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Robbie McCauley: A Journey Toward Movement

Becky Becker

The critical educational language which we envision is one in which difference is seen as a site of both affirmation and remaking, as a negotiated and complex critical practice in which the possibility of democratic public life becomes a central referent of both critique and possibility.
—Peter McLaren¹

I think moving fast is moving deep at the same time.
—Robbie McCauley²

Actor, performance artist, director, collaborator and educator—all titles descriptive of Robbie McCauley whose 25-year body of work may best be described using her own performance vocabulary: movement.³ McCauley explains, “[w]hen I say movement, I mean going from something blocked and unclear to something open and clearer so that we can move to change things.”⁴ From her early work on Off-Off Broadway and with Sedition Ensemble, to a recent Site-Specific⁵ performance theatre piece, *Shays’ Rebellion*, at Mount Holyoke College, McCauley’s work represents a career-long struggle to *move* collaborators, audience members, her community—and herself—toward social change. McCauley has sustained a high level of social consciousness since her earliest work. During her years as an Off-Off Broadway actress, she supported herself as a social worker. As McCauley explains, “It was a job, but it

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¹ Peter McLaren, *Revolutionary Multiculturalism* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1997), 21.

² Becky Becker, Unpublished personal rehearsal notes documenting the rehearsal process for *Shays’ Rebellion*, Fall 1997.

³ I would like to warmly acknowledge Dr. Vivian Patraka, who helped me to shape this piece in its initial stages, as well as Dr. Lisa Wolford, who provided additional commentary. I also appreciate Susan Bennett’s patience and input in seeing this article through to publication. My deepest respect and gratitude go to Robbie McCauley for giving me the opportunity to experience this journey of movement through *Shays’ Rebellion* at Mount Holyoke College during the fall of 1997.

⁴ Vivian Patraka, “Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in Public,” in *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance*, ed. Carol Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 206.

⁵ In her production history of McCauley’s work, Vivian Patraka groups the works according to mode of composition and performance, suggesting four categories of work: Family Stories, Site-Specific Pieces Involving Community Collaboration, Collaborations with Thought Music, and Sedition Ensemble Pieces. Yet, the connecting component among the four categories is McCauley’s commitment to, as she puts it, “bearing witness to racism” (Patraka, “Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in Public,” 226).

was also part of the sensibility I was starting to develop and hone. I wanted to be able to take in personal experiences that are the result of social conditions and be able to speak on them and I thought theatre could do that.”⁶ Eventually, this sensibility began to move its way into her performance work in a much more palpable way.

McCauley’s aesthetic seems to have grown out of this early work, joining a sensibility of social consciousness with a strong political awareness, and a distinct connection to history. She characterizes her work as “content as aesthetic”—in other words, an aesthetic that allows *content* to dictate the form, rhythm, and flow of a piece. Regarding content, McCauley says that she “began to see possibilities of teaching history in a non-academic way.”⁷ Aside from extending historical perspectives and allowing content to determine form, other qualities may be attributed to McCauley’s “content as aesthetic”—I would also describe it as *collaborative*, and as an *aesthetics of difference*. Additionally, McCauley’s work embraces two qualities that, in my observations of *Shays’ Rebellion* at Mount Holyoke College, I feel are specific to her performance process: *cross-cultural/dialogue* and *movement*, the latter a term used frequently by McCauley. Although these terms may seem to be rather elusive in name, each becomes more tangible when grounded in practical work. My essay introduces these characteristics as they relate to McCauley’s performance work and expands upon each, in a discussion of *Shays’ Rebellion* at Mount Holyoke College, thus providing a closer look at these elements in practice.

Mapping the Terrain of Movement

As McCauley’s body of work demonstrates, her approach to each individual piece evokes a slightly different aesthetic. Discussing her conceptions of “content as aesthetic” in an interview with Sydné Mahone, McCauley explains:

The way I shape work is to listen to what is going on; and of course, “listen” is a big word. . . . The thematic thread in my work is the connection of things that have been torn apart. I don’t try to make connections. I’m trying to find the connections that are there. For instance, I know about differences between races. I know about commonness between races, between men and women, and so forth. The commonness is easier to speak than the differences. In a strange way, speaking differences makes the connection happen.⁸

McCauley shapes each work, based on its content, through a careful process of listening and allowing the connections to happen.⁹ Yet, as she describes it above, “content as aesthetic” is also an *aesthetics of difference* because it is through the differences—inherent within the content—that the form emerges.

⁶Robbie McCauley, Laurie Carlos and Jessica Hagedorn, *Teenytown in Out From Under: Texts By Women Performance Artists*, ed. Lenora Champagne (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), 92.

⁷Robbie McCauley, “Thoughts on My Career” in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (New York: Routledge, 1996), 269.

⁸Robbie McCauley, interview with Sydné Mahone, *Moon Marked & Touched by the Sun* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), 214.

⁹Within a work like *Sally’s Rape*, which is partially based on conversations between McCauley and Jeannie Hutchins, a white woman, the content produces an aesthetic much like a dramatically heightened tea party or meeting over coffee among two friends. At the same time, an aesthetic of difference is apparent in the performers racial and cultural backgrounds.

Turning the tables on dominant cultural assumptions, an aesthetics of difference like McCauley's dismantles binaries traditionally upheld in the West, extending a more direct focus on those who are usually rendered invisible.¹⁰ Too often, difference is strictly posited as a way of describing people of color, reinforcing the binaries of "normalized white" and "racialized other," thereby relegating non-whites to an inferior status. However, as whiteness continues to be examined, theorized, and marked, it is also a potential site of difference. Rather than pitting non-white individuals—those who are perceived as different by the dominant culture—against white individuals, theorists of whiteness strive to dissolve simplistic dichotomies and acknowledge whiteness as a complex racialized site of difference, rather than what is perceived to be "normal." As Richard Dyer proposes in *White*:

there is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery. As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we [white people] are just people.¹¹

One necessary task in reforming this harsh inequity, according to Dyer, is that "whiteness needs to be made strange."¹² For as Audre Lorde persuasively observed, "as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt."¹³ By privileging those individuals who are typically situated in opposition to dominant culture, an aesthetics of difference provides a space in which "[t]he understanding of difference is a shared responsibility . . . [a] willingness to reach out to the unknown."¹⁴ While the exploration of racial, cultural, or other differences is central to McCauley's performance work, an aesthetics of difference does not necessarily elide similarities or even potential "universals," rather it struggles *not* to privilege them.

A crucial condition in developing an aesthetic that privileges difference is collaboration. Theatre and performance are often assumed to be among the most cooperative of the arts, supporting a collaboration in which performers, director(s), technicians, and producers join together to create a work of art. Yet, often this is not the case. Much depends upon where the work is produced, who is involved in the process, and what the work is intended to do. Although the "director-as-god" model of creating theatrical works has been rethought in favor of a more evenly dispersed power structure, many directors still position themselves as the sole architect of a production,

¹⁰ Ann Cooper Albright makes reference to the serious damage done by Western culture's privileging of "certain lives, those circumscribed by the guilt frames of public prestige and power [who] were deemed worthy of recitation. These life histories recorded the triumphs and exploits of heroes and statesmen, reinforcing enlightenment conceptualizations of the universal self (complete with classical body). As we have seen . . . that construction of subjectivity is patterned on the traditional binaries of Western culture (mind/body, nature/culture, self/other, etc.)." See her *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 122–23.

¹¹ Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, & Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, & Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 376.

¹⁴ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 85.

fashioning all aspects of a work according to their singular vision with very little input from designers, assistants, and actors. In contrast to more traditional configurations of theatrical collaboration that place the director at the top of a hierarchy, I would suggest that McCauley occupies a unique position as a director of cross-cultural works. Rather than presiding over a group of designers, technicians, and performers who instinctively defer to her vision, McCauley's approach to directing can be compared to anthropological fieldwork, as described here by James Clifford:

Fieldwork [and, I would argue, directing] cannot appear primarily as a cumulative process of gathering 'experience' or of cultural 'learning' by an autonomous subject. It must rather be seen as a historically contingent, unruly dialogical encounter involving to some degree both conflict and collaboration in the production of texts [and performances].¹⁵

Directing that is invested in an aesthetics of difference can not rely solely on the director's autonomous interpretation of a work. The director-as-fieldworker must ground interpretation in collaborative work, stemming from research, dialogue, and possible conflict with others, cross-culturally.

