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# American Visions

**Black Theater's Past  
Anna Deavere Smith  
Black Inns and B&Bs  
Hot New Film Director**

*"Caravan," by Karanja Cordice*



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# A nna of a Thousand Faces

Taking America's Multiple Personalities on the Road

*by Sharon Fitzgerald*

**M**any actors live for the wave of applause at curtain call—for the endorsement of their performance, of their artistry. But as dramatist and actress Anna Deavere Smith returned to the empty stage of Broadway's Cort Theater to acknowledge the cheers of the audience, her countenance was thoughtful and reserved. She seemed to wonder,



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Had she *relayed* it all?

In the past two years, Smith has seized the American stage with her one-person explorations of humanity in turmoil: *Fires in the Mirror* examines the troubled relationship between blacks and Hasidic Jews in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights and the violent eruption that accompanied the deaths of 7-year-old Gavin Cato and rabbinical student Yankel Rosenbaum. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* explores the devastating riots that followed the first acquittals of the police officers charged with beating motorist Rodney King.

Both *Fires* and *Twilight* were embraced by the cities that inspired them. *Fires* was the hot ticket of the season at New York's Public Theater. *Twilight*—commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles—was described as cathartic by many Los Angelenos, its performances sometimes followed by thorny audience discussions.



New York theater critics raved when *Twilight* arrived at the Public Theater and later saluted the play's move to Broadway. The work was described as a "treasure" and a "masterpiece"; Smith was touted as "one of the most important voices in contemporary theater." Although Smith's work was nominated, this year's Pulitzer Prize and Tony Awards eluded her. However, *Twilight* was honored by five other dramatic institutions. Smith received awards from the New York Drama Critics Circle, the Drama Desk, the Outer Critics Circle and Theater World, as well as the Obie for best play.

To create *Fires* and *Twilight*, Smith did not rely on her own observations and insights, but rather hearkened to the voices of those who lived through the conflicts, those whose "anonymity I find so disturbing," she says. From hundreds of taped interviews with members of the communities involved, Smith distilled and orchestrated pure, unbiased, tumultuous symphonies.

Each moment in Smith's world is seamless. Throughout *Twilight*, she is attired in black pants and loosely tailored shirts and employs only the simplest props and accessories. In one scene she sits confidently in a power chair at center stage—one red high heel planted on terra firma, the other dangling from the foot of her crossed leg. Smith has slipped into the skin of Hollywood executive Suzanne DePasse.

A slide projection of Century City glimmers in the background; a supertitle bearing DePasse's name and the segment's caption, "The Money Train," hovers overhead. Smith luxuriates in DePasse's no-nonsense acumen—her understanding of power, her belief in her destiny, her thoughts about buying a gun—and then there is a swift blackout.

When the stage lights go up, power heels and chair have been discarded and the actress is revealed anew: a can of soda in hand, a blue sweatshirt tied about her waist, a bare foot propped on the edge of a park bench. The supertitle introduces both this "Anonymous Young Man, Former Gang Member" and his description of urban violence, titled "Broad Daylight." The background photo is of palm trees viewed through the openings in a chain-link fence.

As that image disappears, the audience is still quaking from the youth's menacing philosophy: "My theory was, when you shoot somebody in broad daylight, people gonna be mostly scared."

Smith relinquishes her stance at benchside and returns to center stage. The subtlety of her physical transition amazes—a shift of a shoulder, slight tilt of the head—however, it does not surpass the softening of voice and vocabulary. Before this new character, "Diane Van Iden, Brentwood Mother," can retie the sweatshirt in that

around-the-shoulder style preferred by suburbanites, one is already absorbed in her fears for her children. ("Can you imagine if somebody took a gun to the prom?")

