



JOYCE GEORGE

Jeannie Hutchins and Robble McCauley In *Sally's Rape*

# How Robbie Do

By Alisa Solomon

**Sally's Rape**  
By Robble McCauley  
The Kitchen  
512 West 19th Street  
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Toward the end of *Sally's Rape*, writer/performer Robble McCauley describes a school set up after slavery times where, along with reading, writing, and numbers, pupils learned "how white folks do." No less important, they stud-

ied rhetoric, which, one of McCauley's relatives told her, meant "the truth told over and over again." In these terms, in addition to teaching us something about how white folks—and black folks—do, *Sally's Rape* is a deeply rhetorical play.

Over and over again, the 45-minute piece reveals sharp, new facets of American truths, truths we secretly hold to be self-evident, but never discuss, truths about racism and misogyny, oppression and history. Sure, these shameful

pieces of everyday America are constantly named and denounced faster than you can say David Duke. But, the play suggests, no one ever really *talks* about them: the discussion always begins—and ends—with slogans, guilt-mongering, or denial.

*Sally's Rape* makes us start talking. Literally. After passing trays of sliced apples and homemade cookies around the audience, McCauley and cop performer Jeannie Hutchins instruct us in ways we can respond to issues raised on stage. Having already established an atmosphere of easy, humorous give-and-take between them, the two women continue trading ideas and stories, periodically leaving

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spaces for us to agree, disagree, or bring up questions. Even on the sparsely attended first night, spectators chimed right in. Though some, like me, might have hesitated out of shyness, McCauley and Hutchins never seemed anything less than genuinely interested in our responses. Unlike typical attempts at audience participation, we weren't being manipulated or coerced. Instead, we were being drawn into a rehearsal, practicing for a bigger project that, we understood, would have to continue outside.

And, thrillingly, it did. For a couple of hours after the performance, I talked about racism with friends who'd also been at the show, looking into areas I'd never before dared to open. I can't remember the last time I left a play more filled with its questions than with the dilemma of where to go for dinner.

Through their own interaction, too, McCauley and Hutchins demonstrate the obstacles and rewards of real dialogue between blacks and whites. Their mutual trust and comfort, and their willingness to point out areas of discomfort and anger, is disarming. While McCauley is undoubtedly at the center of the piece, Hutchins is inescapably part of it—not because she's asked to stand in for and bear the guilt of white people, but because she, like McCauley, must take her place as an active agent in history.

Through narration, commentary, and brief interludes of movement, McCauley spins contemporary tales that unwind in a spiral from the core of a story about her great-great-grandmother, Sally, a slave who, McCauley tells us, "they said had two children by the master like that was supposed to be something." If, as a result, her mother's family was half white, McCauley explains, "that wasn't nothin' but some rape."

Hutchins tells stories about her white working-class life, too. These counterpoint McCauley's stories without competing with them or, most important, without trying to claim they're equivalent. Hutchins, for instance, also talks about rape; huddled onto a bench, she describes the "closing in your thighs, locking up everything" that a rape engenders. Without taking away from the horror of this experience, Hutchins and McCauley don't let it accomplish the easy, liberal job of representing the regular rape of Sally and

other slave women, who were taken from their quarters at night and "done it to down on the ground." While whites might be

accustomed to finding sympathy for blacks by comparing their own suffering, *Sally's Rape* interrupts our tendency to finish with a subject by drawing one-to-one emotional correspondences: understanding might begin there, but all too often, that's where it ends.

Nowhere is this deflection of false symmetry more strongly evoked than when McCauley—and then Hutchins—climbs onto a platform to reenact a slave auction. First, while McCauley stands naked on the block, crying out about Sally's life, Hutchins leads the audience in chanting "bid 'em in," assuring us "it will help her." Later, despite Hutchins's reminders that "we decided not to do this. You said it was too arty," McCauley instructs her to climb up and take off her dress. Hutchins's embarrassment and refusal to disrobe is painful and enlightening: she can't—we can't—try to own the experience of slavery. We can only own up to it.

At a time when issues around race are becoming more and more polarized, *Sally's Rape* risks getting in there and grappling; at a time when demagogues play on simplistic oppositions, *Sally's Rape*, without any compromise, manifests complexity and nuance. A couple of weeks ago, Leonard Jeffries came to speak at the college where I teach; his message of pride and self-empowerment feeds a hunger many of our students feel. But his damaging dichotomies and macho posturing won't, I fear, advance dialogue or bring progress. Student groups throughout the CUNY system would do better to book *Sally's Rape*. Yes, it would feed their hunger. And it just might teach them something about rhetoric. ■