Perhaps even more importantly, within these personal encounters a director must strive to discover a balance among all participants of the collaboration. But balance, as director Anne Bogart asserts, does not always equal agreement:

We not only need to use our terror of differentiation but also our terror of conflict. Americans are plagued with the disease of agreement. In the theatre, we often presume that collaboration means agreement. I believe that too much agreement creates productions with no vitality, no dialectic, no truth. Unreflected agreement deadens the energy in a rehearsal. I do not believe that collaboration means mechanically doing what the director dictates. Without resistance there is no fire.¹⁶

Creating a collaborative environment for cross-cultural exchange does not mean a passive environment in which differences are subsumed in favor of agreement. Such collaboration is a precarious balance among sharing, honesty, and negotiating difference. In this regard, collaboration is also central to McCauley's aesthetic. Because her works are created through interviews, group research, dialoguing, and discussion, collaboration is rarely a simple, accommodating process. In such a context, collaboration can be complicated, intense, and messy.

Part of McCauley's motivation for creating a collaborative process and performance environment stems from her central aim: to facilitate *cross-cultural/dialogue*. As an artist who continually confronts our shared history of racism, McCauley believes that the only way to change racist and classist attitudes is to get people talking. Although dialogue among similarly positioned people is necessary and important, the kind of performance work and dialogue that McCauley pursues crosses divisions of race and class, as well as gender. Her aim in working cross-culturally is to forge connections in the midst of acknowledged difference: "Otherwise, if we've behaved as separate parts disconnected from each other, we don't get the connections between us that lead to the ability to change things that aren't working."¹⁷

¹⁵James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 90.

¹⁶"Theories in Practice," in *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, (Lyme, N.H.: Smith J. Kraus, 1995), 11.

¹⁷Patraka, "Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in Public," 208.

Yet, for McCauley, crossing borders of race, class, and gender is neither intended nor expected to be an easy gesture. In “naming” this particular quality within McCauley’s work, *cross-cultural/dialogue*, the slash between cross-cultural and dialogue is meant to complicate the gesture, signifying the precarious, labored circumstances of entering into dialogue across cultural borders, particularly when the dialogue concerns questions of race, class, and gender. The slash signifies resistance: something that must be overcome, moved beyond, or stumbled through—perhaps continually—as this dialogue starts, stops, and sometimes, remarkably, moves along. Encountering resistance is, for her, a critical part of facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and encouraging actors and audience to open up. When asked how she manages people’s resistance to dialogue, McCauley remarks:

Well, the resistance is the best part, in a way. Resistance is full of information. And . . . so, when one is really dialoguing . . . I’m listening to the resistance and trying to name that, so that that opens up—the term I use, “opening up the resistance”—and finding out what’s in there. And when actors can do that in a way that they can feel safe opening up—that resistance—it can be quite an exchange.¹⁸

When resistance to dialogue arises—as it inevitably does in discussions around such charged topics as racism, classism, and sexism—McCauley recognizes it as an opportunity to move through the resistance to find out what is behind it. Far from a smooth and easy transport, attempting to move through another’s (or one’s own) resistance is a rocky and unsettling journey.

Yet, moving through resistance does not necessarily mean that understanding will follow. McCauley acknowledges, “I’m not talking about ‘we shall all hug and overcome everything.’ It’s simply that it helps us to see where we are on this whole earth—and out of that, many things can happen.”¹⁹ One of the many things that can happen when differences—and our resistance to them—are examined may be misunderstanding. As Peggy Phelan has argued:

Expecting understanding and always failing to feel and see it, we accuse the other of inadequacy, of blindness, of neglect. The acceleration of ethnic and racial violence may be due in part to the misplaced desire to believe in the (false) promise of understanding. It is perhaps past time that we begin to attempt to see the inevitability of misunderstanding as generative and hopeful, as opportunities for conversation (and maybe a little further down the line for comedy as well), rather than as a betrayal of a promise. Or to put it slightly differently, perhaps the best possibility for ‘understanding’ racial, sexual, and ethnic difference lies in the *active* acceptance of the inevitability of misunderstanding.²⁰

Sometimes we find little resolution when differences of culture, ethnicity, and race are dealt with openly. At times, the only place to find understanding is in living with our differences. Although Phelan also acknowledges that “misunderstanding as a political and pedagogical telos can be a dangerous proposition, for it invites the belligerent refusal to learn or move at all,”²¹ her admission that understanding may not always be

¹⁸Becky Becker, Unpublished taped pre-show interview with Robbie McCauley for *Shays’ Rebellion*, November, 1997.

¹⁹Mahone, *Moon Marked & Touched by the Sun*, 214.

²⁰Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 174.

²¹*Ibid.*, 174.

the end result of dialogue is particularly useful to cross-cultural collaboration. Within McCauley's performance practice, securing answers is not necessarily the goal. Rather, actively engaging in dialogue about difference is a step toward *movement*—even if that movement is not an ideally envisioned bridging of difference.

But what is movement? How does one characterize a quality that, by definition, is slippery, unstable and changing? According to Victor Turner, "[i]ndeterminacy should not be regarded as the absence of social being; it is not negation, emptiness, privation. Rather it is potentiality, the possibility of becoming."²² Perhaps it is in the very indeterminacy of the term itself that *movement*—as it pertains to McCauley's performance work—can be described. For McCauley, the process of rehearsal and performance is shaped by vulnerability, uncertainty, and hard-to-answer questions. Within this loose "structure," movement is the process itself: a space for discovery and growth, experimentation and conflict. But movement also refers to what happens when individuals allow the process of rehearsal and/or performance to move them to understand something about their own position or another's position in a racist society. The goal of the work is, then, movement.

Here, I am reminded of Trinh T. Minh-Ha's description of the condition of individuals who choose to continually question and negotiate an uncomfortable path apart from what is culturally sanctioned. Naming this condition displacement, Trinh elaborates:

Displacing is a way of surviving. It is an impossible, truthful story of living in-between regimens of truth. The responsibility involved in this motley in-between living is a highly creative one: the displacer proceeds by unceasingly introducing difference into repetition. By questioning over and over again what is taken for granted as self-evident, by reminding oneself and the others of the unchangeability of change itself. Disturbing thereby one's own thinking habits, dissipating what has become familiar and cliched, and participating in the changing of received values—the transformation (with/out master) of other selves through one's self.²³

Trinh describes a condition under which the individual continually examines the status quo, displacing her own comfort through a constant, conscious and intentional encountering of difference. Displacement, as it is evoked here by Trinh, can be closely linked to McCauley's conception of movement—a confrontation and transformation within the self that occurs kinesthetically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Not one to downplay her own visionary agenda for change, McCauley admits, "I am not struggling to get a piece done, I am struggling to help get us through to a more equitable society."²⁴

In the following discussion of McCauley's 1997 performance piece, *Shays' Rebellion*, I will focus on the qualities in McCauley's work most pertinent to those interested in cross-cultural collaboration. Using the rehearsal and performance process of *Shays' Rebellion* as a practical context on which to build this discussion, I will look at the following characteristics of McCauley's performance practice: teaching history through performance, aesthetics of difference, collaboration, cross-cultural/dialogue, and

²²Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982), 77.

²³Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 21.