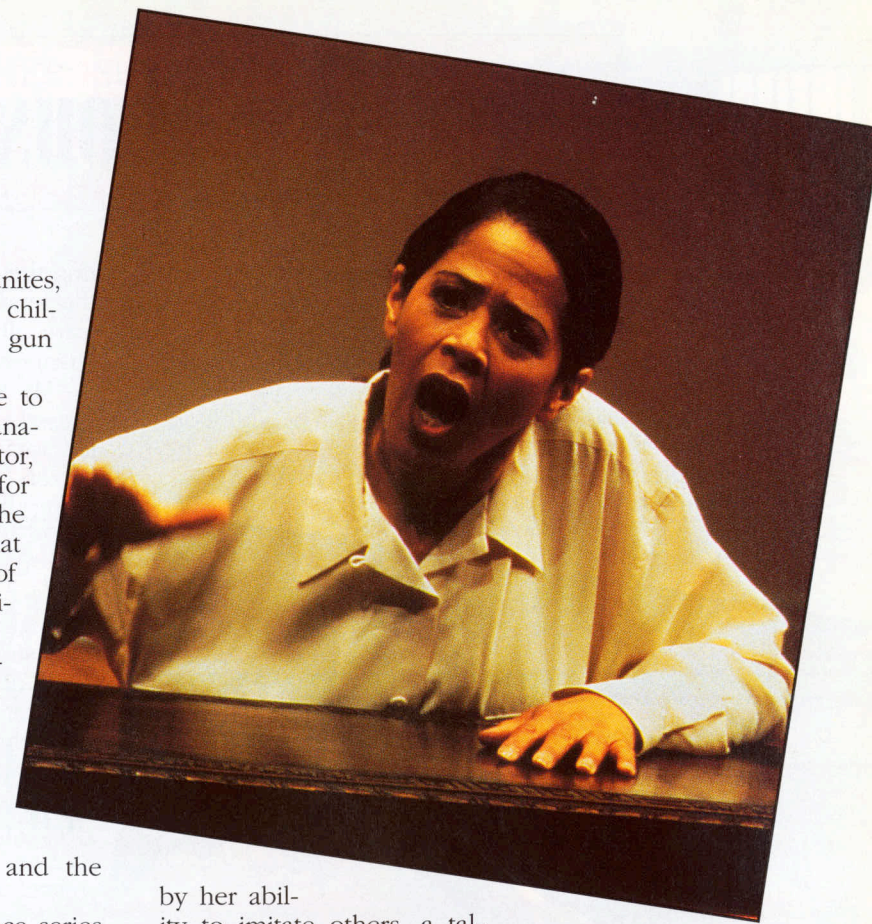
"Anna is like a ferret: She is very available to the truth and does not accept external explanations," says the Public Theater's artistic director, George C. Wolfe, who commissioned *Fires* for the Public and later directed *Twilight* both at the Public and on Broadway. "She understands that inside of language—inside of pauses, inside of everything—there is always this more complicated story going on."

Smith's understanding is driven by her conviction that the truths of a person's inner life often are manifested in the nuances of that person's spoken and body language. She honed her observational skills by spending hours watching television talk shows—awaiting that moment when a subject's guard was down, the rehearsed language diminished, and the person's soul was revealed.

*Twilight* and *Fires* are parts of a performance series that Smith began in the early 1980s called *On the Road: The Search for American Character*. "When I first began this work," she explains, "I asked a linguist how I might encourage people to say 'uh' more. 'Uhs' are actually the place where I find American character. The linguist gave me three questions to ask: Have you ever come close to death? Have you ever been accused of something that you did not do? Can you recall the circumstances of your birth?"

In the troubled areas of Los Angeles and Crown Heights, Smith found that these questions sometimes were answered before she could ask them. "I interviewed a Korean store owner who had to go into the street with guns to keep his store from being burned down," she recalls. "I realized that this man was answering all of my questions. He had come close to death. Nobody knew anything about him personally; his store was being burned down because he was Korean. He talked about his birth in a metaphorical way: The circumstances in Los Angeles made him particularly conscious of his ethnicity. I began to think that the search for American character actually lives not in our achievements or not only in our peace, but in our struggle."

Aptly for the creator of a series exploring the American character, Smith values independence; oddly for an actor—and one who is the stage's sole occupant—she was shy as a child. Both attributes appeared early in her life. Her mother was in labor five days before giving birth to Anna, the first of five children. "I came down the birth canal, turned around and went back up," Smith says. Her childhood shyness was mediated



by her ability to imitate others, a talent that won her the respect of classmates and the appreciation of siblings. "Anna was always the one we wanted to read us stories," her sister Jennifer recalls.

