

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH

The drama critic for one of the national weekly news magazines recently called Anna Deavere Smith "the most exciting individual in American theater right now." She is surely the most original as well. In her one-woman performances she assumes the roles of persons she has interviewed who are involved in a contemporary and often controversial incident in American society. "I'm interested," she has said, "in telling every side of the story." In Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, And Other Identities (1992), she assumes the roles of Jews and African Americans, males and females, old and young, in a sequence that fixes upon an interracial clash in 1991 in Brooklyn. Her performance earned her the Village Voice off-Broadway award (the Obie) and other awards.

More recently, Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992, applies the same dramatic technique to the upheaval that occurred in that city following the acquittal of four policemen in 1992 for the beating of Rodney King. She interviewed more than 175 people and chose 27 of them - blacks, whites, Koreans, Latinos, policemen, journalists, politicians -- to be acted out by herself using the language recorded in the interviews. The result is a riveting evocation of racial tensions in modern American society. Both this play and Fires in the Mirror have been broadcast on PBS as part of the "American Playhouse" series.

These plays and others make up a part of a large, ambitious work that she is calling On the Road: A Search for American Character.

Anna Deavere Smith won the Drama-Logue Award for Playwriting for her play Piano (1991) and collaborated in the production on a ballet entitled Hymn (1994). She performed in films like Ivan Reitman's Dave and Jonathan Demme's Philadelphia.

She grew up in Baltimore, graduated from Beaver College, has taught at New York University, Carnegie Mellon, and Yale University. Today she is Ann O'Day Maples Professor of the Arts at Stanford University.

Redefining the very nature of modern dramaturgy as playwright, performance artist and teacher, Anna Deavere Smith is helping to inspire a revitalization of the American

stage at the end of the twentieth century. This University takes special pleasure in inviting her -- in the middle of her extraordinary career -- to receive this honorary Doctor of Letters degree.