

Disturbing, confusing, anything but easy 'Turf'

By Patti Hartigan
GLOBE STAFF

Can contemporary political theater transcend agitprop? Can it chart new dramatic territory and inspire dialogue, if not immediate change, at the same time?

Stage Review

These are the questions posed by "Turf," a collaboration by New York artist Robbie McCauley and 10 local actors about the Boston busing crisis of the 1970s. McCauley and company set out to create a new theatrical language that penetrates the silence surrounding race relations. Their work intends to explore the specific historical event of school desegregation as a means of examining universal issues. How does the legacy of slavery resonate in the violent response to busing? How does Boston in 1974 reflect today's events and foreshadow the approaching millennium?

The original concept is pure, well-intentioned and long overdue. The actors went out into the community, fielding stories from folks who had lived through the busing crisis. The resulting collaboration, however, is as complicated and thorny as the subject itself. For a number of reasons, it left me profoundly disturbed, terribly confused and grappling for words.

"Turf" is part performance, part contrapuntal panel discussion, part testimonial, yet none of the parts add up to a cohesive whole. Wounds are opened. Rage is unleashed. But the piece fails to channel this raw

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emotion into an organic whole.

It opens with a jazzlike section that fuses nonlinear stories, music and dance. This segment is the most theatrical - from the "Try to Get a Cab" dance to the "I Need Money" song to the staccato rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Stories are interwoven like lace: actor James Spruill confesses his deep disappointment with this thing called racism while a multitalented young discovery named Tezz Yancey beats out the anger with his tap shoes. A fireman complains about integration; a white suburbanite insists there is poverty in Wellesley; a middle-class black woman says she'd never live in Roxbury.

But then the piece breaks down into two groups, with the black actors improvising in a line of chairs and then the white actors following suit.

TURF,

A Conversational Concert
in Black and White
By Robbie McCauley in collaboration
with 10 local performers
Set and lighting design by Joseph
Levendusky
Presented by the Arts Company
At: *The Charlestown Working Theater,*
March 12-13; the Strand Theatre, March
18-19; the South Boston Boys and Girls
Club, March 26-27

This section raises the most difficult questions. How do we talk about racism? How can people of color express the anger of the ages while moving forward? How can white people admit privilege without becoming paralyzed by guilt?

By taking on so much, the piece loses focus and - perhaps deliberately - barrages us with an onslaught of unfinished ideas. The mystifying thing is that "Turf" manages to be so complex and so simplistic at the same time. While it aims to sculpt a myriad of stories and viewpoints (as Anna Deavere Smith did in "Fires in the Mirror"), at times it almost tells us what to think.

The piece is painted literally and figuratively in black and white: there is no gray-area here. It unfolds in the immediate moment, but makes no attempt to explore the changing population that goes beyond black and white to include Latinos and Asians and so on.

And while it so honorably tries to shatter stony silence, it has, for me, the opposite result. These words come with great difficulty: the strident pounding of platitudes makes me feel that any disagreement with the medium will be confused as a dismissal of the message.

Perhaps that's part of the point: to stir us to any level of emotion except complacency. But much of "Turf" doesn't quite gel as theater, despite earnest and talented performances from a true ensemble (Janice Allen, Paula Elliot, John Ennis, Kristin Johnson, Paul Leary, McCauley, Mari Novotny-Jones, Juanita Rodrigues, Spruill, Tom Sypek and Yancey).

One thing is certain, though: people are talking. After Saturday night's performance, the sit-on-the-floor room only audience stayed for a post-performance discussion that was both engaging and enraging. But even in the discussion, sincere statements seemed to be misinterpreted, the best of intentions were viewed as misguided.

None of it, I tell you, none of it is easy. But if "Turf" has accomplished anything, it proves a need for a forum. In this city, it's rare to sit in a packed theater discussing the issue of race. That alone is a testament to the fact that people are starving for serious theater that asks serious questions.