

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH TWILIGHT

LOS ANGELES, 1992

"An American masterpiece...the heart and soul of an American tragedy,
as expressed by the hearts and souls of the people who were part of it."

—JACK KROLL, *NEWSWEEK*

Twilight LOS
Angeles, 1992 On the Road:
A Search for American Character
Anna Deavere Smith

AN ANCHOR BOOK

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This book is dedicated to the
citizens of Los Angeles.

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Introduction

In May 1992 I was commissioned by Gordon Davidson, artistic director/producer of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, to create a one-woman performance piece about the civil disturbances in that city in April 1992. For over ten years now I have been creating performances based on actual events in a series I have titled *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. Each *On the Road* performance evolves from interviews I conduct with individuals directly or indirectly involved in the event I intend to explore. Basing my scripts entirely on this interview material, I perform the interviewees on stage using their own words. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* is the product of my search for the character of Los Angeles in the wake of the initial Rodney King verdict.

In the course of my research for the play I interviewed about two hundred people. Due to time restrictions, however, the number of people I was able to portray on stage was limited to about twenty-five. This book includes some of the material I performed both in the play's Los Angeles version for the Taper and in the version presented at the New York Shakespeare Festival. It includes additional interviews that were not included in the stage versions, which I hope will enrich the reader's understanding of the conflicts that erupted on April 29, 1992. For those who both see the play and read the book, I hope the book can serve as a companion to the theater experience.

The story of how Los Angeles came to experience what some call the worst riots in United States history is by now familiar. In the Spring of 1991, Rodney King, a black man, was severely beaten by four white Los Angeles police officers after a high-speed chase in which King was pursued for speeding. A nearby resident videotaped the beating from the balcony of his apartment. When the videotape was broadcast on national television, there was an immediate outcry from the community. The next year, the police officers who beat King were tried and found not guilty—and the city exploded. The verdict took the city by surprise, from public officials to average citizens. Even the defense lawyers, I was told, anticipated that there would be some convictions. Three days of burning, looting, and killing scarred Los Angeles and captured the attention of the world.

That is the extent of what most Americans understand to have caused what, depending on your point of view, would be variously referred to as a “riot,” an “uprising,” and/or a “rebellion.” But beneath this surface explanation is a sea of associated causes. The worsening California economy and the deterioration of social services and public education in Los Angeles certainly paved the way to unrest. In 1968 President Lyndon Johnson convened the Kerner Commission to examine the causes of riots that shook more than 150 American cities in 1967. The commission’s report highlighted urban ills and the plight of the urban poor. Yet more than twenty years later, living conditions for blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles have hardly improved, and Rodney King’s beating was only the most visible example of years of police brutality toward people of color. The Watts riots, for example, were sparked by an altercation between a black man and the LAPD. In a speech given

at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, California Congresswoman Maxine Waters spoke vividly about the legacy of the Watts riots:

There was an insurrection in this city before,
and, if I remember correctly,
it was sparked by police brutality.
We had a Kerner Commission report.
It talked about what was wrong with our society.
It talked about institutionalized racism.
It talked about a lack of services,
lack of government responsiveness to the people.
Today,
as we stand here in 1992,
if you go back and read the report,
it seems as though we are talking about what that report
cited
some twenty years ago,
still exists today.

The police officers who beat Rodney King were tried in Simi Valley, miles away from the social, economic, and racial problems in Los Angeles. More important, they were miles away from what many residents of the epicenter of the riots, South-Central L.A., would call a war between residents and police officers. When I visited the quiet, predominantly white suburban community of Simi Valley, I began to perceive how profoundly different our experiences of law enforcement can be. For jurors in Simi Valley, Rodney King appeared to be a threat to the police. Moreover, he had been speeding. The officers were, as far as they were concerned, enforcing the law. Police

officers reportedly concluded that King was on the drug PCP, impervious to pain, and therefore not responding to the beating. On the other hand, when I interviewed Rodney King's aunt, she burst into tears as she recounted seeing the beating on television, and "hearing him holler." She heard King's cries the first time she saw the tape. Yet a juror in the federal civil rights trial against the officers who also heard King's reaction to the police blows told me that the rest of the jury had difficulty hearing what she and King's aunt had heard. But when, during deliberations, they focused on the audio rather than the video image, their perspective changed. The physical image of Rodney King had to be taken away for them to agree that he was in pain and responding to the beating.