²⁴Patraka, "Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in Public," 227.

movement. Her performance practice serves, I argue, as a potential model for approaching cross-cultural collaboration without the ease or certainty of answers, and mindful of difficult questions.²⁵

***Shays' Rebellion* at Mount Holyoke College: Preparing for the Journey**

Shays' Rebellion, was conceived, collected, and produced for the Department of Theatre at Mount Holyoke College during the fall of 1997. I had been in touch with McCauley while I was visiting New York City in June of 1997 and, despite our brief contact then—a two-hour conversation in a coffee shop on the Lower East Side—she agreed to let me visit her at Mount Holyoke and observe the work she would be doing there as a guest lecturer/artist. Before I left the coffee shop, McCauley gave me a quick hug, an indication for me that, through our discussion about the difficulty of cross-cultural work and the need for people who are willing to risk doing it, we had really connected. In the middle of August we spoke again, this time by telephone, at which point more tangible arrangements were made for my approaching visit. When I asked McCauley if she would inquire about places for me to stay on campus, she promptly replied, “Oh . . . well I think the apartment they’re giving me has an extra bedroom, so you could probably stay with me.” I may as well admit that at this moment, some of my objectivity as a researcher fell away. Who was this incredible woman who hardly knew me and yet was willing to let me stay in her home? Still, because final arrangements for my visit had not yet been made, I secretly believed that I would end up in a dormitory or a cheap motel. No one welcomes a stranger to live with them for an entire month. No one.

Unless you’re Robbie McCauley. When we spoke again—this time in late August—McCauley told me her apartment was quite large and that it would be no problem for me to stay with her. We began to discuss potential dates for my arrival, in addition to discussing McCauley’s developing ideas for the production. We planned to stay in contact via e-mail and telephone to share other thoughts and information concerning *Shays' Rebellion* prior to my arrival at Mount Holyoke College. Eventually, it was decided that I would arrive in late October, remaining at least until *Shays' Rebellion* opened in late November. Should I say, at this point, that when I arrived at McCauley’s home in South Hadley, late on a Friday evening after driving all day, she had a pot of

²⁵From our initial contact in June 1997, McCauley had expressed an interest in having someone there to witness and comment on the process as it emerged. I spent approximately one month at Mount Holyoke College, beginning October 24 and extending through the run of *Shays' Rebellion*, which ended November 23, 1997. During this time, I kept a record of rehearsal, as well as a personal journal of reflections on the process as it unfolded. Aside from library and internet research, and two investigative trips to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, MA with McCauley, my central role became that of “sounding-board” to McCauley and the production. In addition to my personal notes concerning the process, I will also draw on the many conversations McCauley and I shared in order to provide a thorough depiction of the process for *Shays' Rebellion*, its problems and successes. Because video-taping and audio-taping tend to intrude upon actor-honesty and growth—particularly when discussions of sensitive subjects like race and class are a part of the process—these devices were not a part of my record-keeping. Supplementary data will also come from interviews I conducted with select student-actors, the stage manager of the production, and with McCauley toward the end of the rehearsal process for *Shays' Rebellion*. Subsequent quotations of McCauley and/or other members of the production process are from these materials unless otherwise stated.

chicken soup waiting for me? “Don’t expect this again,” she joked. Should I also mention that despite the initial strangeness of living in someone else’s home—the combination of doing research, observing and living with the person whose work I was studying quickly became . . . comfortable—even familiar? Oh, don’t get me wrong—there were days when I didn’t really care to be familiar—I missed my own space. Still, if I began this journey hoping to learn how to work in a collaborative way, cross-culturally, then I couldn’t have envisioned a better classroom.

Upon my arrival in Massachusetts, McCauley was already involved in the process of researching *Shays’ Rebellion* and compiling the script. Having auditioned actors from Mount Holyoke College and other schools within the Five-College Consortium,²⁶ McCauley had written a preliminary script using historical material, original dialogue, and interviews collected by several students and her. Although McCauley had met with some cast members a couple of times to read and discuss the script and the issues it raised, the rehearsal process was just gaining intensity when I arrived. Immediately, I began attending rehearsals, taking notes, reading historical materials, doing research via the internet, and dialoguing with McCauley. Since my “role” within the process was not defined, I wanted to be as useful as I could be, while remaining as close to or as removed from the process as McCauley needed me to be.

Can a person be too close to the work she is doing? Too close to maintain some level of objectivity? Or are there instances when the work requires closeness, openness, and vulnerability? When you live with someone, even for a short time, you have to let down your guard. Eventually you display your moods and habits and live with the moods and habits of another person. Perhaps we learn to understand and work through our differences, cross-culturally, by living with them. Experiencing them for more than a two-hour workshop. Maybe by living the process of cross-cultural collaboration—in performance—differences can be bridged. I believe this is one way of moving across borders, living somewhere in between.

Shays’ Rebellion: Plot Summary and Historical Background

Shays’ Rebellion is “A Performance Theatre Piece conceived by Robbie McCauley and written in collaboration with Actors, Practicum 282 Students and Local Witnesses,” as noted in the working script compiled by McCauley. The cast is divided into two groups—the Chorus and the History Company. Although the two groups interact with one other at various times throughout the piece, each group travels along its own basic “plot-line” developed through *Shays’ Rebellion*. The Chorus portrays a variety of characters from the distant past, including Daniel Shays, poor farmers and other historical/fictional figures from the era surrounding the Revolutionary War. The History Company is a fictional team of contemporary factory workers whose job it is to choose the knowledge that will be allowed in history books. Although neither group’s “story” travels along a traditional plot line, eventually the various stories do begin to intertwine, causing the History Company to become engrossed in the untold history of Daniel Shays and the Shaysites. As a result, the History Company workers

²⁶The Five College Consortium includes Mount Holyoke College, Amherst College, Hampshire College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

learn to question their choices regarding what is included and discluded within the “official history” they produce. It is discovered toward the end of the performance that the Dizzy Knees²⁷ production company has sent spies to infiltrate the History Company’s office and keep tabs on how much history is being allowed to pass inspection.

Offering no conventional build, climax, or resolution, *Shays’ Rebellion* is not easily captured in a brief plot summary or synopsis—come on, just say it. . . . it’s messy. There is no simple way to describe it. Oh, I suppose I could try to pin it down with a nicely capsulized paragraph—which I suppose I have tried to do above. However, looking at this pseudo-synopsis I realize that in my attempt to familiarize the reader with this piece, I have effectively erased the essence of *Shays’ Rebellion*. Its complicated gestures—verbal and physical. Its subtle humor. Its mind-bending references. I’ve reduced it to the Dizzy Knees version. A performance theatre piece devised through the collaborative process of research, interviews, improvisation, dialoguing, and constant questioning—none of which necessarily happen in this order—is not even intended to be neat. It’s cluttered. Unfamiliar. Disorienting. And all for a purpose. Maybe if we’re all thrown off-balance enough we can get past our assumptions and misconceptions about history. About race and class and privilege. Maybe. It’s messy.

To begin, it might be most useful to provide some background information on the historical events of Shays’ Rebellion and McCauley’s interest in this particular piece of American history. When McCauley found that she would be directing an original performance theatre piece at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, she began to think about the kind of work that would be most useful in that venue. Relating her initial impulse for a piece on Shays’ Rebellion to me, McCauley described a dream in which her sister, a retired history teacher, told her to look at Daniel Shays and the rebellion of 1786.²⁸ As McCauley discovered upon investigation, Shays’ Rebellion not only happened within miles of South Hadley, Massachusetts, but it also involved class conflict, a subject that seemed immediately appropriate to a piece being produced at Mount Holyoke.

Essentially a class war, Shays’ Rebellion was carried out among two distinct groups in post-Revolutionary War America. According to David Szatmary, historians “locate the roots of the insurrection in a clash between a traditional, agrarian way of life and an ever-encroaching commercial society.”²⁹ Following the Revolutionary War, Great Britain gave credit to American merchants, who in turn gave credit to the farmers further inland. When creditors in Great Britain began to demand payment of the merchants debts, American merchants also demanded payment from the indebted farmers. Unfortunately for the farmers, paper money was also banned at this point, and only metals like gold and silver could be used to pay debts. Living primarily by barter, the yeomen had no gold or silver so they could not pay merchants for their debts. In such situations, merchants often responded by paying the courts to throw

²⁷Dizzy Knees, we learn early in the performance, is criticized for producing water-down, fictionalized versions of history. Think mouse.

