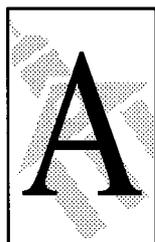


# Under the Skin

by John Lahr



Anna Deavere Smith is a lithe, clear-eyed, forty-two-year-old actress and Stanford theatre professor who has done a great thing. She has gone into this noisy republic and, combining the editorial skill of the biographer and the precision of the mimic, has brought onto the American stage the voices of the unheard. She is offering, in what she calls “a parade of color,” a new framework from which to assess race and class in American culture. She is not writing polemical theatre but, better, doing theatre politically. “It’s crucial that whites in the audience find points of identification,” she wrote in a memo to one of the dramaturges of her most recent piece, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* which is at L.A.’s Mark Taper Forum until July 18 and opening late October at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton. “Points of empathy *with themselves*,” she added. “To create a situation where they merely empathize with those less fortunate than themselves is another kind of theatre. . . . My political problem is this: Privilege is often masked, hidden, guarded. This guarded, fortified privilege is exactly what has led us to the catastrophe of nondialogue in which we find ourselves. I’m not talking about economic privilege. I’m talking about the basic *privilege* of white skin which is the foundation of our rare vocabulary.”

Smith wants to breach this fortress by including both people of color and their unofficial language in the public debate. She speaks heart to heart with her subjects who, in turn, speak memorably to us. There is no buttonholing, no buzz of sound-bites, nothing from the bargain basement of sociology. Instead, like the Billie Holiday song, she asks heartache to come in and sit down. That she succeeds completely is a testament to the integrity both of her performance and of the complex, often poetic feelings she coaxes out of her subjects. *Twilight*, which distills more than 170 interviews into an hour and three-quarters, attempts, through 27 narratives, to take the pulse of Los Angeles between the Rodney King incident, of March 3, 1991, and the federal trial that ended this April with the conviction of two L.A. policemen for violating King’s civil rights. The play — the fourteenth installment of a series she calls “On the Road: A Search for American Character,” which came to national attention in 1991 with her award-winning “Fires in the Mirror,” about Brooklyn’s Crown Heights riots that year — is a bold, prodigious democratic gesture that calls to mind Walt Whitman’s dictum “The United

States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Whitman’s great poem, of course, invoked the voices of America but celebrated only himself. Smith, who speaks verbatim the words of the voiceless, is really writing a poem with them in public. In this heroic undertaking, she is conducting one of the most sophisticated dialogues about race in contemporary America.

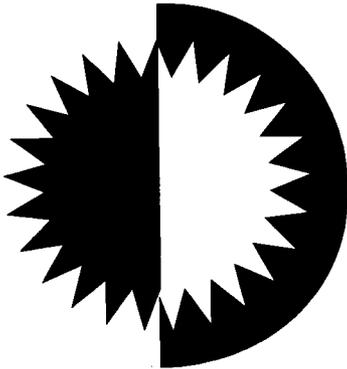
When the lights come up on Smith, the eyes struggle to find her amid the clutter of chairs and tables strewn in some surrealist pattern around the thrust stage. (“Anna’s always saying ‘It’s not domestic. It’s not domestic,’” says the director, Emily Mann, who puts Smith neatly through her paces.) The epic nature of the piece is reinforced by the large, undecorated gray back wall, at the center of which is a recess that becomes variously, a TV split screen, a hodgepodge of graffiti, an office window. Onstage, barefoot and with her hair pulled back, to make the changes of costume and sex easier, Smith somehow neutralizes herself in the task of giving shape to the multifarious voices of others. (In rehearsal, with earphones on, she literally lets the characters take her over, playing back their unedited talk and speaking their words until images and gestures emerge from the rhythms.) “As a student learning Shakespeare, I became fascinated with how the spoken word works in relationship to a person’s psychology,” she says. “It’s the *manipulation* of the words that creates character, not just the words, not just the emotion. My earliest exercise was to take Queen Margaret’s speech from *Richard III* — a vicious speech — and say it over and over again. I did it for three hours. I felt that I’d entered this awful world and this strange woman. I was completely taken over. That became my point of reference for acting. I kept wondering why that wasn’t happening in more realistic plays. Why the words didn’t really hold. In Shakespeare, the words held not just the psyche of the person but also the psyche of the time.”

