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## Real women laugh

Kiki Melendez showcases 'Hot Tamales' to find unity in comedy

By MICHAEL LISI, Special to the Times Union

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It's not that Kiki Melendez thinks she's on a mission from God. But she firmly believes that divine intervention of some sort helped make her "Hot Tamales Live!" female comedy revue a multicultural comedy showcase.

It was an early morning epiphany that hit a few days after returning home to California from a short run of performances in New York City in 2002 that Melendez believes led her to expand the show's scope from featuring only Latina comics to including women of all races.

"I wanted to help women in their quest to become comics, but I didn't really think it was my mission," said Melendez, the show's creator and host, in a recent phone interview from her home in Bel Air, Calif. "But ... I heard this voice that said to me, 'You are to unite races through laughter.'

"My saying is, 'God puts in your heart what you are meant to be, and the meaning of life is to have the courage to do it,' " continued Melendez. "When I first cast the show, I was going to make it all Latino, and then it would break my heart when I'd get calls from comics of other races telling me how much they'd love to be in my show.

"And I'd say to myself, 'Why should I tell this person she can't be in my show?' It didn't make sense to me. If I want to help women, I have to help all women, not just one race."

She has stayed true to her vision.

"Hot Tamales Live!," set to be performed Saturday at Albany's Palace Theatre, is a melting pot of comedy, featuring female comics who are black, white, Hispanic, Asian and just about any ethnic group you can think of -- and each show features a different lineup. Melendez even crosses gender lines: "I always have a man in the show, and we call the segment 'Mucho Macho,' because if you can go out and perform with a bunch of women, you've got to be a real man," she said.

Make no mistake: the focus of "Hot Tamales" is on women, and Melendez has had her share of female comics who have climbed through the ranks.

"Hot Tamales" alumni include actresses Loni Love (VH1, Nickelodeon's "Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide"), Tess (NBC's "Last Comic Standing") and a number of female comics who have appeared on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and Comedy Central.

In Albany, Melendez will bring along Sara Contreras (Showtime's "Latin Divas of Comedy"), Helen Hong (E! Network), Jessica Kirson ("Last Comic Standing," "The Tonight Show"), Roz ("Last Comic Standing," "HBO's Def Comedy Jam," Comedy Central), Vanessa Hollingshead (Oxygen Network) and Valentino (Comedy Central, VH1).

"It is the biggest misconception that there aren't that many female comics out there, because there are," Melendez explained. "They're not getting the breaks because they didn't have a showcase. The women I work with, they get what I'm doing, they support me. I've had (female comics) take a cut in pay to do the show, because they know what I'm trying to do."

Then there's "Hot Tamales" most famous alumna, Melendez's good friend Eva Longoria.

Yup, that Eva Longoria, one of the stars of the sultry, sexy ABC hit "Desperate Housewives." Longoria, who spent two years starring in and working on "Hot Tamales," was Melendez's "right-hand" person, helping her with writing comedy sketches, scouting talent and doing office work, Melendez said.

Longoria, who met Melendez in the late 1990s -- and about a week after she arrived in Los Angeles -- stayed with "Hot Tamales" from its inception in April 2002 until making the jump to network television as Gabrielle Solis with "Housewives" in 2004. "For two years, she never missed a show," said Melendez. "I treated her as my protege. She was someone that I took under my wing and she proved herself. She worked hard and she accomplished, she produced."

Melendez had already made a name for herself in the Hispanic community as a popular disc jockey on L.A. Latin music station KRLA. She met Longoria while doing her "Latin Groove Live" disc jockey gig in a popular Los Angeles dance nightclub called the Hollywood Athletic Club.

The two became fast friends, and Melendez helped Longoria when she could, including giving the aspiring actress her first television role, as a reporter on the pilot episode of "Kiki Desde Hollywood," a bilingual variety show that aired on the Galavision

network in the late 1990s.

Melendez and Longoria worked closely on "Hot Tamales," molding the show together and writing comedy sketches for Longoria to act in. Longoria was not a stand-up comic; the sketches allowed her to showcase her talent, Melendez said.

The pair continued to work together even as Longoria found acting jobs, including a recurring role as villainess Isabella Brana on the hit CBS soap "The Young & The Restless" from 2001 to 2003. For "Hot Tamales," the women would hit local comedy clubs almost every week in the early days of the show, checking out female comics to do the show.

"I remember that she would come over to my house after working on 'The Young & The Restless' and work with me on the show," Melendez said. "I remember one time saying to her, 'Eva, we have to send 300 faxes about the show to production companies and people that could hire us.' Two hours later, she came in and said she was done. I couldn't believe it; it was so fast. I was like, 'Oh my God.' "

Longoria and Melendez are still close. Longoria is set to make a guest appearance in "Hot Tamales" on Nov. 17, when the show is taped as part of the HBO Comedy Festival, a prestigious comedy event in Las Vegas featuring performances by the likes of Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock and Ellen DeGeneres. Melendez said she's hoping the exposure will be enough to land "Hot Tamales" a spot on cable or network television.

"We're putting a lot of hope that we'll be discovered from the festival," said Melendez. "If networks were looking for multicultural talent, my show would have a bidding war."

Still, comedy fans are often thrown by the show's name, Melendez admits.

"Unfortunately, sometimes, when people hear the name of the show, they assume it's just for women or just for Hispanics, but it's not. It's almost like watching 'In Living Color' or 'Saturday Night Live.' It has a lot of Latin flavor because I'm the host. But it really is for all audiences."

"I think that people who come out to the show are really going to feel the message I'm trying to send, which is unity," she continued. "I think this is a show that really inspires people and brings people together."

Michael Lisi is a freelance writer from Rotterdam and a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

Kiki Melendez and

"Hot Tamales Live!"

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Palace Theatre,

19 Clinton Ave., Albany

Tickets: \$20 and \$25

Info: 476-1000

More than just a show

Buying a ticket for the "Hot Tamales Live!" show Saturday at Palace Theatre will mean more than just a night's worth of laughs.

A portion of the show's proceeds will benefit the Albany Latin Festival Association, the nonprofit organization that presents the annual Albany Latin Festival.

And one lucky audience member and a guest will win a free flight to Las Vegas and VIP tickets to see the live HBO taping of "Hot Tamales Live!" -- and get a chance to meet "Desperate Housewives" star Eva Longoria and "Hot Tamales" creator Kiki Melendez. The trip is sponsored by Envy Restaurant & Lounge, 74 State St., Southwest Airlines and Target. Call the Palace Theatre box office at 465-3334 for tickets and more information.

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