, nimble even when her careening pace makes her character transitions a tad ragged around the edges, has an ample supply of wit — and heart — to go around.