By demonstrating that to be “literature” a narrative doesn’t have to be “educated,” *Twilight* goes right to the heart of the issues of race and class. “The process of creating literature is natural. It isn’t dependent on a pen and paper. It’s a person using their voice and the making of words to come to consciousness of what they know,” she says, pointing to the print on my newspaper. “This little thing on a page is just a capsule. The real magic happens when the word hits your breath.”

Certainly in her case it does. I saw *Twilight* twice, and it was thrilling to watch different parts of the Los Angeles community face their reflection. At the first performance — a truncated one, which was part of the Taper’s Young Audience Program — things didn’t look good for Anna Deavere Smith. A rambunctious audience of more than 700 students from 11 L.A. high schools began laughing at the TV images of looting which open the section she was about to perform. But Smith soon tamed them. As Julio Menjivar — one of

the innocent Latinos with no criminal record who were nonetheless rounded up by the police during the riot — she was describing in Spanish the police abuse, than suddenly stopped and said to the audience, “I don’t think I should say what the police said. Your teachers will mind.” The kids shouted back, “No they won’t!” So Smith said, “Get up, motherf\_\_\_ ! Get up!” What had started in laughter ended in a standing ovation. The next day, a predominantly white and paying adult audience also rose to its feet at the finale. “She’s the closest thing to a professional athlete I know,” the Taper’s producing director, Robert Egan, told me. “There’s a willingness to go out into the field of play and just do it. She’s got a uniquely, instinctive instrument. She also learns as much dialogue as anybody I’ve ever seen.”

*Twilight* is both a metaphor for a scarred city and the tag of one of Smith’s characters, Twilight Bey, who helped to organize the L.A. gang truce, and whose poetic interpretation of his name gave Smith the idea for her title. “I can’t forever dwell in darkness,” he said to her of the limbo his name signifies to him. In Smith’s script, for reasons of rhythm and memorization, the words are printed like poetry, falling unpunctuated down the page. Here, for example, is Bey, a kind of night watchman of his grim neighborhood, discoursing about his name:



So twilight  
is  
that time  
between day and night  
limbo  
I call it limbo  
so a lot of times when I’ve brought up  
ideas to my homeboys  
they say  
Twilight  
that’s before your time  
that’s something you can’t do now  
when I talked about the truce back in 1988  
that was something they considered  
before its time  
yet  
in 1992  
we made it  
realistic  
so to me it’s like I’m stuck in limbo  
like the sun between night and day.

But in its ruthless probing of both the language and the life of its subjects Smith’s piece embodies another aspect of twilight. “The twilight hours are a time when it’s harder to see, but they become a more creative time, because you have to participate more,” Smith told me. “We might see more because we have to look harder.” Her show looks for no scapegoats and offers no solutions. “It’d be horri-

ble to give an answer,” she says, “because there hasn’t been an examination.”

*Twilight* is the beginning of the inquiry. It bears theatrical witness to the barbarity not just of violence but of envy, which in Los Angeles drives both rich and poor crazy. Smith shows people struggling to make coherent their sense of rage and pain. Over the phone, a former Black Panther activist socks it to a militant about armed struggle: “If you just want to die, and become a poster, go ahead and do that.” A Korean wife tells of hospital visits to her husband, who has been partially lobotomized by a rioter’s bullet fired at point-blank range. “At night, and all the day long, and I spend all my time and in my heart for him,” she says, in halting English. Almost all of Smith’s subjects struggle to get to the point. Smith tracks her subjects through their quirky syntax and their repetitions. “The process of getting to the point is where I think character lives,” she says. “Shoshana Felman, in ‘The Literary Speech Act,’ says that people talk and talk in order to have an experience of themselves. The sludge is the journey to understanding. The sludge is the self.” In *Twilight*, out of the groping for words Smith creates a sense of spiritual static. For example, here (with punctuation added) a Hollywood talent agent, trying alternately to deny and to admit that winning in the American sweepstakes means somebody else’s losing, ties himself up in the kind of semantic knots that David Mamet would envy:

But maybe — not maybe but, uh — the system plays unequally. And the people who were the “they” who were burning down the Beverly Center had been victims of the system. Whether well-intentioned or not, somebody got short shrift, and they did. And I started to absorb a little guilt and say, uh, I deserve. . . . I deserve it. I don’t mean to get my house burned down. The “us” did not in — not (I like to think) — not intentionally. . . . But maybe so. There’s just. . . . It’s so awful out there.