²⁸McCauley speaks of the power of dreams in her interview with Mahone.

²⁹David Szatmary, *Shays’ Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), xiv.

poor farmers in debtor's prison. Angered by the merchants' actions—particularly after they had fought alongside them to ensure America's freedom—a group of farmers decided to take action against their creditors. One of the ways the yeomen could effectively fight against wealthy merchants was to take over the courts so that no debt cases could be heard. Perceived as a band of insane ruffians according to Szatmary, the rebels were believed to be rebelling against reason and secretly interested in an armed take-over by "the tyrant of America," Daniel Shays.³⁰ Although Shays denied his reputed leadership of the rebellion, insisting it was a collaboration, he is credited by historians as having led the impassioned farmers, providing the rebellion with its name.

The events of Shays' Rebellion, usually treated as a mere footnote in American history, became for McCauley the impetus of a performance work about both class and racial distinctions, as well as about how information about historical events is perceived, represented, and disseminated.

The Rehearsal Process: A Study in Movement

There is no question that, to a degree, my account is subjective. As anthropologist Kristen Hastrup suggests, "Observation is never neutral; the gaze is directed from a particular point of view."³¹ Given my close contact with McCauley, it would be impossible to separate myself from this very particular point of view. As a researcher, practitioner, and analyzer of performance, however, my purpose is to reveal what I perceived to be the most effective—and perhaps ineffective—aspects of the rehearsal process, particularly for directors who wish to collaborate on published works and original performance pieces that venture across cultural borders.

From the beginning, experiencing *Shays' Rebellion* was, for me, a study in movement. The concept of movement is not only the means to collaboration and cross-cultural/dialogue, but it is also a way of characterizing what can occur as a result of cross-cultural exchange. In other words, movement is the process of collaborating cross-culturally, as well as the intended goal. It is only through movement—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually—that cross-cultural collaboration can become more than a quick trip across the border. Even traveling to South Hadley to visit what I perceived to be an elite women's college, and to delve into an unfamiliar process with a rather unfamiliar person was a *moving* experience, both literally and figuratively. A relatively short rehearsal period further heightened this sense of movement—or at least the need to move quickly. And, yet, the kind of movement I want to focus on most closely can be illustrated through a detailed discussion of the specific events of McCauley's rehearsal process. For McCauley, performance can facilitate, through a combination of dialogue, listening, and physicalization, movement in understanding across racial, class, and gender divisions.

Like many directors, McCauley began the rehearsal process by listening to the performers read through the script, by displaying a model of the set, and by asking and answering questions when possible. Sitting in on one of the initial read-throughs,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹ Kristen Hastrup, *A Passage to Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 4.

I soon learned that McCauley had created two groups of characters named, in her signature style, after the performers who portrayed them. One group of performers consisted of what she referred to as the characters: contemporary workers in The History Factory where their job is to choose the “facts” that the public will come to know as American history. The other group of performers, fashioned after a Greek chorus, was dubbed the ensemble. These performers functioned primarily as figures from the past, bringing to life selected events of Shays’ Rebellion, as well as other untold historical narratives. Within the developing script for *Shays’ Rebellion*, it became apparent that despite their separate functions, the characters and the ensemble would converge, overlap, and move together freely in creating a collage of past and contemporary stories that comprise *Shays’ Rebellion*.

Much like the burgeoning form of the script, the rehearsal process for *Shays’ Rebellion* unfolded in a similar way. With approximately four weeks of rehearsal before opening, McCauley had a limited amount of time to work and experiment with the performers. Yet in the allotted time she worked very hard to maintain a steady pace without compromising her process. By alternating rehearsals among the two groups, characters and ensemble, McCauley managed to include some actor training and intensive dialogue within each rehearsal period during the first couple of weeks. In between these daily rehearsals she continued to research and script the piece, often based upon discussions and interactions among the actors during rehearsals. After the first three weeks of rehearsal—although the training and dialoguing continued to a lesser degree—most of the script had been staged. Even in the final week of rehearsals, however, McCauley added small segments of dialogue to the script as she continued to shape it for performance.

While it is generally assumed that every director’s job is to shape a work for its eventual presentation to an audience, McCauley’s process is both similar and distinctly different in this regard. As I observed McCauley working with performers on specific sections of the script, my initial impression was that a sense of instability or perhaps vulnerability pervaded everything. Early in the process, McCauley suggested that the entire piece should have a “we’re-making-it-as-we-go feeling” in which “everything you do, you’re present with it,” both in rehearsals and in the eventual performances. Although McCauley takes responsibility as the conceiver or compiler of a work, she notes in “Thoughts On My Career” that “[o]wnership in this work is uncomfortable. I put my name on it to take responsibility for and identify myself as the gatherer and shaper.”³² Similarly, her position as director may be more accurately described as facilitator, since she works very hard to let the work define itself. From her constant and careful listening to the performers at Mount Holyoke, to her frequent script changes based on actor discussions and new research, McCauley supported the unfinished nature of the work, encouraging the actors to use rehearsal time to find their way into and through the piece. To move, both physically and mentally, and to allow themselves to be moved.

In my interview with McCauley during the fall of 1997, I asked her to speak about movement and what it means in the context of her work:

³² McCauley, “Thoughts On My Career,” 269.

Well, it's just simply that the work can't get done unless you open up barriers between yourself [and] the charged information—charged information has to do with “Am I all right? . . . Do I belong here? If America is based on Indian land and African slavery do I have a right to wake up every morning?” That's what's so charged about it. And one has to be open to examining that. And therefore one has to allow feelings of sadness, shame . . . and also some sense of joy in taking in the whole story. And that's why theatre allows that vulnerability to happen, because once you are able to feel these things you're able to speak them and release your voice through them. And that transmits to other people and affects them. And therefore vulnerability is the basis of the power in theatre for an actor. And when you engage your vulnerability around these issues that are both political and personal then you can have something powerful happen between people. And hopefully a good theatre piece.³³

Just as McCauley's description of movement suggests, the goal is to open up the process so that it remains fluid and capable of change, so that—like the history that is the subject of the piece—stories, moments, and specific choices can constantly be rewritten, elaborated upon, and renegotiated. Similarly, each collaborator's own story and way of thinking about history, race, and identity is constantly renegotiated—provided that the individual allows herself to open up—to engage and to be *present* with the work.

* * *

November 3, 1997: I continue to obsess about whether the process is going okay. I guess it's the director/performer in me. So I am learning to sit back and listen. Maybe this is all about me learning to listen very carefully for clues from the performers and director as to what is really at issue in a given moment. A skill I desperately need if I am going to work in this way.

November 4, 1997: . . . I do think I've been a bit too self-involved this first week, probably because of the difficult and painful circumstances I just left [in Bowling Green]. So . . . I'm not going to be hard on myself or beat myself up about this. But I am going to try to be “here” now that I'm feeling a bit more grounded.

The other thing is, I don't want to overstep my boundaries. But I get the feeling that maybe there aren't any boundaries. Or I won't know what they are until I cross one. I do wish Robbie would ask me to do more, but maybe I should just plunge in and assume more responsibility. The worst that could happen? She could ask me to back off.

So I guess I'm going to try to be more “present,” to use Robbie's own words. And I'll see where that takes me.³⁴

* * *

One of the ways in which McCauley's collaborators are encouraged to engage in the process is through a strong emphasis on—and commitment to—collaboration. In contrast to more traditional models of collaboration in theatre, it is an invitation to collaborate rather than a “mandated” agreement among the participants. In other words, each person involved in the collaboration is invited to engage fully in the

³³ Unpublished taped interview with Robbie McCauley in her home, November 17, 1997.

³⁴ This italicized section and the following italicized section are excerpts from my personal Rehearsal Journal, written during the fall of 1997.

process—thinking, creating, moving with presence. Yet, as the word presence implies, it is also each collaborator's responsibility to put forth the kind of labor necessary to fully engage. For McCauley, the creation of *Shays' Rebellion* was a shared process: shared among actors, designers, technicians, assistants, and even the lone graduate student from Bowling Green State University who came there to learn more about her process.

