



Anna Deavere Smith



I played Twilight in Los Angeles as a call to the community. I performed it at a time when the community had not yet resolved its problems. I wanted to be a part of their examination of the problems. I believe the solutions to these problems will call for the participation of large and eclectic groups of people. I also believe that we are at a stage at which we must first break the silence about race and encourage many more people to participate in the dialogue.

— Preface to *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (xxiv)



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1950
- * African-American playwright and actress
- * Author of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

Biography

African-American playwright and actress Anna Deavere Smith was born September 18, 1950 in Baltimore, MD, to an elementary school teacher and a coffee merchant. As a child, Smith suffered from intense shyness, but soon gained popularity because of her skillful mimicry. Consequently, Smith's love of performance led her to earn an M.F.A. from San Francisco's elite American Conservatory Theater in 1977, where she had relocated after receiving her B.A. from Pennsylvania's Beaver College six years earlier.

Anna Deavere Smith has held academic positions in the Drama Departments of the University of Southern California, New York University, Carnegie-Mellon, Yale and Stanford. During her stint as an Associate Professor of Drama at Stanford in the early 1990s, Smith published *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Both works are transcripts of performances that Smith created as part of her ongoing project on language and identity, *On the Road: A Search for American Character*.



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Biography continued

Anna Deavere Smith originally created *On the Road* in the early 1980s without an overt political intent; the project was initially conceived as a series of interviews that would explore and experiment with language, behavior, and their relationship to character. In an undergraduate seminar that Smith conducted at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in Spring 2005, she described the genesis of the award-winning project. Smith recalled approaching strangers on the streets of New York, attempting to discover the city's character through her tape recorder and the line, "I know an actor who looks like you, and if you give me an hour of your time, I'll invite you to see yourself performed" (quoted from lecture to University of Minnesota undergraduates, Minneapolis, April 15, 2005). Although she had intended to portray these sketches with the help of a theatre company, Smith soon realized that monetary concerns would become an obstacle. To ensure that the dialogue culled from the interviews would receive stage time, Anna Deavere Smith started an acting workshop to explore character and language while concurrently gaining funding for *On the Road*. Finances began to detract from her time for the company and its performances, however, and Smith recognized the need to conduct the interviews and performances of her subjects alone. This reduction impacted the project far more significantly than a simple alleviation of financial difficulties; in fact, when Smith, as an African-American woman, replicated the words and speech rhythms of all the different characters of different races and genders, the project took on a whole new dimension.

Smith's performances challenge audience members to examine and rethink their constructions of gender and racial identity. While imitating her subjects' speech, Smith strives to "hold within [her] body many different points of view" (quoted from lecture to UMN undergraduates). She believes that the value of this method lies in the fact that no matter how authentically she mimics a person, she will always be herself and only herself, and that the subject of her portrayal will, in spite of her impression, retain his or her individual character and speech. Anna Deavere Smith works to lead her audience to the discovery "that American character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between the places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences" (*Fires in the Mirror* xli). The dialogue from these performances transcribed in the print editions of *Fire in the Mirror* and *Twilight* demonstrates the similarities, as well as the uniqueness, of individuals' word choice and word order, evident in the prose poem-like layout of the interviews.



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Biography continued

In *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith attempts to portray the real people and motivations behind the eruption of racial tensions, triggered by a fatal accident, between the borough's Hasidic Jewish residents and the largely immigrant black population. Although the play never depicts the actual accident and the murders and attacks that followed, the implications and aftermath are visible within the characters' recollections. John Leonard of *New York Metro* says that Smith's juxtaposition of different interview subjects allows the viewer to see "around corners, into recesses" where the social constructs of race, gender, and class identity has kept people from realizing their many commonalities (Leonard). The extremely diverse and seemingly disparate voices extend from the Reverend Al Sharpton to an orthodox Jewish female graphic designer to the father of the child killed in the accident. The dialogue chosen by Smith cuts through the media exaggeration and misrepresentation of both groups with unflinchingly honest and vivid depictions of neighborhood residents with varying stances and statuses. While Smith's dialogue emphasizes the characters' individual differences, she also focuses on the common threads of humor, hope, and despair evident in their words. The book's themes live within the narratives; forgiveness, empathy and personal and community identity are embodied in the memories and opinions that Smith's characters express.