The agent never finishes his thought. To Smith, who is fond of quoting to her students Allen Ginsberg’s “The breath is the inspiration,” the agent’s stammering is a metaphor of his moral stalemate. “I’m not interested in who’s responsible,” she says. “I’m interested in catching this particular agent, who wears Armani suits and is a neat guy. Where is he? That inability to express is itself a reality.”

Listening is one of *Twilight*’s major unspoken dramas. In making the audience hear the characters, Smith is also showing it how to listen to the strangers in its midst. She creates a climate of intimacy by acknowledging the equality of the other. She waits out the anger. She accepts the contradictoriness. She cleverly notes the body language. And sometimes even her right to listen is tested. Angela King, the aunt of Rodney King, says at the end of her interview, “You understand what I’m sayin’ now. You do? Alright.” “That ‘Alright’ is her allowing me to listen. I’m passing the test,” Smith explains. “There is also the issue of ‘Am I worthy to hear them? I like it that in some

cases the dance that you have to do to get to the position of being allowed to listen is difficult. That's why I'm interested in a character like Big Al, who says to me, 'You got to live here to express this point, you got to live here to see what's goin' on.'"

The information for which Smith listens is not facts but the inner conflicts of the soul and how they express themselves in everyday speech. There's no mistaking the former L.A. Police Chief Daryl Gates' slip of the tongue when he refers to Rodney King as "Rodney Thing." "You can't appreciate the blossom without the sludge," she says, and her extraordinary interview with Reginald Denny proves her point. Denny, who was pulled from the cab of his truck and nearly beaten to death, became the media's totem of ghetto barbarity; his beating but not his rescue by four blacks got the TV coverage. Smith follows Denny's meandering vacuity — "I didn't usually pay too much attention of what was going on in California, or in America, or anything" — which leads to a moment of eloquence: "How does one say that someone saved my life? How does a person. . . . How do I express enough thanks for someone risking their neck? And then I was kind of — I don't know if afraid is the word — I was just a little awkward meeting people who saved me. Meeting them was not like meeting a stranger but it was like meeting a buddy. There was a weird common thread in our lives." Smith says that Denny's phrase brought something into focus for her and her desire to dramatize difference in the community. "What I'm offering — and I never started thinking about it until Reginald Denny's piece — is a kind of an aggressive response to the damage the search for sameness has done for us. We're never going to be the same. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for whites to acknowledge it. Then we really could say, 'We have this weird common thread,' which is racism."

The discrepancy between surface and seriousness is brilliantly pointed up by Jon Stolzberg's "videowall," with its elegant use of iconic L.A.-riot reportage ("image looters" is what the South Central locals dubbed the media), which never approaches the depth of discourse of Smith's speakers. We hear from Theresa Allison, whose nephew was murdered and whose son is in jail, how the L.A.P.D. fakes drive-by killings and sometimes eliminates a project youth by merely picking him up and dropping him into enemy-gang territory. Angela King remembers the young Rodney King standing up to his ankles in a stream, so alert and agile that he could catch trout with his hands: "I said, Boy, you sure you ain't got some African in you? Ooh, yeah, I'm talkin' 'bout them wild Africans not one them well-raised ones like with a fish hook." A juror in the first trial, which cleared the L.A.P.D. of any wrongdoing in Rodney King's beating, cries in Smith's presence, recounting public reaction to the decision: "One of the most disturbing things — and a lot of the jurors said that — the thing that bothered them that they received in the mail — more than anything else, more than the threats — was a letter from

the K.K.K. saying we support you and if you need our help, if you want to join our organization we'd welcome you into our field. And we all just were — *No!*" A juror from the federal trial agreed to talk to Smith after her lawyer saw a preview of *Twilight*. Her interview, restricted by contract from quotation or publication, is one of the most fascinating of the evening — a hilarious and touching account of the back-room frustration in which the deadlocked jurors (one Hispanic, two blacks, and nine whites) had to face their own racial guilt before they could finally find two of the policemen guilty of violating King's civil rights.