* * *

November 9, 1997: I've been here just over two weeks. I guess things are going well. It's sort of difficult to determine, though. Robbie and I spend quite a lot of time discussing the piece and how the actors are responding to it. I have done extra research to help frame the production and add to the content and connections. So I feel like I have a sort of purpose here, but at the same time I feel like I could/should be doing more. Yet, Robbie would probably be telling me if she wanted me to do more, I think.

I'm sick of questioning myself all of the time about everything. Why can't I just trust myself? So what am I saying? I guess maybe I wish that Robbie would tell me more what she needs or wants me to do. And I don't want to be pushy or assume too much. I have asked about this, but she's so casual about it. I guess she's really just concerned that I'm getting something out of this. But I also want to be helpful in some way, however small.

Robbie and I talked about being honest and vulnerable today. Am I being that here and now?

* * *

When McCauley began rehearsing individual scenes from the script, she immediately asked the actors to collaborate in the staging and interpretation of these moments. Some of the questions she consistently asked were: "What are you thinking in this moment?" or "How do you feel about doing the dialogue here?" or "What does that mean to you?" Although it is not uncommon for a director to ask an actor questions about her/his character, McCauley's questions were meant for the *actors*, not the characters. Speaking to the performers about being "present" with the work, McCauley confirmed that "In doing this kind of work, you have to find something personal in it for you. Elaborating on the notion of presence, she spoke about listening and engaging with the text, and also about the actors discovering their own feelings in relation to the issues and ideas within the text. Continually encouraging the performers along these lines, McCauley's concern, it became clear, was not to make sure the actors interpreted the script *correctly*, but to draw upon their thoughts, opinions, and impulses in shaping the piece.

During one exchange in which McCauley guided the ensemble in a discussion about how they might interact with an audience, I wrote in my rehearsal notes: "Robbie brings up questions and sort of talks around them. Ex. How are you going to deal with the audience? She seems to want to draw things from the performers rather than impose [answers upon them]." While another director might have instantly provided examples of the *correct* way to interact with the audience during a performance, McCauley encouraged the actors to think and collaborate together to discover their own instinctive ideas about how they might do this. Certainly, most directors crave thinking actors who will bring as much to the rehearsal process as they themselves do; however, few directors place so much emphasis on the presence of the actors as individuals and their personal investments in the process of creating. Ann Cooper

Albright invokes the phrase “staying in the fire” to describe a condition similar to presence within the context of dance. She notes that “[Jawole Willa Jo] Zollar used this expression to point out the performer’s commitment to experiencing a physical and psychic disorientation in performance, her willingness to stay in the experience even when it was not completely controlled or comfortable.”³⁵ As Zollar’s remarks imply, when performers are present, responding “in the fire” on-stage, the experience may not be altogether comfortable. Rather, it can be disorienting and “displacing,” to recall Trinh’s wording. Yet, it is through this kind of personal risk and openness to such instability that change or movement can occur.³⁶

In keeping with the notion of presence, McCauley created specific moments throughout *Shays’ Rebellion* in which the performers could be present for one another, supporting or adding to their individual stories. Although a certain amount of on-stage collaboration is assumed in any production involving more than one performer in scripting the piece, McCauley found ways to build uniquely collaborative moments into the work. For example, when Jey begins to tell a story about her grandfather and how his work ethic has affected her parents, Dan adds to the story—which is actually Dan’s personal story—to gently provide supplementary details. In allowing the two women to “share” Dan’s story, a sense of tension and negotiation was apparent in the telling. In performance, as Jey told portions of the story, Dan watched her carefully, waiting to add details, but also supporting Jey with her presence. In this manner, a rather simple story about the economics and class of one family became a collaboration in which both actors were strongly invested. And, most provocatively, it became an exercise in performing an identity other than one’s own.

Similarly, in scripting another personal narrative—this time one of the narratives provided by an outside “witness”—McCauley again brought together two performers to share the moment. While Shannon (who is white) recounts a Civil War story about “her grandfather” and his experiences, Rainbow listens, asserting her thoughts in moments of tension, not only to support Shannon’s story, but to question certain details in the telling. When Shannon describes the soldier’s quest for food on his walk back to camp, she explains that he “stopped at the manor house.” Not missing a beat, Rainbow, who is bi-racial, but visibly black, questions Shannon concerning this small detail, asserting “Manor house?” Relenting, Shannon corrects herself quickly, “Uh . . . master’s house,” before continuing with the story. Although Rainbow’s question provokes tension in the moment, Shannon’s response seems almost grateful, as if to say, “I didn’t want to insult you—a black woman—by referring to the ‘master’s house.’” Here, the collaboration occurs when Rainbow subtly asks Shannon not to deny history, a history of slavery that implicates them both, but to negotiate the moment with her so that both she and Shannon can reflect and move on. The story can continue, but Rainbow needs Shannon’s “admission” as much as Shannon needs her to listen to the story. At the same time, Rainbow’s interruptions are not made to appear easy and Shannon’s discomfort is apparent. By scripting moments like these in which

³⁵ Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference*, xxi.

³⁶ David Graver writes at length on the many ways in which actors use their own bodies to assert their *presence* in his article “The Actor’s Bodies” (*Text and Performance Quarterly*, July 1997), 221–35. Graver delineates seven forms of corporeal presence, detailing the complexity and ambiguity of the term.

actors must share a story and collaborate in its development, McCauley deepens the level of collaboration, moving it beyond the logistics of staging and design. In turn, by encouraging the performers' presence, McCauley facilitates their movement in the process.

Perhaps what is most crucial to maintaining a collaborative, shared rehearsal process is not just *seeking* input from those involved, but actually *meaning* it. The quickest way for a director to close down the often-tenuous lines of communication is to solicit ideas, feedback and sharing from the cast and production crew, and then disregard whatever is offered. As McCauley established a flow of ideas among the cast and, for lack of a better term, the "consultants" working on *Shays' Rebellion*, it became apparent that she trusted her collaborators to help find their way through the process. Although I expected a certain level of collaboration within the process—particularly given McCauley's history as an artist—her careful listening and honest consideration of our ideas suggested collaboration on a deeper level than I had anticipated. One of the performers echoed this in an interview, remarking:

If you can't find what you need . . . then she'll help you find it. . . . And then she'll ask you . . . "What do you think this character is saying?" And then if you spew out something that's, like, completely contrary to what she was thinking, she'll be like "Oh, okay. So that's what you're thinking. That's why you're doing it this way." And she's so willing to listen and see your point of view and where you're going with the character. Even though we have such a limited amount of time.

For this young woman, McCauley's willingness to listen and accept her individual ideas was a rewarding aspect of the process.

McCauley's attention extended not only to individual performer's interpretations, but also to group interpretations. At one point during rehearsals, I noted an exchange in which one of the characters didn't understand a joke told by another character. An impromptu dialogue among the characters resulted, as they broke away from the script for a moment to explain the joke. Without stopping long to make adjustments, McCauley asked the characters to keep the improvised explanation they had just "composed." In another instance, McCauley initiated a discussion regarding an ensemble member's line, "It's not a story about black people or Asians or Indians or Latinos"³⁷ asking Jey, the performer, what she meant when she said the line. Jey responded, saying the story is "about people who are disregarded, not about race." Continuing the discussion, McCauley asked her where another line later in the same segment of dialogue—"Here we are minimizing the white people"—comes from. When Jey responded, saying "You forgot about the white people," McCauley agreed, saying "It might be that, or maybe it's not that clear." Without instructing Jey, McCauley later added that the line "Here we go minimizing white people," might also be directed at Shannon, who is a part of the group Jey is addressing—and also white. By asking for the performers' insights concerning the line and offering a number of possibilities, McCauley provided an opportunity for collaboration in determining potential meanings.

Just as no absolute meaning was determined in this moment, McCauley tended to refrain from assigning definitive interpretation or staging during the rehearsal process. As the rehearsal process proceeded, McCauley seemed to be working with what Peggy

³⁷Robbie McCauley, *Shays' Rebellion*, unpublished working script, 24.