The interviews are deftly woven together, leaving the reader with the sense that progress and understanding can truly be achieved. *Fires in the Mirror* proves the necessity for open dialogue, for heartfelt words and active listening. "There's nothing to hide/you can repeat every word I say," declares Carmel Cato, the father of the first victim, within the final pages of the play (*Fires in the Mirror* 139). Smith's concluding interview reflects the real tensions within all the previous monologues: the pain of neighborhood residents, the continuous struggle for understanding, and the possibilities for reconciliation. *The Hollywood Reporter* describes the play as "not only potent social commentary in search of truth, but also a poignant look at a glaring cultural gap." *New York Times* critic David Richards lauds the piece's simultaneous timeliness and timelessness (Richards). *Fires in the Mirror* won the Drama Logue Award, the Drama Desk Award, the Obie Award, and was a finalist in the Pulitzer Prize drama category in 1992.



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Biography continued

Twilight deals with similar themes of racial prejudice and awareness. The original performance piece was commissioned in May 1992 by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and was born out of Smith's "search for the character of Los Angeles in the wake of the initial Rodney King verdict" (*Twilight* xvii). The play is named after Twilight, an ex-gang member whose words reflect the need to "speak from another point of view, like speaking another language," in order to step beyond the bounds and restrictions of racial identity (*Twilight* xxv). Twilight himself summarizes the intention of the piece: that one "cannot forever dwell in idea/ of identifying with those like me/ and understanding only me and mine" (*Twilight* xxvi).

In her review of the play, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory describes *Twilight* as a "razor-sharp play script . . . a major contribution to American theater" (Brown-Guillory 373). In *Twilight*, Smith takes the reader/ audience member on a journey through the varying class strata of the African-American, Caucasian, and Korean-American communities affected during the disturbance. The range of people Smith portrays in *Twilight* is noticeably more diverse than those within *Fires in the Mirror*. *Time Magazine* praises Smith's careful depiction of the identifying details and individual eccentricities of speech and dress that "subtly illuminate the problem of race." In fact, within *Twilight*, Smith's subjects include neighborhood residents and people directly affected by the violence, but she also reaches into segments of Los Angeles communities not readily associated with the riots.

Through her interviews, it becomes increasingly evident that the tension and the fear behind the riots are inescapable, that their roots are deep and far-reaching, and that the problems of America must be taken on by all of its citizens. Smith voices the fears and the hopes of a Hollywood agent, a man whose shop was destroyed in the riots, a woman who saved a man's life from an angry mob, and a sheltered sorority girl. In spite of the characters' differences in viewpoints and in speech patterns, readers come to see the basic human desires for security, peace, and fraternity underlying the multiple interviews. As a result of Smith's careful analysis and portrayal of her subjects, in 1993, *Twilight* received the Obie Award and the Drama Desk Award, as well as the Antoinette Perry Award and the Outer Critics Circle Award.

In addition to her critically acclaimed theatre performances and books, Anna Deavere Smith has appeared onscreen in the films *Dave*, *The American President*, *Philadelphia*, and *The Human Stain* (2003), and she has a recurring role on the television series *The West Wing*. Her works have been performed across the United States and in Britain. In 2000, a filmed version of *Twilight* was screened at the Sundance Film Festival.



Anna Deavere Smith

Biography continued

Recently, Anna Deavere Smith published two more non-fiction books, *House Arrest: A Search for American Character in and Around the White House, Past and Present* and *Talk to Me: Travels in Media and Politics*. Smith's body of work has received further acclaim with the addition of *House Arrest and Piano: Two Plays*. The first of the two plays is based on the novel of the same name, and the second is a fictional, dramatic depiction of gender and racial tension in an affluent Cuban household prior to the Spanish-American War.

Anna Deavere Smith's upcoming projects concern the increasing need for interest and involvement in international affairs. Smith concluded her visit to the University of Minnesota by advising students to "make a deliberate step out of safe houses of what you know," adding that writers and artists must not be afraid to enter the "crossroads of ambiguity" in order to learn resilience, fortitude and strength, and to become familiar with, and even embrace, the anxiety of the unknown (quoted in lecture). Smith believes that only by discovering the words and the people constituting different communities can we "engender public trust," achieve authenticity, and become active practitioners of an effective, open dialogue (quoted in lecture).



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