



The Other Weapon

## 'Weapon' Fires on State of Race Relations

■ **THE OTHER WEAPON.** BY ROBBIE McCAULEY. VISUAL DESIGN BY JAY JOHNSON. LIGHTING DESIGN BY TOM DENNISON. VARIOUS LOCATIONS; CALL FOR VENUE INFO. (213) 660-TKTS. FRI.-SAT. AT 8 P.M. CLOSSES MARCH 26.

By Michael Frym

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This adage certainly holds true in light of the 1965 Watts riots. After this devastating social tumult, investigations were held, a commission was appointed, and recommendations were made — to no avail, as the 1992 riots evidenced.

Only time will tell whether the powers that be will implement any of the Christopher Commission's suggestions with any degree of commitment to change. But, in the past, Los Angeles has taken the "out of sight, out of mind" approach, reacting to problems only when they reach tragic proportions. Obie Award winner Robbie McCauley's *The Other Weapon* bridges the past and the present, crystallizing the fact that little, if anything, has been done to improve the plight of urban blacks.

If you accept the notion that real life contains all the elements of an intense theater piece, it stands to reason that docudrama, or docu-performance art, will rouse audiences to awareness and action. McCauley's mixed-media theater work partially achieves its dramatic objective by reminding viewers of the noble intent for political unity held by the Black Panthers in the late sixties.

The piece — developed through improvisation based on interviews with participants and witnesses of the movement in Los Angeles — has the most impact during the ensemble's solo recollections, while the free-form group work is less effective. Its real strength lies in its ability to remind us that little has changed in twenty-five years: There still exists unbridled abuse by the police as they "serve and protect"; no real representative political party consistently addresses the needs of African-Americans; and tokenism prevails as a short-sighted salve for inequities of the past.

Using ten local performers, songs, slides, and video projections, McCauley creates a collage of the passion, pain, and violence of such historical moments as the UCLA shootout and the early-morning FBI raid on Panther headquarters in 1969. The piece is somewhat reminiscent of Anna Devereaux Smith's work, but performed by an ensemble. *The Other Weapon* has a sense of immediacy about it, as well as a clear message: These people will not be denied their dignity.

The various testimonials provide the performers with ample opportunity to explore this passionate struggle for community empowerment in the face of overwhelming odds. While *The Other Weapon* shines fiercely in the individual moments, McCauley neglects to pull the parts of her piece together, and the audience — bombarded by images, historical facts, and personal accounts — finds it hard to focus.

The group work is often muddled by inarticulate ramblings and improvised percussion from the cast. McCauley compares her piece's structure to jazz, but, in even the most spontaneous jazz improvisation, each musician is solidly rooted in certain musical disciplines, whereas McCauley's group lacks discipline. But the committed performers glisten with rough-edged talent. Particularly noteworthy are Amentha Dymally, Wheaton James, and Gregory Binion; another jewel in this gifted ensemble is Sister Somayah "Peaches" Moore-Kambui, who adds texture to the evening with her autoharp-accompanied liberationist music.

An especially effective moment occurs at the show's closing, when the cast conducts a Q&A session with the audience. The ensuing dialogue invites a self-actualizing introspection on the part of the participants; this dialogue may very well be McCauley's underlying purpose.

Though Jay Johnson's slides and video work provide a historically interesting backdrop, they are at times more intrusive than complementary.

Through it all, however, McCauley's artistry prevails, and her voice rings clear with theatrical vision. The challenge facing whites goes beyond guilt — guilt simply leads to such quick-fix solutions as new labels (African-American), comforting catch-phrases (Equal Opportunity), and token funding for cultural festivals. The down-and-dirty problems of hatred, fear, and prejudice that lead to cut-rate education and an unacceptable, hopelessly limited standard of life *must* be addressed if the past isn't, once again, to become the future, making the '92 riots little more than the tip of the iceberg. ☐