Phelan has described as “relations [that] are not, and can no longer be, anchored on a notion of ‘understanding.’ They must rather be founded on the recognition of the impossibility of such ‘true seeing.’ Pedagogy must involve training in the patient acceptance of the perpetual failure of in/sight.”³⁸ The process of learning and discovery was given more value than producing absolute understanding of the work—an impossible goal, in any process. Often in our post-rehearsal discussions, McCauley expressed her frustration with certain aspects of the process: “They’re not getting it. . . . How do I get them to be present and take control of each moment for themselves?” Yet, her choice was invariably to create opportunities for learning rather than rabid feeding-frenzies in which she attempted to spoon-feed meanings to the actors.³⁹

As rehearsals progressed, performers asserted their thoughts more readily with the knowledge that their ideas would be heard and often implemented. On several occasions, McCauley altered her initial staging, phrasing, or explanation of a specific scene based upon the input of the actors or other collaborators. Feeling no pressure to “know” exactly what she wanted or to be “right” about a particular interpretation, McCauley created a rigorous, but relaxed atmosphere for those performers who were invested in the rehearsal process. In interviews with several of the cast members of *Shays’ Rebellion*, I discovered how significant their collaboration in the process was for some student performers. As one student performer shared:

I am a part of this play. Most people get scripts and they’ve been written by someone fifty years ago who didn’t even know that that person had been born, let alone is going to be acting out this character. I am a part of this script. And as long as the script . . . exists I will always be a part of this script. That feels so exciting. . . . It can be frustrating because we do have a limited amount of time . . . and we’ve just got our finished script [a few days before opening]. But . . . that makes it even more exciting because of the fact that [Robbie] was still listening to us and still getting ideas from us. And then using those ideas and transforming the script . . . it’s amazing!⁴⁰

For this person *Shays’ Rebellion* was unlike any other performance experience because the student actors’ input was valued even in the composition of the script.

As might be expected, not every performer I interviewed felt that the rehearsal process was the rewarding, collaborative experience their colleagues described. For one performer in particular, the fact that the script was still changing in the final weeks of the process was a difficult problem to negotiate:

Just right now, we’re still screwing with the script . . . and I think there comes a time when you take what you have and there you have it . . . and I’m very distraught with the fact that the script is still changing daily and the movements are still changing daily. I mean I think . . . it comes to a point where . . . “Okay, this is what we have, this is what we are, let’s make this the best it can be.”

³⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, 174.

³⁹ According to many educators, we teach the way we were taught. If this is true, then certain aspects of McCauley’s pedagogical style may be attributed, in part, to her former “teacher,” Joseph Chaikin. In a 1969 interview with Richard Schechner, Chaikin sounds a lot like McCauley works: “The teacher of the actor is like the teacher of small children. He looks for the right steps for each student. And when the student is about to make his discovery, the teacher must disappear. If the teacher looks for his own satisfaction at the point of discovery, the student does not fully discover” (*TDR* 13.3 [Spring 1969], 141).

⁴⁰ Many of the other actors expressed similar observations.

Having experienced many different kinds of rehearsal processes, both as a performer and a director, I can appreciate these frustrations. In academic theatre, despite our well-meant pedagogical objectives, it always seems to come down to the reality that a show needs to be put up. Even as I observed and participated in the rehearsal process for *Shays' Rebellion*, I felt the traditionally-trained director in me wanting to push the process more quickly and "quick-fix" problem areas through "spoon-feeding" as the inevitable loomed near. Yet, in such moments I was also reminded of the nature of the work. For McCauley, the work is more about process than product. And if a product is intended, then it has more to do with raising the consciousness of both the actors and the audience than with perfecting aesthetics.⁴¹ Commenting on the work, McCauley asserts:

It's not political in the sense that right after the show we're going to march on the capital. But it is something for a regular audience to *use*, rather than simply having an evening at the theatre. . . . It's more for individuals within communities than for a mass movement kind of thing.⁴²

The hope, then, is not that audiences will enjoy the work on a superficial level, but that they will become engaged in what the work is trying to say and do. That the work will *move* them to think about the inequities of racism, classism, and sexism and perhaps be changed, as a result.

Another important part of McCauley's mission as an artist is to facilitate learning and social consciousness-raising among audiences who see the work. One way of accomplishing this objective is to involve audience members in ways that challenge passive spectatorship. According to Susan Bennett "What she [McCauley] underscores is the deep commitment to what is here called the 'sensitivity' of the audience and that the aesthetic . . . could be made subject explicitly to the audience's needs and to the vision of the project."⁴³ In the case of *Shays' Rebellion*, the non-linear, collage-like aesthetic is one of the means by which audiences are drawn into a collaborative experience. Because the piece follows no singular narrative, audience members must piece together the bits of information they are given and come to their own understanding not only of the events of Shays' Rebellion, but also how these events connect to their own lives. Although McCauley scripted the work in such a way that contemporary connections to history are available to the spectator, how the audience makes such connections depends upon their own thoughtful negotiations with the material and images presented.

Often, in addition to a more contemplative kind of collaboration, McCauley provides opportunities for physical involvement with the audience as well. During a particular segment of *Shays' Rebellion* each performer approached one or more audience members to request their active involvement. Audience members were asked to stand and say "Jo Bunker" when the male actor made a specific gesture during the ensuing scene. ("Jo Bunker" was the secret code used by the Shaysites

⁴¹For additional perspectives on theatre experiences in which process is privileged above product in particular ways, see "Believed in Theatre," by Richard Schechner that appears in *Performance Research*, 2.2 (1997), 76–91, and Bruce McConachie's "Approaching the 'Structure of Feeling' in Grassroots Theatre," in *Theatre Topics* 8.1 (March 1998), 33–54.

⁴²Patraka, "Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in Public," 206–7.

⁴³Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 1997), 180.

when they were mounting a protest or takeover of a particular courthouse.) By joining in with the Shaysites to declare “Jo Bunker,” the audience “participated” in the closure of one of the courts. While no one was forced to participate, this simple gesture was made more complex by the lines that follow it in the script. After the moment of protest is over and the court is closed, the character of Dan turns to the audience and says “Some people don’t join protests because they aren’t approached by organizers. Others just don’t want to.” In this moment, depending upon each individual’s position in relation to Dan’s statement, audience members may experience several different types of involvement in the performance. For those who were not approached and asked to join in the protest, there may be a sense of frustration at not knowing. For those who were approached, their response depends upon their own actions—if they stood and joined in, saying “Jo Bunker,” there may be a sense of satisfaction and camaraderie; if they ignored the request, the audience members may feel implicated by Dan’s statement. In any case, moments like this one provide significant opportunities for collaboration among performers and audience members.

Although McCauley’s purpose as a director is to teach, like any dedicated pedagogue, she is also conscientiously open to learning. Collaboration, at its best, involves a variety of minds and voices riffing off one another to create something extraordinary—both stimulating and satisfying to all involved. Understandably, for McCauley the process of collaboration becomes most frustrating when others either refuse to join the riff, or are incapable of doing so. One comment made by a performer seemed to highlight the difficulties that can arise when collaborators do not have the same understanding of collaboration:

Her directing is very challenging for me, because . . . it’s almost [as if] she speaks to hear herself talk and not to make the actors understand. . . . And I’ll be like “Well I don’t understand. Can you give me an example?” And she’s like “Work with that.” And I think an essential part of being in a show is understanding the director’s direction. And when an actor’s not understanding a director’s direction there’s no way that the piece can be what the director wants it to be.

The actor does make an important point about understanding direction, especially in moments when the performers had a difficult time interpreting McCauley’s directives. Some of what the actor criticizes above is also, however, an essential part of invested collaboration. In a collaborative process like *Shays’ Rebellion*, willingness to cultivate and engage in the process without having to understand everything is critical. At the same time, even a highly collaborative process does not undermine the reality that McCauley is, ultimately, the envisioner of the work, both in scripting it and imagining its potential in performance. But, as an equitable teacher, McCauley’s vision does not get in the way of its potential to facilitate mutual learning and movement through collaboration.