Although I did not attend the original trial in Simi Valley, I did attend the subsequent federal civil rights trial. There, I was able to imagine how such a jury could become convinced that, although the beating seemed brutal to any layman, it was, according to the defense, within the guidelines of the LAPD use-of-force policy. Moreover, I came to observe that some people are effected by the power of what District Attorney Gil Garcetti would describe as the "aura" and "magic" of the police, especially when police officers come to court. There they appeared polite, well groomed, and ready to "protect and serve." This image differed radically from the image of police conveyed to me by Michael Zinzun, a community activist and chairperson of the South-Central-based Coalition Against Police Abuse. The walls of his office were covered with blown-up photographs of people who had been beaten by police—bruised, bloodied, maimed. Zinzun himself had won a case against the city because he had been blinded when he attempted to intervene in a police beating of someone in his community.

The video of the Rodney King beating, which seemed to “tell all,” apparently did not tell enough, and the prosecution lost, as their lead attorney told me, “the slam-dunk case of the century.” The city of Los Angeles lost much more. *Twilight* is an attempt to explore the shades of that loss. It is not really an attempt to find causes or to show where responsibility was lacking. That would be the task of a commission report. While I was in Los Angeles, and when I have returned since my initial performance of *Twilight* in the summer of 1993, I have been trying to look at the shifts in attitudes of citizens toward race relations. I have been particularly interested in the opportunity the events in Los Angeles give us to take stock of how the race canvas in America has *changed* since the Watts riots. Los Angeles shows us that the story of race in America is much larger and more complex than a story of black and white. There are new players in the race drama. Whereas Jewish merchants were hit during the Watts riots, Korean merchants were hit this time. Although the media tended to focus on blacks in South-Central, the Latino population was equally involved. We tend to think of race as us and them—us or them being black or white depending on one’s own color. The relationships among peoples of color and *within* racial groups are getting more and more complicated.

Where does theater fit into this? Theater can mirror society. But in order to do that theater must embrace diversity. It must include new characters in our human drama that have not been portrayed on our stages. Clearly even white mainstream theater could be more interesting, and more honest, if people of color were integrated into the drama rather than used as walk-on stereotypes. We now have the opportunity to be a part of the discovery of a larger, healthier, more interesting picture of America. I went to Los Angeles as part of this

process, to listen to those who had lived through the disturbances and to reiterate their voices in the theater. I have felt in this project, more than once, an increased humility, and a greater understanding of the limitations of theater to reflect society. In developing the *On the Road* project, it was my goal to develop a kind of theater that could be more sensitive to the events of my own time than traditional theater could. This book is a part of that quest.

The challenge of creating *On the Road* works is to select the voices that best represent the event I hope to portray. *Twilight* was a particular challenge in this regard due to the number and the diversity of the voices I had gathered through interviews. I had made decisions as to which interviews to include on my own. However, since *Fires in the Mirror*, I have found it helpful to include more people in the creative process. I developed *Twilight* at the Mark Taper Forum in collaboration with four other people of various races who functioned as dramaturges (a dramaturge is a person who assists in the preparation of the text of a play and can offer an outside perspective to those who are more active in the process of staging the play). These dramaturges brought their own real-world experiences with race to bear on the work. They reacted to *Twilight* at every stage of its development.

My predominant concern about the creation of *Twilight* was that my own history, which is a history of race as a black and white struggle, would make the work narrower than it should be. For this reason, I sought out dramaturges who had very developed careers and identities, outside the theater profession. I was interested not only in their ethnic diversity, but in the diversity that they would bring to the project in terms of areas of expertise. I am a strong critic of the insularity of peo-

ple in theater and of our inability to shake up our traditions, particularly with regard to race and representation issues. An issue that is at the heart of many theater conferences and gatherings is the need to make theater a more responsible partner in the growth of communities.

Among the people I asked to join me were Dorinne Kondo, a Japanese American anthropologist and feminist scholar; Hector Tobar, a Guatemalan-American reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* who had covered the riots; and the African American poet and University of Chicago professor Elizabeth Alexander. Oskar Eustis, a resident director at the Taper, also joined the dramaturgical team.

After every performance during previews, I met with the dramaturges and with the director and members of the staff of the Taper. Many of the meetings were very emotional. They were dramas in and of themselves. The most outspoken members of the group were Dorinne and Hector. They passionately attacked the black-and-white canvas that most of us in the room were inclined to perpetuate.

