



COMIC RELIEF FOR AIDS PREVENTION

A series of announcements from Canada starring an unlikely trio delivers a serious message.

Meet the new ambassadors for safer sex: three animated condoms named Shaft, Dick and Stretch. In the deadly serious battle to stop the spread of AIDS, a wildly funny series of public service announcements co-produced in Canada is scoring direct hits.

Since the South African Broadcasting Corporation began airing the series featuring the characters dubbed "The Three Amigos" on World AIDS Day, December 1, 2003, one non-governmental organization in that country reports that condom sales have spiked by 63 percent. Firdaus Kharas of Ottawa, who developed the series along with South African co-producer Brent Quinn, says the television broadcasts work because "they are non-threatening. We use humour to make a serious point."

In one 60-second spot, the three friends are playing soccer and find they "just can't score without a condom." In another, they are astronauts who cannot blast off without protection. "We are destigmatizing condoms," Kharas says. "We want the target group of 15- to 24-year-olds to think condoms are cool."

The series proved its worldwide appeal at the 15th International AIDS Conference last July in Bangkok, Thailand. Kharas, who attended

the meetings with the support of Foreign Affairs Canada, says daily screenings of the comedic sketches were packed. "The whole world was laughing at them."

The productions have been endorsed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as a "powerful communicating tool" and were introduced at the Canadian Film Festival in South Africa in March by Canadian High Commissioner Sandelle Scrimshaw. "This is a brilliant concept," Scrimshaw wrote the co-producers, "that may make a huge difference to the lives of people, not just in South Africa, but across the globe."

Kharas now wants to launch "The Three Amigos" in more countries, particularly India and in Eastern Europe, where rising AIDS infection rates are causing alarm. The goal is to get the series of 20 spots broadcast on national networks in 100 countries with \$100 million in donated air time, reaching one billion people.

Such broadcasts are part of a larger public education campaign that includes local distribution of tapes of the announcements. In South Africa, the Canadian International Development Agency is contributing \$100,000 to an HIV/AIDS prevention initiative in which tapes of the announcements in Zulu, Afrikaans,



illustrations courtesy of Firdaus Kharas

Making a point through humour: "The Three Amigos" help to destigmatize condom use.

Sotho and English will be available at various locations, such as military barracks, prisons, health clinics and cinemas. They will also be shown on a cross-country network of plasma screens in minibus stops used by 1.5 million riders daily.

Versions in 40 more languages are being produced with support from OMNI Television, a multilingual television service based in Toronto. Rather than translate the sketches, the producers recruit young people who speak each language to voice new versions of the traditional scripts, laced with local humour.

The project has so far involved 80 people in three countries and a considerable sum of Kharas's own money, but he continues to be enthusiastic about the possibility of making condoms true "amigos" for life. "AIDS is a preventable disease," Kharas says. "I am absolutely convinced we could stop it in its tracks." ♦

You can find sample announcements by "The Three Amigos" and further information at www.thethreeamigos.org.