

FOCUS

Thursday, May 21, 1992

Local actors bring civil-rights memories to Jackson stage

■ *Mississippi Freedom* will feature the tragedies and triumphs of the 1960s.

Special to Focus

On May 29 and 30, at 8 p.m., the Smith Robertson Museum in Jackson will be the site of the premiere of *Mississippi Freedom*, a new theater production that will draw on the personal stories of living Mississippians as a way of exploring the legacy of race relations in the state over the last three decades.

Created by award-winning New York theater artist Robbie McCauley in collaboration with 11 actors, storytellers and musicians from the Jackson area, *Mississippi Freedom* places special emphasis on the "freedom riders" in Jackson and the voting rights struggle of the 1960s as a watershed of change for the entire country. The work is being presented by The Arts Company of Cambridge, Mass., in association with Potpourri Theater Company of Jackson.

For the past six months, McCauley and her multi-racial collaborators have been collecting oral histories from people in the state and elsewhere which will form the basis of much of the dialogue in the piece.



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Jackson-area participants in *Mississippi Freedom* are, from left, James Green, Veronica Cooper, Leroy Divinity, Kay King Valentine, Deborah Imboden, Sameerah Muhammad, Kent Lambert, Clarie Collins Harvey, Sadat Muhammad and Sheila Richardson.

This will be combined with the performers' own stories and interaction among themselves and with McCauley. Various storytelling styles, local music, historical and contemporary slides and media footage will contribute to the social resonance of the work.

"Having done performances of

my own family history as it related to the social history about us in the South (Georgia, where I spent much of my childhood), the West (where my grandfather was a Buffalo soldier) and Washington (where my immediate family settled, being part of many black families who migrated north in the 1930s). I have

started work with artists in other communities telling and retelling personal stories connected to social events," says McCauley.

"I hope, in Mississippi, that telling stories as performance and developing theater arts out of existing culture is encouraged. Another intention is to use art in a way that celebrates the hard and good changes that Mississippians have struggled to bring about for generations."

McCauley is a veteran of New York theater, having appeared in the original Broadway run of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, as well as a number of award-winning off-Broadway productions.

A writer and director as well as an actress, she began to create her own musical theater performances in 1979, and, in the mid-1980s, a series of autobiographical works based on historical events. For one of these, *Sally's Rape*, she received a prestigious New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Award in 1990. Recently, she has begun working in film and video, and was the dialogue coach for the Hollywood film *Juice*, directed by Ernie Dickerson.

The 11 cast members of *Mississippi Freedom* are African-Americans and Caucasian, range in age

from early twenties to mid-sixties and live now in the Jackson area though the original homes of many of them are located throughout the state. Most were involved in or have personal memories of the voting rights struggle in the 1960s.

They are: Ona Banks, Veronica Cooper, Leroy Divinity, James Green, Deborah Imboden, Dick Johnson, Kent Lambert, Sadat Muhammad, Sameerah Muhammad, Shelia Richardson and Kay King Valentine. Along with Robbie McCauley, they will participate in discussions about *Mississippi Freedom* with interested audience members after each performance.

Mississippi Freedom is being produced by The Arts Company, a non-profit organization that produces, presents and tours the work of contemporary artists in different locations around the country. In September, *Mississippi Freedom* will tour to four additional sites in the state: Cleveland, Alcorn, Port Gibson and Hattiesburg.

Partial funding for presentation of the piece in Mississippi have been provided by The Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Initiation of *Mississippi Freedom* was assisted by the American Festival Project.