Closely linked to collaboration, another movement-oriented aspect of McCauley’s work—and probably the quality for which she is most noted—is cross-cultural/dialogue. As suggested earlier, dialogue is rarely an easy process, particularly when that dialogue extends across borders of race, culture, gender, and sexuality. For McCauley, the goal is to move dialogue *through* the fissures caused by resistance—resistance stemming from cultural differences, stereotypical perceptions of others, and the defensive guilt of feeling implicated in another’s oppression. At the same time, resistance is “information” according to McCauley, and as such it can be a rich source

of learning and understanding our cross-cultural fears, misconceptions, and desires. By choosing to work with casts that are often racially mixed, McCauley generates opportunities for dialogue across race and culture.

Throughout the rehearsal process for *Shays' Rebellion*, one of the ways in which McCauley facilitated cross-cultural/dialogue was by helping the performers to look for contemporary connections to the historical event they were exploring. Initially, discussions of Shays' Rebellion as a guerrilla war led to associations with the Civil Rights Movement. Wanting the actors to discover more personal connections to the piece, McCauley asked if there were similar conditions in their lives. One actor began by remarking, "my thesis . . . I can't get away from it . . . but I have to . . . but I can't." Agreeing that this is the "condition" of events like Shays' Rebellion and the Civil Rights Movement—situations in which people can't help but feel affected—McCauley asked someone to talk about the Campus Rebellions that occurred at Mount Holyoke College in the spring of 1997.⁴⁴ The dialogue that ensued began slowly and carefully, building in intensity as more students felt compelled to share.

According to cast members of *Shays' Rebellion*, the Campus Rebellions, involving Mount Holyoke College as well as several schools in the vicinity, erupted when school administrators failed to act upon a number of student requests. One of the requests was for a cultural center dedicated to "minority" student needs. Complicating the issue further was the administration's intention to drop affirmative action requirements that provided enrollment access to underprivileged students. As one actor aptly asserted during the discussion, "It was about class and it was about race and, you know, people in authority." In order to protest the actions of the "authorities" at Mount Holyoke College, several students took over a building on campus, refusing to leave until their demands were fulfilled. Other students rallied to support the rebels, bringing them food and signing petitions, but the leaders of the rebellion were eventually persuaded to end the protest. Following the rebellions, a select group of students were suspended, and although administrators promised to create a cultural center and ensure equity in enrollment practices, little had actually been done to meet the students' requests.

Despite a hesitant and halting start, the dialogue really picked up as the group of students/actors "relived" the circumstances of the previous year. Although one student insisted, "Nothing will happen if students forget," another student was equally adamant that things had changed. Denying that change had occurred, one young African-American woman expressed her frustration and grief that, as a result of the administrators' actions, future students from lower-income backgrounds would not have the same opportunity she has had. Whatever the actors' convictions it became clear, as I wrote in my notes, "that Robbie is getting the performers to connect personally and let that feed them." Encouraging the actors to continue to grapple with their own investments in the Campus Rebellions, as well as their relationship to Shays' Rebellion, McCauley noted that this "pulling apart [of personal connections to the work] . . . is the

⁴⁴Shortly after McCauley arrived at Mount Holyoke College, another faculty member on campus gave her a newspaper clipping about the Campus Rebellions. She had also heard about these events from other faculty members who generally downplayed the rebellions' significance—in much the same way that Shays' Rebellion was belittled.

kind of material that you need to bring to the work.” The dialogue regarding the campus rebellions was such a significant point of reference for the actors that McCauley added a scripted version to the performance, basing it on the rehearsal dialogue:

Laconia: We said, We learned in the campus rebellions last spring that those who have the authority always win.
 Rainbow: We said Those of us who didn’t participate helped the rebels.
 Shannon: We said Nothing changed.
 Ji: We said Some things changed.
 Beth: We said We heard different stories from the authorities than from the participants.
 Devin: I keep remembering what my Sister said.
 Dan: Yeah. She said it was awful! She said she can’t get out of her mind the sound of her friend down the hall in the dorm screaming.

Pause (six counts)

Jey: She said, “We didn’t win anything. With all that struggle we didn’t win a thing.”
 Devin: She said, I think that They always win. They have the money and the power. We get a little bit for a little while. I almost feel like crying now, she said, and I thought we’d been given something and were moving forward, but They change back and forth according to their own interests. I think about, she said, how . . . after the students in my class graduate, that there won’t be the same opportunity for people [who look] like me.
 Rainbow: Wow! They *minimized* . . . like what happened with the Shaysites.
 Beth: But people who have legitimate grievances never lose. What happened in these parts last spring is here now and will come up again and again . . . and again. *Lights*.⁴⁵

Combining the words of the performers with some paraphrasing of the rehearsal discussion, McCauley scripted a particularly evocative moment from the rehearsal process, providing a space in which the actors could share their personal connections to the work.

Although these connections are certainly meant to be significant and challenging to the actors, they are also meant for audience members of the same community. As in McCauley’s previous site-specific works, contemporary and historical material within the works are intended to be both thought-provoking and revelatory, but they are also intended to build community among the audience and performers. For one Mount Holyoke student who spoke to McCauley following the opening night performance of *Shays’ Rebellion*, seeing stories about the campus rebellions included within the piece was a validating experience. Relating their discussion to me, McCauley noted that the young woman was so excited to realize that the campus rebellions were “important enough” to be written about in a play, that they had not been forgotten or erased from memory.⁴⁶ Similarly, for students who worked on *Shays’ Rebellion*, their thoughts and feelings about the campus rebellions changed—or moved—as a result of the work. Rather than viewing the rebellions as a mere “footnote” in Mount Holyoke history, the students began to understand how stories are included or excluded from “official”

⁴⁵Robbie McCauley, *Shays’ Rebellion*, unpublished working script, 36–37.

⁴⁶Becky Becker, unpublished personal journal documenting the rehearsal process for *Shays’ Rebellion*, October/November 1997, 16.

histories based upon the ideological positioning of people in power. At the same time, the campus rebellions were not over-simplified to be an “us and them” situation. Rather, discussion of varying perspectives from both students and administrators made it an intricate and uneasy process, marked by individual convictions and investments.

In a similar manner, rehearsal dialogues about race, ethnicity, and class also served to point up the complexity of identity and how identity is often construed by those in power. Undoubtedly the most arduous aspect of the rehearsal dialogues during *Shays' Rebellion*, the level of contestation and resistance surrounding race and class was striking, though not surprising. As with the campus rebellion discussions, dialogue was initiated by McCauley based on material in the script. Stemming from a discussion about who the characters in the History Factory are, the discussion I will recount here began in a very different place than it ended up. In response to McCauley's inquiries about their individual characters, one of the actors offered her opinion about the “character” Dartania,⁴⁷ noting that “Dartania wants the other characters to see the connection of Shays' Rebellion throughout history.” According to this performer, the political events of Shays' Rebellion were intimately connected to the factory politics.

Seeing this performer's response as a potential opportunity to bridge a discussion of identity, McCauley began by engaging the performers in a discussion about the division of labor in the factory and how it might pertain to differences of gender, class, and race.⁴⁸ As the discussion moved further in this direction, McCauley asked the group, “What are the differences between all of you?” Initially, responses tended to be uniformly vague as the actors alluded to their “American” identities. When McCauley asked for more specific thoughts about what that might mean, the responses were more varied. One actor asserted his view that being American means “Live in this country. Die in this country,” while a young woman commented, “I think it's a question of where we come from and where we are now.” Agreeing with her white colleague's comment that identity depends upon where we come from, another young woman identified herself as “African-American.” At this point, the white male actor piped in, somewhat confrontationally, “Can somebody define African-American for me?” Immediately, the air in the room seemed to become charged despite Dartania's patient explanation: “I am a member of the African Diaspora.” Still, the young man continued to pursue this line of questioning, asking how an “American” could identify with Africa. Here, another African-American woman joined the discussion, offering her personal view that there are “things” about her that are “definitely not from here [the United States] and are unexplainable” because of the history of slavery and colonization. Adding to this, Dartania quipped, “It's in my blood, honey.”

