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New York--In her deeply engrossing film "The Healing Passage—Voices from the Water," S. Pearl Sharp selected a number of accomplished artists to evoke the horrors of the slave trade and ways to suture our terrible past. Such notable artists as the late Babatunde Olatunji and Tom Feelings, along with Haile Gerima, Ysaye Barnwell, Oscar Brown, Jr., Chester Higgins, Jr, Gil Noble, and Riua Akinshegun are among the healers who invest the film with powerful images and expressions.

But the film itself is perhaps the most potent source of healing. At the very start we look over Feelings' shoulder as he works on his book *The Middle Passage—White Ships, Black Cargo*. It took the great artist nearly a quarter of a century to complete the drawings some of which Sharp has enlisted to establish her theme, a theme further enhanced by Akinshegun's and Angela Briggs' African dolls, and the sculpture of John Outterbridge.

It isn't easy to get a New York audience to its feet with applause, but that was the reaction last Thursday evening at the Schomburg as the film's credits crawled and the music faded. Like Gerima's film *Sankofa*, Sharp had transported her viewers back through the Middle Passage, through the Door of No Return on Goree Island, to the pain of the past before thoughtfully replenishing them with the process of healing.

One significant part of the healing process was the immersion in the blues. And while the passion of Olatunji drums was only intimated, Brother Yusef's guitar and lyrics were given riveting prominence. Vocalist/composer Oscar Brown, Jr. brought Sharp's narrative into the next century with his rendition of "Forty Acres and a Mule," accompanied by bassist Nedra Wheeler.

Barnwell's magisterial voice ushered in the spiritual component; her songs complementing the words of Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, who annually has been a reliable griot in the quest to make sure that the tragedy of the Maafa, the African holocaust, is remembered and ritualized.

On other occasions, Sharp has explained the background and purpose of her film. "A growing number of people are beginning make a connection between the psychological traumas of slavery and our behavior today. My documentary is on how artists create paths to healing," she said.

The composition of the film—the editing, color and continuity—is taut and as finely conceived as one of Feeling's sketches. Among the most memorable scenes is one toward the end when Akinshegun is in the foreground looking seaward while Brother Yusef in the distance, is strolling with his guitar along the shoreline. As in the scene where Sharp and two other women cast sand or ashes into the ocean, no narration is needed here. The message is clear.

And when words and clarity are needed, Noble, Outterbridge, Barnwell, Higgins, and the venerable Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan (Dr. Ben) are eloquent and insightful. Particularly moving were the moments when Noble and Dr. Ben are traveling in Egypt (Kemet) and discussing the ancient monuments. "They were here thousands of years before Rome was even thought of," Dr. Ben remarks of the statues.

The Healing Passage was one of several films in the 12th Annual African Diaspora Film Festival, and it's a good chance that it'll be screened again at other festivals. "I've submitted it to POV on PBS, but I haven't heard anything yet." Sharp told the audience during the question and answer session. "I just finished it in June. Distribution is the problem.

No need to worry, Ms. Sharp. Word-of-mouth will give the film the wings it needs to fly to the people, a people so desperately in need of its passages of healing.

[The good news is that S. Pearl has won the ADFP's "Public Award for the Best Film Directed by a Woman of Color." And in March, she will be opening the Harlem Film Festival at Aaron Davis Hall on March 5th.]