

Robbie McCauley (left, on chair) rehearses "Turf" with the cast at the Boston Center for the Arts.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / LANE TURNER

Finding common ground onstage

Living Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE • FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 1993

'Turf' draws in the audience to break the dangerous silence on issues of race

By Patti Hartigan
GLOBE STAFF

For theater artist Robbie McCauley, silence is the great enemy, the obstacle to progress. She is here to wrench stories from the stony, sleepy past, to encourage witnesses to speak the unspoken.

Her subject is race.

Her challenge is profound.

As much as individuals support some abstract concept — equality this or equality that — how often do they dredge up their deepest, most painful memories? How often do people of any race stretch beyond polite conversation to the terrifying territory called honesty? How often do we probe, really probe, the historical record?

McCauley, an award-winning New York writer and performer, has made these questions the stuff of life and art, and she's spent much of the past year researching racial tension in Boston. She and a crew of local actors conducted interviews with people who lived through the crisis that erupted after the 1974 court order to desegregate Boston's public schools. The field work has been molded into an aptly named performance piece called "Turf," which begins a four-weekend run at area theaters tonight at the Boston Center for the Arts.

What McCauley and company found was a pattern of silence. What they mined was a source of catharsis.

"People said it was a great relief to talk about it, even though it's charged and painful," McCauley said of the interviews conducted in Boston neighborhoods. "Sometimes they had to stop the interview and begin

again the next day."

But once they were given permission to unload, the witnesses broke the dead hush of time.

Theater that explores contemporary history is rare: Like McCauley, Anna Deavere Smith explores history and racial tension in her work, and she's currently preparing a Boston piece that was commissioned by Radcliffe and the American Repertory Theatre. But it's worth noting that area theaters have not explored busing and its inflamed moment in the city's history, while Arena Stage in Washington commissioned a stage adaptation of "Common Ground," J. Anthony Lucas' Pulitzer Prize-winning history of the crisis.

"There is a dangerous silence around race. There's no dialogue. Racism exists, but there's a sense that if we don't discuss it, it will go away,"

McCAULEY, Page 71

■ McCauley

Continued from Page 61

McCauley says.

Tom Sypek, who has lived in South Boston all of his 54 years, is an actor in the project, and his own story is interwoven in the tale. "It never dawned on me to think about blacks or slavery or anything like that. I was a typical South Bostonian," he says. The acting company is a mix of different races and ages and includes professional and amateur actors, and the experience opened Sypek's mind. "It had been dormant and silent," he says. "My brain was on hold."

The actors uncovered sagas from all segments of the community, tales of triumph and memories of despair. They heard testimony from black people who were beaten up during the crisis and from white people who were intimidated by police.

"Turf" is part of a triad of performances in which McCauley goes into a specific area to create a piece about race relations in that community. The series, produced by the Arts Company of Cambridge, began with a piece about the voting rights movement in Mississippi. She chose Boston partly because the Arts Company is based in the area and partly because racial tension "is part of the lore" of the city.

An outsider in both communities, McCauley observed key differences between racial attitudes in the South and in Boston. "Black and white people in Mississippi share a culture, as tense as it is. In Boston, that's not true," she says.

The difference, she says, comes down to Turf vs. Land. Bostonians cling to territory; allegiance to turf divides neighbors. But in the South, the land connects people to history and family, McCauley contends. "It sounds romantic, but there's a connection with land, even if you're black. It has blood in it. It has history. It is bigger and older and more connected."

The interplay of history, in fact, is central to her work. For McCauley, time is a circle, a continuous curve. Yesterday inhabits today, the past informs the present. The legacy of slavery resonates in today's atmosphere of racial tension: The past, present and future coexist in the immediate moment.

Consider "Turf." McCauley and company have been working on the

piece for more than a year, but as they gear up for the first performance tonight, the issues of yesterday reemerge in today's headlines. At this moment, the city is reexamining the effect of busing and debating a call for "walk-to" schools.

McCauley is not surprised. "To me, that's part of the continuity," she says of the current debate. "I'm very interested in how the issue of turf continues today."

The third piece in the series will explore the Black Panther Party and the role of the police in Los Angeles. It was planned well before the recent riots that erupted after the Rodney King verdict. Again, history repeats itself.

...

Vehicle for change

McCauley's performance work spans Broadway, resident theater, experimental venues and community ventures. If there is a common thread, it's the issue of race. That focus, she says, was formed early on when she was growing up in Georgia. "It has to do with being born in the South during the official apartheid - with the signs," she says, referring to segregated bathrooms and drinking fountains and so on. "I knew what that was about from a very young age, and I lived through the change. And I see theater as a vehicle for change, from not talking to talking, from separate to equal."