⁴⁷I place the term “character” in quotation marks to point up the fact that Dartania is also the name of one of the actors. Although the characters are based on the performers portraying them, there is at least a subtle difference between the “characters” and the “performers.”

⁴⁸Although it did not come out of the dialogue discussed in this section, McCauley scripted a number of “white facts” dealing with white identity into the dialogue of *Shays' Rebellion*. Within the History Factory, the character of Cousey is obsessed with collecting “white facts.” At one point another character, Art, brings her a “white fact,” prefacing it with: “Nobody calls anything white history especially stuff like this” (*Shays' Rebellion*, 12). He then proceeds to share information about who makes the best kind of employee among white men, black men, white women, and black women.

Amidst furtive eye-rolling by a couple of the white students who didn't seem to relate to the individual significance of identifying oneself, McCauley intervened with, "There [are] some messy things that happened in everybody's history . . . and we don't deal with those messy parts." The dialogue about our shared and often "hidden" history continued until the young man spoke up again to announce, "I know my culture and I don't think I could describe it. But I don't need to." McCauley quickly responded with a perfunctory, "That's right, you don't," emphasizing that whites don't have to think about white culture or what it *means* to be white because their whiteness does not affect them in the same way that being black affects black people. Seizing the moment to "name" the actor's resistance, McCauley was able to open the dialogue still further into a discussion about white as well as black identity. From this point, the dialogue seemed to center more specifically on the young man's disbelief that racism remains a prevalent condition in American culture—this despite the fact that nearly everyone in the group, white and black, joined in to provide examples of racism against blacks in everyday life. Eventually, without producing any definitive conclusions or answers, McCauley moved back into staging the piece after asking the performers to find what was useful to them in this discussion.

As the dialogue on race unfolded, I was struck not only by how powerfully the one white male asserted his own skeptical voice, but also by my own reaction to what I viewed as his ignorance and unexamined sense of privilege. Sitting with my laptop, furiously taking notes throughout the discussion, I felt a strong urge to speak up and put this young man "in his place." Later, I spoke to McCauley about my fear of the heated dialogue that had occurred, wondering how I would respond, particularly to the young man in the group. McCauley shared that for her, "the task is to hear, rather than react to what is said." As I continued to reflect on these words, I began to think about how vulnerable the facilitator of such a process must make herself. Weeks later, still pondering this process, in an interview with McCauley I asked her how she manages to really hear what is being said:

- Becker: This kind of work requires a type of vulnerability, I think, unlike any other way of working in the area of performance. How do you make yourself vulnerable so that other people will open up, and do you find that by being vulnerable that does help others to open up . . . and think and talk and listen?
- McCauley: Well, that's a hard one (laughter) because it's very difficult for anyone to be vulnerable and even though I talk about it . . . I think I'm constantly listening to my own resistance. And when I can identify that—in terms of the breathing that one's doing when one is listening—when I hear my own resistance I try to name that . . . and once I can open that, it stimulates other people that I'm working with to open—at least to the subject matter that I bring up. It's like a pinprick that turns into a wide, wide opening.⁴⁹

Only after interviewing McCauley could I begin to honestly identify my own resistance to the young man's apparent arrogance. It was all-too-easy for me to point a self-righteous finger at him, from where I sat, observing the rehearsal process and knowing that I was "enlightened" about the insidious effects of racism. Just as it was all-too-easy for him to dismiss racism because he didn't experience its effects. Henry Giroux might describe such a moment as a kind of pedagogical "trauma," in which an

⁴⁹ Unpublished taped pre-show interview with Robbie McCauley for *Shays' Rebellion*, November 1997.

individual must rethink his/her position in relation to others. In "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity," Giroux notes that "[t]rauma represents that pedagogical moment when identities become unsettled, provoking both anxiety and the opportunity to rethink the political nature and moral content of one's own racial identity, and the roles it plays in shaping one's relationship to those who are constituted as racially 'other.'"⁵⁰ This particular moment caused me to see my own liberal whiteness in believing that I was somehow more enlightened concerning racial matters and therefore less guilty than the young man in question.

In an event that might be described as similarly 'traumatic,' Shannon Jackson emphasizes through her performance piece *White Noises* that "the longing for self-redemption may be at odds with the act of self-transformation."⁵¹ In Jackson's experience as winner of the Black Theatre Network's graduate essay competition—the subject matter of her piece *White Noises*—she found herself repeatedly seeking redemption from her own whiteness by disassociating from whites at or in proximity to the conference whom she perceived as lacking a social conscience.⁵² Likewise, my own trauma with *Shays' Rebellion* involved the realization that I was judging the young man as harshly as I perceived him to be judging the actor who identified as African American. My own critique of his ignorance actually became a deeper critique of my tendency to judge others and their racist tendencies while forgiving or ignoring my own sexist and racist leanings.

As Raewyn Whyte maintains, "McCauley offers an aesthetic practice that constructs an adversarial critique and which demonstrates that the taken-for-granted explanations of how race relations came to be the way they are in America, can no longer be taken at face value."⁵³ A part of this adversarial critique is McCauley's attention to her own resistance in dialogue, a characteristic that is essential to cross-cultural/dialogue as movement. Because, as McCauley contends:

Dialogue is an act. One of the comments I'm sensitive to is, 'You're talking about it, but what are you doing?' . . . I found that just the nerve, the boldness to speak about the charged issues of race relations can be something right there. It is an act. It is not before or after the act. Saying the words, allowing the dialogue, making the dialogue happen is an act, a useful act in the moment.⁵⁴

When dialogue is negotiated—as it was during the rehearsal process of *Shays' Rebellion*—it is a form of action out of which *movement* can occur. Sometimes movement may mean that people begin to talk and share in ways that they could not

⁵⁰Henry Giroux, "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity," *Harvard Educational Review*, 67:2 (Summer 1997), 285–320.

⁵¹Shannon Jackson, "White Noises: On Performing White, On Writing Performance," *Theatre Topics*, 42:1 (Spring 1998), 49–65.

⁵²Although there is an element of self-critique acknowledging this tendency to disassociate within her performance piece, Jackson's essay on *White Noises* is a further critique of her own choices in performance. According to Jackson, her performance changed depending upon whether the audience make-up included more or less people of color: "the act of performing this piece itself [is] an exercise in whiteface-saving and a test of whether I will allow myself to look bad" (53).

⁵³Raewyn White, "Robbie McCauley: Speaking History Other-Wise," in *Acting Out*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 290.

⁵⁴Mahone, 213.

previously, so that “Eventually these processes permit the audience members [and actors] to hear things from people they are not used to listening to, about issues that have been barriers between them.”⁵⁵ Sometimes movement may mean that even those who *think* they understand the issues barring open dialogue are *moved* to rethink their original positions. Perhaps it is, as Phelan has described, “in the attempt to walk (and live) on the rickety bridge between self and other—and not the attempt to arrive at one side or the other—that we discover real hope.”⁵⁶

* * *

More than two years have passed since I experienced this moment of “pedagogical trauma” during *Shays’ Rebellion*. Since then, I have been moved to reflect on my own scholarly arrogance and self-righteous presumptions more times than I could have allowed myself to imagine then. As an educator. As a director. As a friend. Only now am I beginning to see what I believe Robbie McCauley has valued all along: that each collaborative experience is a “work-in-progress” for all participants. Movement is the method and the intended goal of cross-cultural collaboration, “[b]ecause it also means a work-in-**progress**, in people moving forward. So the working in progress is also the labor of struggle that shapes the performance.”⁵⁷ In order to embrace this kind of movement, I as “director” must be willing to live—and move—on that rickety bridge.

⁵⁵ Robbie McCauley, “Mississippi Freedom: South and North,” *Theater*, 24:2 (1993), 90.

⁵⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, 174.

⁵⁷ Patraha, “Robbie McCauley: Obsessing in Public,” 228.