

BOSTON HERALD



Actors and audience face their fears

REVIEW/by Terry Byrne

"Turf," at the Boston Center for the Arts

Why can't my neighborhood look like this?" an actor asks the ethnically diverse audience at the Boston Center for the Arts. "The world looks like this."

Struggling for change is hard. Even talking about it can be hard. Just ask the 11-member troupe of "Turf," a "conversational concert" that is touring theaters around Boston this month.

The "Turf" team, led by noted actress Robbie McCauley, works hard at facing its fears

— about race, money and privilege — and helps us face our own. In a 90-minute presentation that is by turns compelling, courageous and confusing.

The context in which the "Turf" actors are placed is the history of busing in Boston. And when the focus is on first-person testimonies — a Charlestown teacher fired for trying to take care of her schoolchildren, a South Boston fireman complaining because blacks "without training" were pushed onto his squad, a young black man pulled over by Somerville police as a suspicious character

just because he's black — the evening is dramatic. We *know* these people.

But McCauley has failed to shape these moments into a coherent whole. Too much history, too many wide-ranging stories overwhelm the audience with information and images.

The acting troupe is terrific, with Janice Allen, Paula Elliott, John Ennis, Kristin Johnson, Paul Leary, Mari Novotny-Jones, Juanita Rodrigues, James Sprull, Tom Sypek and Tezz Yancey feeling as much a part of their local communities as the people in the audience.

In fact, one of the most exciting parts of the performance was the discussion with the audience afterward. The relaxed

atmosphere and the familiar feeling with the actors gave audience members the freedom to talk about their own prejudices and perhaps begin to think about them in a different way.

The end result of "Turf" is provocative, but more because of the actors' efforts to engage the audience than the development of the performance piece itself. The effort to get people talking about, and accepting, their differences as much as their similarities makes the struggle to define this "Turf" one worth waging.

"Turf" will be performed at the Charlestown Working Theater tomorrow and Saturday, the Strand Theater March 18 and 19, and South Boston Boys & Girls Club March 26 and 27.

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