

# LAS VEGAS SUN

## To this day comedian still fights stage fright

BY SARA FELDBERG

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When then New York-based radio host Kiki Melendez wanted to get into comedy, she didn't just start cracking jokes or trying her hand at open mic nights. She went back to school. The budding comedienne took a course at NYC comedy club Comedy Strip, but there was one little problem: Melendez was terrified of getting on stage.

"It's so embarrassing to go up there," says the comedienne whose female-focused Hot Tamales Live tour recently enjoyed its first Showtime special and will land this Sunday at the Pearl at the Palms. "Comedy, I think, is one of the hardest of all the arts. When you're doing a movie you're reading a script and you portray a character. It's up to the director to direct you correctly, but when you're doing comedy it's just you up there."

However, Melendez's comedy school instructor told her something interesting: "The people with the most fear are the ones that are the greatest talents." She took it to heart, and, with the help of a little nightly self-hypnosis, she hasn't looked back.

"I swear to God, it works like a charm," she laughs. "I hypnotize myself that I'm not going to be fearful, that I'm confident, that I'm going to do great, that I'm creative, blah, blah, blah." It's worked so well that Melendez says she's even excited for her shows these days.

"There's always that nervousness of before the show starts – I can't eat a few days before – but once I hit that stage, I feel great." And when the show is done and the diverse range of comics Melendez selects have done their bits, making the audience laugh, groan and maybe even grip their stomachs in the kind of pain only great comedy can produce, she says she feels even better.



"I hope that my husband never reads this," she says chuckling, "but it's better than an orgasm." Melendez has been enjoying that feeling for seven years now. She and co-creator Eva Longoria started Hot Tamales Live in 2002 as a vehicle for female comics of all backgrounds to gain exposure and stage time.

"I knew a few female comedienes, Latinas, and they were all complaining that they could not get on at any of the clubs. They don't give them a shot," recalls Melendez.

As co-producers, she and Longoria decided that they could be the ones to give their underutilized friends a chance to perform and further their own careers in the process. Melendez had seen a hosting offer for a television show fall through – she calls her proposed persona "L'Oprah, like the Latina Oprah" – and for Longoria, Hot Tamales Live was one of the actress' first stage performances and certainly one of her first attempts at sketch comedy.

“I said to her, ‘I really want to do a show where I can show everyone that I can be a host and at the same time help other people. What can we do?’” The answer was Hot Tamales Live, a female comedy show that combined original sketches starring Longoria, salsa dancers and comedy and hosting by Melendez. Today, that project has morphed into a touring show that in May 2009 was featured on Showtime and continues to employ some of the top female talent in the industry, a fact that Melendez cherishes.

“Basically, you have 78 percent of all comics on stage are men. So, when the industry says that women aren’t funny, there are so many more men that are funny, the reason is because they’re getting three times the exposure and the stage time. How are women going to compete if they don’t have the stage time?”

For Melendez’ show, she reverses this trend, casting Hot Tamales Live mainly with women comics like Amy Anderson, Tiffany Haddish and Jill Michele Meleán. But she always includes at least one male comic in the lineup.

“I love male comics. I think there are so many brilliant ones, but I also know for a fact that there are at least 100 amazing females, because I’ve put 100 in my show in the last seven years.”

The gender reversal isn’t the only thing that the host says makes her show stand apart. There’s music, dancing, a multi-racial cast of comedians and something else, too.

“This is *not* a normal stand up show,” Melendez says. “When you see our show you become spoiled about comedy...our show has a certain *je ne sais quois*. It has a gift that people leave with, and that is we unite races through laughter.”

While the title Hot Tamales Live indicates the Latin background of its creators, Melendez emphasizes that diversity has been a focus of its changing lineup. The comics that take the stage throughout the course of the evening, she says, are black, Asian, Persian and Jewish.

“It’s really God who puts the lineup together,” Melendez says. “Every show, no matter where I do it, how I do it, has every race represented as part of the show, so everyone feels part of it.”

The proof that it works, she adds, is in her audiences’ reactions.

“I went to Houston and Dallas and I was getting a standing ovation from white Republicans. That’s when I know that we’ve hit a chord. That’s what keeps me going.”

The other thing that clearly keeps Melendez going, hypnotizing herself at night and scouting for new talent wherever she can, is the hilarity of it all. Her laughter comes easily and often throughout the conversation, as she makes fun of her own nervousness at performing, the communal bond of dysfunctional families and how she only casts comics who are better than she is.

“If they’re better than me, they’re in. If not, I don’t book them,” Melendez giggles. “I am the bar. I think normally women would scout for women that are not as good, so they can be the star. I do the opposite.”

Melendez’s voice is lost in a flood of laughter. She’s literally cracking herself up. And the comic’s life is ripe with material. She jokes about how people mistake her as the nanny when she takes her blond, half-Scottish kids to the park.

“What do you mean how long have I been with the family?” she cackles. “I just had them two years ago.” As she’s telling the story another one rolls out, it will be added to her material soon, too. Then there’s the story about her Spanish-speaking mother’s difficulties understanding her husband’s Scottish accent, or the time her daughter thought Obama was partying in Bel Air. Comedy isn’t just Melendez’s career; it’s her way of life.

As such, Melendez isn’t content just touring with the Tamales. Seven years after debuting the show, she has big dreams for bringing her comics to more people through an ongoing television series and a regular show in Las Vegas.

“We have to continue to showcase women,” she says, suddenly serious. “I see so many females struggling in this business, and I struggled, too. My dream would be to have 100 women working – have women working on the series, have women working on the Vegas show, have women touring – and basically build an empire of female comics where they’d never have to worry about supporting their families or pursuing their dreams.”

An empire of hot tamales, if you will.