

# W E E K E N D Independent

FREE Vol. 3 No. 10 March 19-20, 1994 • Los Angeles Independent Newspapers

"Sit down and lend me your ears," sings liberation songstress Sister Somayah "Peaches" Moore-Kambui from her seat near the stage, her wizened voice underscored with the emotion of remembrance.

It's more than the just the ears, however, that Robbie McCauley hopes to engage with her new work, "The Other Weapon."

"It's amazing how in our society we don't know how to respond to each other," says McCauley. "So much — like race and class — keeps us separate."

The New York-based artist sees conversation as one way to break down barriers. In "The Other Weapon," McCauley uses the events of the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s as the starting point to begin a frank discussion of racism.

A gifted actor, writer and director, McCauley won the Obie Award for Best Play in 1992 and a Bessie Award for creative achievement for her 1991 work, "Sally's Rape," which focused on events in her family history as a metaphor for the African-American experience of surviving racism.

In fact, race relations is a subject that infuses nearly all her work, including "Primary Sources," the performance trilogy which includes "The Other Weapon." The series, created in conjunction with The Arts Company, a Massachusetts-based organization, began in 1992 with "Mississippi Freedom," an exploration of the voting rights struggle, and continued a year later with "Turf," a piece about race and class relationships in Boston.

"I like to look at things big and broad, but from a specific place," McCauley explains. "Content informs me. I am interested in the black liberation struggle and its importance for this country and the world." Yet hers is not an exclusionary dialogue. While "The Other Weapon" is told largely from the eyes of the black experience, McCauley says it's a story that could have also been told from an Asian, Hispanic or Caucasian perspective.

"We are connected through our shared history and our places in history," she says. "And by history, I don't mean 'places' in the sense that you are stuck in them. Places are the things that you know about."

"Each of us was born into things that we have no participation in individually," she says. "Not every white person owned a plantation. I am also connected to something that I am not."

To understand those connections, "Weapon" uses a process McCauley calls "witnessing." Over a nine-month period, she and her collaborators collected

personal accounts, recollections and anecdotes from individuals throughout Los Angeles.

Witnesses were asked to tell what they remembered about the Black Panthers in Los Angeles, specifically the 1969 murder of John Higgins and "Bunchy" Carter on the UCLA campus; the FBI raid on the party's headquarters the same year; and the 1970 arrest and conviction of "Geronimo" Pratt, the party's former Minister of Defense.

"This idea of storytelling is something I've been

then fleshed out through informal rehearsals and discussions among the actors.

"It was quite a task that the actors participated in. We had dialogues, so much that you could even feel the tension...and we didn't come out saying 'we shall overcome and love each other,'" she says, "but we did come out with a certain ability to know how we all respond."

The result is what McCauley calls a "conversation-tal concert," with 10 actors combining storytelling, songs, slides and video projections in a loose, improvisational style similar to jazz.

"Part of my work in culture is to challenge the way culture is presented," she says. "There is a notion that continues today that if something is artistic, then it can't be educational. You don't want to be dull, or lecture, you want to engage. That's what I try to do with my work."

Yet the learning doesn't stop when the two-hour performance ends.

In fact, in some sense, that's when it truly begins, through an informal discussion between the actors and the audience.

"We need to be given memory," says one young woman in her 20s, clearly frustrated by her lack of knowledge about the Black Panthers.

"But don't you also have to ask for it?" replies McCauley.

And in this relaxed atmosphere, it's easy to do so. At times, the questions and conversations are volatile, often frustrating, but the answers are always illuminating. Most importantly, individuals can begin to talk candidly about their fears

and misconceptions.

Though the 1992 riots are touched upon, McCauley actually conceived the performance piece long before the riots. That they seem tailor-made for inclusion attests to the fact that history can, in fact, repeat itself. McCauley admits that there's still so much we need to learn.

"The art that I and my collaborators in different parts of the country create draws upon our ability to pass on songs, stories and even humor in order to keep talking about what often seems unspeakable," she says. "Lessons from the tragedies, and triumphs of civil rights struggles in the 1960s and 1970s may indeed be the other weapon."

"The Other Weapon," Friday and Saturday at the Southland Cultural Center, 226 S. Market St. in Inglewood. Also March 25 and 26 at Hollywood Moguls, 1650 N. Hudson Ave. All performances begin at 8 p.m. Tickets \$10 general public, \$7 students and seniors, group rates available. To purchase tickets in advance, call Tickets L.A. at (213) 660-TKTS.

## BEGINNING THE DIALOGUE



WHEN "THE OTHER WEAPON" ENDS, THE LEARNING DOESN'T STOP. IN FACT, THAT'S WHEN IT BEGINS.

STORY BY JENNIFER PIRTLE  
PHOTOS BY GARY MCCARTHY

doing for a long time," says McCauley, who has vivid memories of her grandmother's slavery-era tales. "I had the idea that if you talked to people from a certain era, you could make art out of it."

She admits the process was difficult. "Some people were willing to talk freely, while others were fearful," she says. "The memories are still very painful."

McCauley and her collaborators collected more than 25 tapes of dialogue, which were then used to construct a script outline. That groundwork was