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 huddled around points where the real thing was going on. Mostly white, I couldn't help but sense, in the context of Sally's Rape, deconstructed as it is to bring racial subtext to the surface. So there we were. Have people in Harlem. Listening to Robbie McCauley talk about her greatest-great grandmother Sally, "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 critical of her. Always with the same attitude—"is there a lesson in it?" "Racism stops here." Always about informing people what to do, she once told me. And racism continues because people do not talk about it—across racial lines.

So let's start the conversation. What is the new full-length Sally's Rape? The Week opens at the Kitchen this week (November 1986). I was among a current of several current or recent McCauley pieces on 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 get the first time they performed Sally's Rape in Boston, because it 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 won't work. 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 Clarice Thomas can use the word "I'm guilty" 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 trust in 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 plays. Then there's relief, as the piece moves back to the present, the simplicity of the friendship. Then the past intrudes again. White people always want to discuss these things—how to have some hero Caucassians. But Hutchins is 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 where 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 unspeakable that was slavery. And it's just too shocking. No nuance. No sentimentality. We chant "Bid 'em in!"

I remember a white friend telling me after one show, "I just couldn't say those words." Slave buyers' 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 here!" Black spectators always join in quite willingly. "They get it," says McCauley. The moment is a cleansing rite. "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 participate." McCauley has been turning personal history into performance for years. In the mid-80's, she began a series of pieces called My Father's the War. McCauley's father was a career soldier who didn't kibosh in the army, navy, air force, and national guard. But she was addressing his private, everyday day with a racist society. McCauley, who is now 49, has been active since the late 60's. 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." Well. She and her husband, musician Ed Montgomery, formed the Sedition Ensemble in 1979 to deal with issues like racism.