After my work at the Taper, and in revising the text for the New York production, I went to the Rockefeller Foundation's Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy, to work with my acting coach, Merry Conway, who has been working with me at various times during the development of *On the Road* since its beginnings. The bottom line of my choice in material for a text is what happens when I actually *act* the material. Merry and I worked on a lot of material that never appeared in the play in any production, but which does appear in this book. What most influences my decisions about what to include is how an interview text works as a *physical, audible, performable* vehicle. Words are not an end in themselves. They are a means

to evoking the character of the person who spoke them. Every person that I include in the book, and who I perform, has a presence that is much more important than the information they give.

This book is first and foremost a document of what an *actress heard* in Los Angeles. The performance is a reiteration of that. When I did my research in Los Angeles, I was listening with an ear that was trained to hear stories for the specific purpose of repeating them with the elements of character intact. This becomes significant because sometimes there is the expectation that inasmuch as I am doing “social dramas,” I am looking for *solutions* to social problems. In fact, though, I am looking at the *processes* of the problems. Acting is a constant process of becoming something. It is not a result, it is not an answer. It is not a solution. I am first looking for the humanness inside the problems, or the crises. The spoken word is evidence of the humanness. Perhaps the solutions come somewhere further down the road.

I see the work as a call. 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 the problems. I wanted to be a part of their examination of the problems. I believe that 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.

One of the questions I was frequently asked when I was interviewed about *Twilight* was “Did you find any one voice that could speak for the entire city?” I think there is an expectation that in this diverse city, and in this diverse nation, a unifying voice would bring increased understanding and put us on

the road to solutions. This expectation surprises me. There is little in culture or education that encourages the development of a unifying voice. In order to have real unity, all voices would have to first be heard or at least represented. Many of us who work in race relations do so from the point of view of our own ethnicity. This very fact inhibits our ability to hear more voices than those that are closest to us in proximity. Few people speak a language about race that is not their own. If more of us could actually speak from another point of view, like speaking another language, we could accelerate the flow of ideas.

The boundaries of ethnicity do yield brilliant work. In some cases these boundaries provide safer places that allow us to work in atmospheres where we are supported and can support the works of others. In some cases it's very exciting to work with like-minded people in similar fields of interest. In other cases these boundaries have been crucial to the development of identity and the only conceivable response to a popular culture and a mainstream that denied the possibility of the development of identity. On the other hand the price we pay is that few of us can really look at the story of race in its complexity and its scope. If we were able to move more frequently beyond these boundaries, we would develop multifaceted identities and we would develop a more complex language. After all, identity is in some ways a process toward character. It is not character itself. It is not fixed. Our race dialogue desperately needs this more complex language. The words of *Twilight*, the ex-gang member after whom I named the play, addresses this need:

Twilight is that time of day between day and night
limbo, I call it limbo,
and sometimes when I take my ideas to my homeboys

they say, well Twilight, that's something you can't do right
now,
that's an idea before its time.

So sometimes I feel as though I'm stuck in limbo
the way the sun is stuck between night and day
in the twilight hours.

Nighttime to me is like a lack of sun,
but I don't affiliate darkness with anything negative.
I affiliate darkness with what came first,
because it was first,
and relative to my complexion,

I am a dark individual
and with me being stuck in limbo
I see the darkness as myself.

And I see the light as the knowledge and the wisdom of the
world, and the understanding of others.

And I know

that in order for me to be a full human being
I cannot forever dwell in darkness
I cannot forever dwell in idea
of identifying with those like me
and understanding only me and mine.

Twilight's recognition that we must reach across ethnic bound-
aries is simple but true.

Production History

Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 was conceived, written, and performed by Anna Deavere Smith. It was originally produced by the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles: Gordon Davidson, artistic director/producer, and Emily Mann, director.

It premiered on May 23, 1993, and closed on July 18, 1993. It was subsequently produced as a work in progress at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey.

Twilight's original New York production was provided by the New York Shakespeare Festival, George C. Wolfe, producer.

It opened at the New York Shakespeare Festival in March 1994 and was directed by George C. Wolfe.

All material is taken from interviews conducted by Anna Deavere Smith.

At the Mark Taper Forum, Charles Dillingham served as managing director and Robert Egan as producing director. Robert Brill designed the set; Candice Donnelly, the costumes; Allen Lee Hughes, the lighting; Lucia Hwong, the original music score; Jon Gottlieb, the sound; Jon Stolzberg of Intelewall, the multimedia design; and Merry Conway, the physical dramaturgy. Dramaturges: Elizabeth Alexander, Oskar Eustis, Dorinne Kondo, and Hector Tobar. Corey Beth Madden was associate producer; Ed De Shae, production stage