



STEPHEN NEWTON CHIN

talk show

Robbie McCauley Crafts Dialogues in Black and White

By C. Carr

In the spring of 1990, I saw an early version of *Sally's Rape* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in conjunction with "The Decade Show." Most spectators that evening had been bused uptown from Soho's New Museum. Most were white. I can't ignore that observation in the context of *Sally's Rape*, deconstructed as it is to bring racial subtext to the surface. So there we were. White people. In Harlem. Bused. Listening to Robbie McCauley talk about her great-great-grandmother Sally, who "had them chillun by the master like that's supposed

to been something." Which is the kind of story most white people can handle. Horrific, but historic. Couldn't-happen-today. I wasn't there. Except that *Sally's Rape* is about the way we live now. It's about the way such stories continue to shape black/white relationships because the past has never been dealt with.

So, at the heart of *Sally's Rape* is the dialogue, the friendship, and the inexorable difference between McCauley and Jeannie Hutchins, "that white woman." In the words of a white spectator at the Harlem

show: "I don't know what that white woman was doing on the stage."

Hutchins told me: "White people don't want me to be there. White people want to identify with Robbie."

Robbie McCauley is an analyzer who seems to thrive on intense conversation. Dialogue isn't just the heart of her work but her life. When I first wrote something about her in 1986, she criticized me for "not saying how you felt"—which was a bit startling at the time, but became an opening to conversa-

tion. Since then I've heard her talk about others' criticisms of her, always with the attitude—is there a lesson in it? "Bearing witness about racism informs everything I do," she once told me. And racism continues to thrive because people do not talk about it—across racial lines.

So she'll start the conversation. When the new full-length *Sally's Rape: The Whole Story* opens at the Kitchen this week (November 7 through 16), it becomes one of several current or recent McCauley pieces about black/white dialogue.

In my experience, it is white folks who participate reluctantly and nervously in such discussions, afraid to say something wrong, afraid to feel guilty. McCauley and Hutchins both recalled the Guilt Response they got the first time they performed *Sally's Rape*, in Boston, because it certainly wasn't the response they wanted. As Hutchins remembers it, a white woman stood up and told McCauley she felt terrible about "what we did to you." McCauley remembers: "I told her guilt wasn't useful. That pain was useful but that you had to go really into the pain. And she said she didn't think that was fair. And I said, 'Well, if I can go into it, you can.'" For white people, guilt is often the first thing that comes up, and it often stops them from going further. That's why a Clarence Thomas can use the word *lynching* and watch all the white guys back off. That can only happen in a country where issues of race are so unexamined.

Plain speaking about race, between races, feels practically taboo. More familiar are platitudes from whites and rage from blacks. Most familiar of all is silence.

McCauley tells me, "When you bring up racism, the first thing everyone says is 'I'm not one.' And that's the end of the conversation."

After seeing *Sally's Rape* as a work-in-progress at three different venues, I began to develop a theory about how the piece gets around that defensiveness: What we first see of McCauley and Hutchins is their friendship, their easiness with each other. And because of this, I think, the white people in the audience drop their guard. So when McCauley suddenly steps back into moments from Sally's life, the don't-make-me-feel-guilty barriers are not in place. Then there's relief, as the piece moves back to the present, the equanimity of the friendship. Then the past intrudes again. White people always want these stories—please—to have some Hero Caucasians. But Hutchins is not a hero. Or a villain. She plays a regular white person. That's exactly what makes some white people uncomfortable.

There's a moment in the piece when McCauley gets up on an auction block, naked, as both she and Hutchins direct the audience to chant, "Bid 'em in!" It's a kick in the gut, a glimpse at the unspeakableness that was slavery. And it's just there—shocking. No militance. No sentimentality. While we chant "Bid 'em in!"

I remember a white friend telling me after one show, "I just couldn't say those words." Slave buyer's words. Among the three performances I've seen, the whitest audience had the hardest time by far with getting words out. I recall Hutchins next to the auction block at that show, working hard: "Come on! You have to help her!" Black spectators always join in quite willingly. "They get it," says McCauley. The moment is a cleansing ritual. "White people have a problem because they don't want to be generalized as white. They don't understand that this is for all of us. We all participated."

McCauley has been turning personal history into performance for years. In the mid '80s, she began a series of pieces called *My Father & the Wars*. McCauley's father was a career soldier who did hitches in the army, navy, air force, and national guard. But she was addressing his private, everyday war with a racist society. McCauley, who is now 49, has been acting since the late '60s. She studied with Lloyd Richards at the Negro Ensemble Company, appeared in the Broadway version of *For Colored Girls*. . . . But she's always been "political" as well. She and her husband, musician Ed Montgomery, formed the Seditious Ensemble in 1979 to deal with issues like racism

land gentrification. McCauley had heard Sally's story from her mother, but "it's one of those stories we don't know the details of because it's shameful." Yet, she was fascinated. She identified with Sally: "It had to do with really being a slave woman. I felt that I was coming from that a lot. I would resonate it through everything without bringing it up." McCauley wrote Hutchins's part. "I wasn't interested in doing my story and her story," she laughs. "I was interested in my story. And her being in it." Over the last year, however, they've opened the piece by using what comes up between them in rehearsals—questions or misunderstandings, for example: "The first one," says McCauley, "was that she thought she was supposed to be the weak one and I was the strong one. So we deal with that in the piece." Onstage, they talk about their feeling that McCauley's history is "heavy" and Hutchins's is "light." Hutchins says, "I can understand her story, but there's no way I'm going to have that experience. There's a certain bridge that can't be crossed. You have to accept that and go from there."

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Buffalo, no one talks about the riots. They began breaking the "weird silence" in interviews with people who'd lived through the disturbances. McCauley found it much harder to get interviews from white people. White actors reported they were having a hard time getting interviews from black people. The performers ended up spending much of their rehearsal time talking to each other, a process they turned into part of the performance: "Black Confessions/White Confessions."

"We had these jokes," McCauley says. "Like black people figured that white people thought about them all the time. But white people never have to think about us just getting that out within the group—that was very hard to do. Then, the white actors found it so hard to confess anything in their backgrounds. I'd bring in texts I'd gotten from other white people in interviews, just to get the actors to a place where they could say, 'Oh, that's like my family.' My fantasy had been that the piece would be really hard-hitting, really radical. But I finally felt gratified to just get people to talk. Doing the project made me face my own unreality about how hard that is."

blacked coworkers: the black cop who quit the force; the one meat market that didn't burn. And these anecdotes were mixed with those of fear, shame, denial—about the blacks moving "too far" about the racial self-consciousness that has everyone obsessing and no one discussing. "We don't know enough about history," McCauley said in the piece. "That's why the rage lives in our bones."

After the show closed, she told a Buffalo newspaper, "I know that people who were closed up, opened up. That's what art can do... it can initiate a long-term process toward resolution."

With that ideal in mind, McCauley has begun working on new "performance dialogues" between black and white people in both Mississippi and Boston. The latter will address the early '70s turmoil over busing in Mississippi, she's doing two pieces on the voting rights struggle. One's set for Holmes County, where it started; where local young people have already collected stories; where everyone's so accustomed to Hollywood folks taking their "stuff" that they accepted McCauley only gradually. A second Mississippi piece will originate with actors in Jackson, who will do interviews all over the state, drawing on the work of Fannie Lou Hamer.

With these pieces tailored to the needs and histories of specific communities, McCauley is developing a unique activist art. I went to see the Buffalo piece, and I didn't get some of it because I don't know the topography or local characters. But people in the audience black and white both, were clearly moved that the silence around them had broken.

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