Twice in the play, characters refer to waking up. Elvira Evers, a cashier whose life was saved by the elbow of her unborn baby when she was hit by a stray bullet, concludes, "So it's like — open your eyes. Watch what is goin' on." And Reginald Denny is aroused almost to a fury at the thought of racism as he says, "I just want people to wake up." *Twilight* inspires to disenchant a community whose major industry is the business of enchantment. "How do we encourage people to grow up?" Smith wondered out loud to me. "Will there ever be a sobering moment?" She then confided a dream she had had the night before.

In her dream, Smith went into a hospital room, where she was alone with a Japanese man whose head was shaved and who had a perpendicular incision on the front of his forehead. She realized that the man didn't know what had happened to him and was terrified. "This is the place where I relate to Reginald Denny," she said of the dream. "It's a very terrifying place, to tell you the truth. It's a place that has to do — it's very, very deep — with coming into consciousness. Of the *terror* of coming into consciousness, whatever that consciousness is. So, for me, my point of connection with Denny is when he's in the hospital, not knowing who's there and having to put together why he's there." Smith's eyes shone suddenly with tears. Her voice cracked. "I guess that's what makes me so sad about America. I know we haven't yet come to consciousness. To me, there is something *very, very* dark and *very, very* disturbing about the inevitability of having to wake up after this *horrible, horrible* accident, which is racism. The only way to master this fear of coming into consciousness is by coming into the consciousness of others, mimicking how other people did it, because it's terrifying to come into my own."

In its judicious daring, *Twilight* announces that a multicultural America is here and functioning and is capable of noisy but brilliant collaboration. Smith herself was struck by the reality of this diversity as she watched on the TV monitors of the Taper lobby her many-hued dramaturges discussing the play with a preview audience. The next day, she sent them a note, which read, in part:

In my life, in this moment  
you are proof  
that

“a change’s gotta come”  
has come.

Her victory is hard won, and theatre throughout America is better for it. *Twilight* goes some way toward reclaiming for the stage its crucial role as a leader in defining and acting out that ongoing experiment called the United States.

“Under the Skin” by John Lahr originally appeared in *The New Yorker*.  
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# DIALOGUE TO CHANGE CONFLICTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

by Harold H. Saunders and Randa Slim



Deep-rooted human tensions and conflicts — ethnic, racial, religious — are not ready for mediation, negotiation, or referenda. They require a different approach.

That approach is sustained dialogue designed to change conflictual relationships over time. This kind of dialogue is more than just good conversation and less than a structured negotiation. Sustained dialogue is a political process in which participants probe the dynamics of even the most destructive relationships and gradually develop a capacity together to design steps to change them.

Dialogue by its very nature provides the context for developing and changing relationships. The pages that follow describe a process of dialogue that grows and deepens through five stages. People decide to engage because they feel a need to build or change a relationship to resolve a problem that hurts their interests. They come together to talk — to map the elements of those problems and the relationships responsible for creating and dealing with them. They probe specific problems more deeply and uncover the dynamics of underlying relationships and even begin to see ways into those relationships to change them. Together, they design a scenario of human and political steps to be taken in the political arena to change those relationships. Finally, they devise ways of putting that scenario into action. By the end of the dialogue, they have moved from wariness of each other to a close working and even personal relationship with insight into how to share their experience more widely.

These stages are not rigid; one does not fully end before the next begins. Participants move back and forth across the stages. But the framework suggested provides a checklist of the work that needs to be done if the dialogue is to have a sense of purpose and direction and if it is to produce change in conflictual relationships.

## **STAGE ONE: DECIDING TO ENGAGE**

The *purposes* at this stage — before people ever come to the table — are: (1) to reach agreement that they will meet and (2) to produce understanding on the nature, purpose, and broad ground rules of the dialogue. Four *questions* must be addressed: (1) Who will take the initiative? (2) Who are the participants? (3) How can resistance to meeting and talking with the adversary be overcome?