McCauley studied history at Howard University. But as she sat in the audience during a student production, she said what every artist says at a critical moment: "I can do that." She landed in New York in 1968 at the height of the experimental theater movement off-off Broadway. She worked at such legendary venues as Cafe Cino and La Mama and also studied under director Lloyd Richards in the original apprentice company of the Negro Ensemble Company. She worked with Lanford Wilson long before his Pulitzer Prize for "Talley's Folly."

"My timing was good - as if I had anything to do with it," says McCauley, 50. Many other actresses of color of her generation remember difficulty landing roles: They were told, "You're too light. You're too dark. You're too ethnic." But that's not McCauley's story. She didn't follow the mainstream path; she deliberate-

Finding common ground onstage:

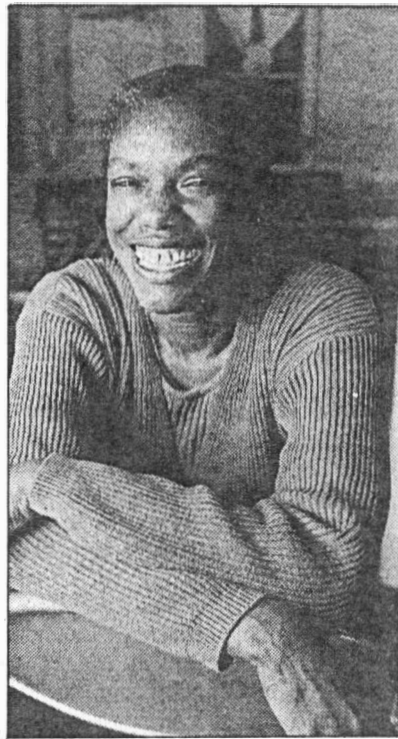
'Turf' draws in the audience to talk about race

ly opted for the experimental scene that was blossoming off the Great White Way.

But she did end up on Broadway, in the legendary production of Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf." She was asked to be in the original workshop that shaped the piece but declined. "I was doing something at the Public," she simply says. But after the show became an unexpected hit, she took over a role.

Even in mainstream productions, McCauley found herself wanting to tell other stories. She gives an example. In "Colored Girls," there's a devastating scene in which a woman and her children are abused by a man named Beau Willie Brown. He holds two babies out the window. "I could only whisper," the character recounts, "& he dropped them." McCauley says, "I always wanted to tell *his* side of the story. He was a Vietnam veteran. He was struggling to survive."

She also had an urge to tell her own family stories. In a series of work, her family history is a metaphor for the African-American fam-



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / LANE TURNER

ROBBIE McCAULEY

ily that survives today. McCauley, for instance, remembers a phrase repeated at her family breakfast table:

"Sally had two children by the master." The phrase was the inspiration for "Sally's Rape," a performance piece about the rape of her grandmother by her white master.

But the point is not to dwell on the personal or to use performance art as onstage therapy. The goal is to use specific stories as a means of exploring the universal. "I'm not spilling the family business. I'm using the stories to look at larger issues," McCauley says.

Involving the audience

She takes a similar approach to "Turf," which does not aim to retell individual sagas or to create specific characters. McCauley says she molded the material into a kind of jazz-like drama, with actors improvising with the audience and emphasizing the music of language. The performance unfolds in the immediate moment, and audience members are encouraged to participate. There is always food at performances, to take the edge off the typical theatrical experience and to tear down the "fourth wall" between actors and audience.

"We open up our dialogue to the audience," she says. "We give the audience permission and comfort to talk."

The piece will be performed at various venues around the city, including the Boston Center for the Arts in the South End (tonight and tomorrow); the Charlestown Working Theatre (March 12-13); the Strand Theater in Dorchester (March 18-19) and the South Boston Boys and Girls Club (March 26-27). The tickets are deliberately affordable at \$8.

"When we are doing this kind of work about witnesses, which is what we call the people we interview, we want them to be able to see it," McCauley says. "I'm not sure how many people in Charlestown or South Boston would come to the Strand."

The goal - in Mississippi, in Boston, in Los Angeles - is to shatter the silence. "People want answers, and I don't claim to give them," McCauley says. "I'm interested in keeping the dialogue going. People want to be healed, but it has to hurt first. And they have to talk about it."