Acting became an early passion, but shared its influence with the drama taking place on the political stage of the 1960s and '70s. "When I went to college in 1967, my college was looking for nice Negro girls," Smith says. "But by the time I got out, there was no such thing as a nice Negro girl—Martin Luther King had died, and the black power and feminist movements had begun. So when I got out of college I had no idea who I was or what I should be. I left home with \$80 and an overnight bag and went to California looking for a social movement."

But even in the San Francisco Bay Area of the '70s, much of the political activity she sought was subsiding. "By complete accident," one night she attended a play at a theater and acting school and decided to resume taking classes. Soon after, she was invited to join the school's serious training program. "I guess if my college was courting, I met my lover in my first summer of acting school," she now says. "If you ask about the birth of my artistry, I got pregnant with acting that first year."

"Becoming an artist was wonderful. I was so innocent—knew so little about art—that I was just completely open to everything. When I saw Beethoven's Ninth performed at a cathedral, I had a transcendental experience. The walks with my friends through Chinatown ... It was this real blessed love affair for the first year. Then it got political and hard and all of



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the other things. I always long for that year because I know that it was probably the most creative year of my life."

The period that followed was a time of struggle. "The artist was born, but the next 20 years were a very difficult childhood," Smith recalls. "The childhood of my artistry was in the wilderness in a way. It became a quick adulthood because I didn't have many parents—I had very few mentors."



Now an associate professor of drama at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., Smith talks to her students about this wilderness—and independence. "I don't like for them to think of me as a mentor, their big sister or, now that I'm getting older, as a mother or any of that stuff."

"I talk to them about thinking of class as a store. You do your work in the wilderness, and you come into the store to get supplies. You should almost be starving by the time you come to the store to get a box of crackers. I believe in that type of independence, mainly because most of my career has been in independence."

"I know that this is such an old-fashioned thing to say, and it's nothing new," she continues, "but I think a lot of gifted people ultimately want to be recognized by the mainstream. I do a dream exercise in my classes, and I can't tell you how many people dream of get-

ting the Academy Award. But you can't just wake up in the morning and get the Academy Award. You have to learn all of the channels for that, and getting in those channels begins to transform the nature of the work."

"My big dream, from the time I read *The Glass Menagerie*, was to write a play that would create a career for somebody. Tennessee Williams and others created careers for people. I'm 43, and so if that dream is going to be realized, I think I have to begin now."

*On the Road* was galvanized by Smith's recognition that "the iris of the American theater was so small," that gender and race could stifle one's voice, and that original works were needed. "I really began my project as a suggestion to the American theater that different kinds of people could populate its stages," she says.

Wherever her dream takes her, it's likely to continue that suggestion. "We see a lot written in the press about the death of the serious play on Broadway," says Smith. "And if that is true, certainly the death of the serious play is something to mourn. But [my] concerns about the theater begin with getting to perform my work for diverse audiences and end with the bigger problem, which is—how can the theater have a greater effect on culture as a whole?"

Searching for answers does not mean she expects to uncover a solution. Smith's artistic expressions are propelled by "contradictions that want resolution"—namely, her inherent idealism versus her view of reality. "Let's just take race," she explains. "At the same time that I feel a very profound concern about race, and I'm not sure what changes I will see in my lifetime, in my heart I have a kind of idealism that was bred by being raised during the time of Martin Luther King. I still have that, but I see the reality daily, and that reality is always facing off my idealism."

"I probably don't understand this on a conscious level, but my work may very well come out of that contradiction. This idealism and this realism are like chemical forces that want resolution, but the two things know that they don't belong together. If they were chemicals, their opposition would cause a certain activity. The result is my work. My work is action."

So has she become an activist? "No," she replies. "The activist has made the decision: This cannot be anymore, and I am going to change it. I have a lot of activist friends. When I am shocked, I'll go to one of them and say, 'I cannot believe what happened.' And they'll say, 'Well, Anna, it's this, this and that.' They have the answer. I don't have the answer, I have the shock."

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*Sharon Fitzgerald is a freelance writer in New York City. Her last article for American Visions, "The Glorious Walk of Marion Williams," appeared in the December/January 1994 issue.*