



Robbie McCauley Crafts Dialogues in Black and White

By C.Carr

in the spring of 1990, I saw an early ver-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-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

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 wom-

an was doing on the stage."

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

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 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 informs everything I vitness about racism informs everything I o," she once told me. And racism contin-

ues 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 (No-

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 ins 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, wilk is often the first thing that comes up. think that was fair. And I said, well, II 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.

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."

sation."

After seeing Sally's Rape as a work-inprogress 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-makeme-feel-guilty barriers are not in place. me-feel-guilty barriers are not in place. Then there's relief, as the piece moves back to the present, the equanimity of the friend-ship. Then the past intrudes again. White

ship. 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!"

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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."

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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 Sedition Ensemble in 1979 to deal with issues like racism McCauley has been turning personal his-

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 rehearals—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."

Early in 1990, McCauley began working in Buffalo, New York, to create a "performance dialogue" about the city's 1967 riots. But she and her cast of black and white actors first had to do some research. In

bring up racism, the taboo. McCauley feels practically race, between races, Plain speaking about says is 'I'm not one.' first thing everyone says, "When you the conversation." And that's the end of

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 Confession of the performance:"

"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."

McCauley had done one of her solo pieces at Buffalo's Hallwalls in 1988 and was surprised to find very few blacks in the audience, very few downtown, very few anywhere. She finally asked. Where are they? And was told, "Across town." Buffalo is a very segregated city, with a long history of clearly demarcated turf for Germans, Poles, Irish, Italians, and blacks. Both black and white people told her "This is the most racist town I've ever been in."

The Buffalo Project played to sold-out houses at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, the Polish Community Center, and the Langston Hughes Institute. Performers told stories from the three-day riot; the white man hidden in a grease pit by his

black 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."

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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 begin 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 and. 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.

McCauley said someone told her. "I think you married Ed so you could have this dialogue." Not really. But Ed Montgomery, her husband of 13 years, is a white man, and, she says, "one thing that makes it work is that we talk about it all the time. We share a lot in terms of class background, family conditions. The racial stuff is what we have in common politically. It's just that his experience is different from mine. We've considered that a problem to deal with. We confront it. So it's demystified for us."

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She told me a story about their daughter, Jessie, who was once—to McCauley's horror—questioned by a cabdriver on whether she was '100 per cent black." Jessie, who was four or five at the time, calmly replied, "My father is white but I'm 100 per cent black."

black."

But, of course, said McCauley, "She'd been hearing that since she was born, because we talk black culture a lot."

Again the theme is talk. As Hutchins commented to me, "White people think they're supposed to have a sophistication or sensitivity addressing something they grew up not talking about at all."

Where things are stuck is with white people, because we can't admit to anything. I really believe this. So, while it feels a little strange to end this with something about myself "as if it was something," it also seems appropriate. At some point in our last interview, I told McCauley that, actually, my grandfather was in the Klan, though I hadn't known that till after he was dead. This is something I don't tell black people. But I also don't tell white people.

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"For me as a black person, hearing that is a relief," she said. "Because I feel like I'm not making up something. The 'nice white people' I know all come from something. If we uncover and find the racitst in our closets, then it's healing to bring that out."

I remembered finding a photograph of a 'lynching in my grandfather's hometown. I had searched through the grinning white faces to find his, but couldn't. I made some more inquiries to make sure that my sister had done the same thing.

"Those are the stories we need to hear, that white people aren't telling," McCauley said. "From my point of view, it's the only way. That's what standing on that auction block is for me. This all has to do with shame, and that's what makes it so hard."

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