

Arts and entertainment

Healing old wounds

Robbie McCauley comes to Boston to talk about busing and 'Turf'

by Cate McQuaid

New York theater director Robbie McCauley has come to Boston to stir things up. Her performance piece "Turf," developed over the last year and a half with a group of Boston-based performers, takes on the thorny issue of busing in the city, and the 1974 court order to desegregate Boston's public schools. "Turf" is slated for eight performances at four Boston neighborhood locations, including two nights at the Boston Center for the Arts' BCA Theater, March 5 and 6.

"The piece is theatrical but not linear," McCauley explained in a phone interview. "We're experimenting with language. The text of 'Turf' has been collected from witnesses; we got the stories, images, and experiences of people who lived through the court-ordered busing event.

"But we're not just taking that language and telling the story," she went on. "We're using the language to break silences around events that still affect people. Theater is a good way to do that."

"Turf" is the second in a series of performance works McCauley is developing around the country called "Primary Sources." It follows on the heels of a piece she created in Mississippi about the civil rights movement and voting rights.

"I visit the area and audition the actors, find people to work on the project," she explained. "They interview people who agree to be witnesses. Then I meet with the actors and we dialogue about the material they're collecting. The actors are part of the community; their input is very important.

"From there, I create a working script," she continued. "But there are opening in the scripts for improvised dialogue among actors, and between actors and audience."



MAPPING OUT TURF: Boston collaborators on Robbie McCauley's *Turf* performance piece, from left: Mari Novotny Jones, Tom Sypek, Arall (Snoopy) Charles, Paul Leary, South Ender Paula Elliott, Janice Allen, Juanita Rodrigues, Kristin Johnson, and John Ennis. (Marie Cieri photo)

Drawing the audience into the performance is a vital piece of the process, the aim of which is to open up discussion and begin to heal old wounds in a community. "The issues are charged, and we want the audience to feel as comfortable as possible. People have pretty strong points of view," McCauley remarked.

The director said that she's learned a lot about Boston in the 18 months she's been working on "Turf."

"Busing was a hard change for people to make in terms of racial matters," she said. "Neighborhoods were being looked at from the outside, and they were examining themselves from the inside. Boston has a reputation as the

cradle of liberty, and it was hard for people to see their city as a place that perhaps wasn't so free."

McCauley sees the South End as a sort of microcosm of Boston, with its diverse ethnic population. "In the South End, contradictions are stated outright," she explained.

"It has always been a fluid neighborhood, a mixture; that's been apparent from the people we've spoken to. But, like many neighborhoods, there was a reluctance to reflect that there was a problem here.

"Of course, the problems go deeper than Boston," she added. "They have to do with the differences we have internalized. The U.S. is not homogeneous. Most coun-

tries are. What America is attempting with a heterogeneous population is difficult, and often it comes out in an ugly way. But we keep dealing with it, and that's to our credit."

The director said that despite the difficult nature of her work, audiences have been receptive. "People are usually grateful for the opportunity to talk back to us," she noted. "Some people are resistant; they say, 'Oh my God, I don't want to hear it again.' But afterwards, they say 'I didn't know I would feel so relieved to talk.'"

McCauley's attention to language may be one of the reasons audiences feel so comfortable talking about painful topics. "I experiment with language," she explained. "I musicalize and theatricalize it. I call it conversational music. It has to do with playing with the way people talk, finding the music and the poetry in the everyday language and drawing it out into dialogue."

From Boston, McCauley will move on to Los Angeles, where she will begin to develop her third "Primary Sources" performance piece. "The next one will be centered on the Black Panther raid in the early 70s," she said. "Geronimo Pratt was jailed. It's about the relationship between law enforcement and the black community—a pretty current topic these days."

Racial issues lie at the core of McCauley's work. "I'm interested in history, but only as it continues into the present, how we relive it. I'm always working with this subject matter. I bring it with me, and it interests people."

McCauley says her role as an outsider coming into a city to talk about a divisive issue has been helpful in the healing process. "I'm the outsider, and that becomes part of the work. I've felt that people welcome me. I always get warm responses."

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—*Turf* director
Robbie McCauley