

ENTERTAINMENT

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The humorous side of 'The Red Road'

by: **Estar Holmes** / Today correspondent

LOS ANGELES - Gauging by audience reaction, the art of Indian storytelling is reaching new heights in Los Angeles this April, where Arigon Starr, Kickapoo, has brilliantly brought 11 characters to life in her one-woman comedy, "The Red Road," at the Autry National Center's Wells Fargo Theatre.

Loaded with good-natured jabs at everything from Anglos who love Indians to intertribal backbiting, Starr builds empathy for all the characters that converge during a busy day in the 1970s at the All Nations Cafe on legendary Route 66 in Sapulpa, Okla.

Vivacious, witty and energetic, Starr strives to be known as "the Indian woman that could," and her current production proves that she can be virtually anything she sets out to become.

Starr masterfully builds the play's momentum as she morphs smoothly through a diversity of characters, ages and genders, from kind-hearted diner owner Verna Yahola, a Creek Indian trucker's widow struggling to make ends meet while caring for her teenaged niece, who is suffering from an identity crisis; to Pawnee organizer of Indian causes Richard Doolittle and his prima donna activist sister, Bonnie; to Emmitt, the diner's beloved Navajo fry cook; the handsome and stoic Merle Yahola Jr.; a bingo-loving, insightful Chippewa elder; a vivacious Choctaw country singer; an innocent 9-year-old Kiowa Beatles fan; a Creek disc jockey who broadcasts his live show from the cafe; and an English punk rocker who wants Verna to be his personal guide on a tour through Indian country.

While she has your attention, Starr wants you to know how she thinks things ought to be, and she delivers the message with sensitive passion through her songs and dialogue.

"We should meet people where they're standing, and not have a lot of expectations," she said.

The melting pot of Sapulpa along Route 66 is a fitting setting to make the point. Known as the "Main Street of America," the road converges with four other thoroughfares here, and a string of mom-and-pop diners and old-fashioned service stations serve a cornucopia of truckers, Indians and hillbillies, along with a steady stream of tourists eager to experience a slice of genuine Americana.

An accomplished singer, songwriter and actress, Starr decided to write "The Red Road" while attending a Native Voices retreat for playwrights at the Autry. The inspiration for the All Nations Cafe comes from Jollie's Restaurant, a truck-stop diner and lounge along Washington's Interstate 5, run by Bill Jollie, Red Lake Chippewa. The characters are a composite of people she has met during her own travels along the red road and stories she's heard from relatives. Setting the play in the time of the American Indian renaissance of the '70s pays tribute to an era when Native activists and writers arose to challenge the myth of the vanishing Indian.

The Autry's Native Voices program is dedicated to dismantling false images perpetuated by stereotypical portrayals of



PHOTO COURTESY OF TONY BAILEY

Arigon Starr played Chippewa elder Etta Walters and 10 other characters in the debut of her one-woman comedy, "The Red Road."

Natives in mainstream productions. Devoted to the development of new works by American Indians, the program provides opportunities for established, mid-career and emerging Native writers to workshop their material with professional directors, dramaturges and actors.

Starr has been featured in five other Native Voices productions and recently made her network television debut on Showtime's hit comedy, "Barbershop: The Series." Among the accolades to her credit are two First Americans in the Arts awards, the Maverick Award from the Los Angeles Women's Theater Project and a Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers Award. Her musical accomplishments include two Native American Music Awards and five CDs full of original arrangements.

In conjunction with the play's debut, Starr released her latest album, "The Red Road - Original Cast Recording," featuring 12 new songs performed by the various characters depicted in the show. She is accompanied by performers Kenny Vaughan, Gary Bennett, Doug Pettibone, Skip Edwards, Chris Lawrence, Stuart Duncan, John Hatton, Thaddeus Graham and Scotty Lund.

"The Red Road" will play at the Wells Fargo Theatre through April, after which Starr intends to take the performance to theaters, colleges, museums and conferences throughout the nation and beyond.

Despite the saturation of insider Indian jokes, the menu at the All Nations Cafe offers up something for everyone. When a portion of the play was performed in Brisbane, Australia, before what Starr described as "a bunch of Aussies," they laughed and said, "You guys are just like we are," she recalled.

No matter where you are from, if you can stand laughing and smiling for a full 75 minutes, the fare at the All Nations Cafe is well worth sampling.

For more information, visit www.arigonstarr.com