

FEATURES

The Voices of Anna Deavere Smith

She's an uncanny mimic whose one-woman plays explore racial and social tensions. Now this Stanford professor of drama is writing the second act of her career.

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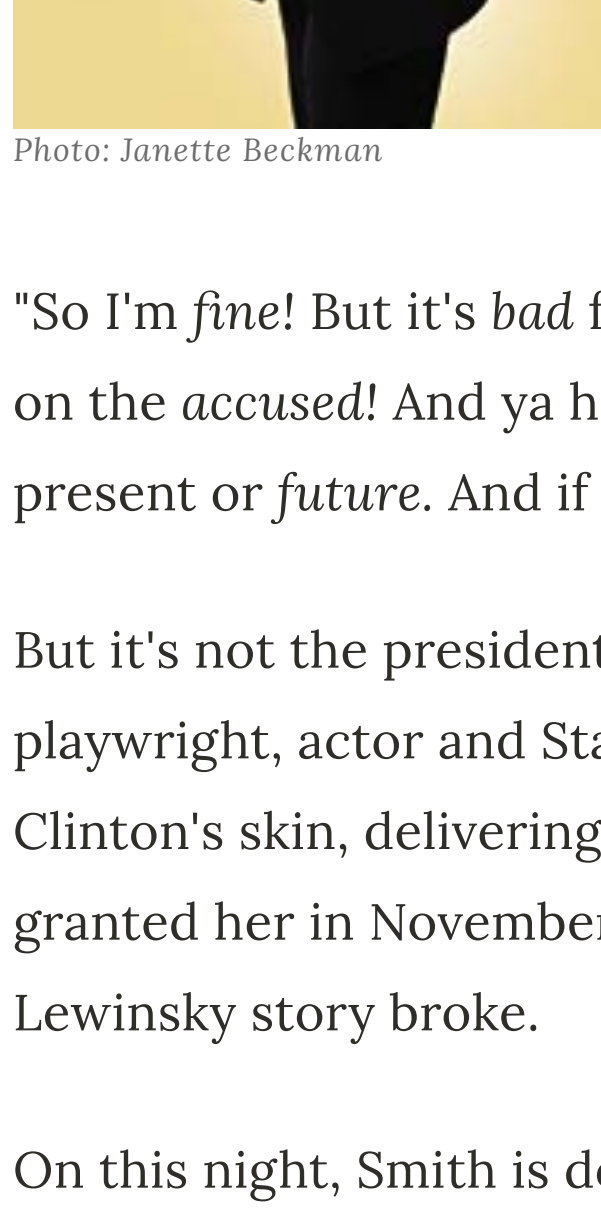
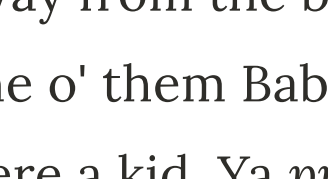


Photo: Janette Beckman

by Barbara Tannenbaum

The tall figure steps back from the podium, away from the bank of microphones. "I'm like one o' them Baby Huey dolls ya had when you were a kid. Ya punch it, but it just keeps comin' back up." The audience howls. We know this voice -- the Southern drawl, the throaty rasp from too much public speaking. This is the voice of Bill Clinton.

"So I'm fine! But it's *bad* for the country. It's *bad* when the burden of proof is on the *accused!* And ya have ta disprove ev'ry conceivable accusation, present or *future*. And if ya don't, there's somethin' *wrong* with you."

But it's not the president talking. It's Anna Deavere Smith -- 48-year-old playwright, actor and Stanford drama professor. Smith has just climbed into Clinton's skin, delivering a monologue culled from an exclusive interview he granted her in November 1997, about two months before the Monica Lewinsky story broke.

On this night, Smith is doing her Clinton impression at the Herbst Theater in San Francisco. It's part of a "lecture-demo" on her most passionate interest: language. To Smith, language is the window to the soul. It's the center of everything she does; it's why her audience sits in rapt attention.

For the last 20 years, Anna Deavere Smith has been using language to change American theater. She interviews people involved in some of the nation's most convulsive events and shapes the disparate voices into a collection of pitch-perfect monologues, which she then reproduces onstage. Her one-woman productions are a genre unto themselves -- theatrical documentaries using the real words of real people. Winner of an Obie and a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, Smith has been described by the *New York Times* as "the ultimate impressionist -- she does people's souls."

It was two solo shows, produced in rapid succession, that catapulted her to celebrity in the early 1990s. In *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith portrayed 29 people talking about the race riots that broke out in 1991 after a car accident killed a child in Brooklyn's Crown Heights. Next came *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, on the uprising that shook L.A. after the acquittal of the officers who beat Rodney King. When *Twilight* opened in 1993, *Newsweek* hailed Smith as "the most exciting individual in American theater."

That was six years ago, and now she is trying something new. Her latest work, still under revision, is an experiment in ensemble acting that has the theater world wondering if she can pull it off. Titled *House Arrest*, the play ponders the American presidency through dozens of monologues. This time, however, Smith surrenders the spotlight to other actors, stepping in only as narrator and to portray two people, Clinton and oral historian Studs Terkel.

Smith's use of interviews is often compared to journalism. But it may be more evocative to think of her work as music -- the music of spoken language. Smith, who shuns scripts and studies her lines by ear, believes that our true character, our humanity, emerges only when we abandon formal language for the messy patterns of spontaneous speech.

Imagine a jazz singer who scats and trills, swooping through the musical scale before coming back and restating the motif. People vocally underline their words, throw parts of their speech into italics. Or trip over their thoughts in awe or in anger, blaring like a trumpet. Or their voices become staccato, like percussion. Each. Point. So. Serious.

Start by imagining one voice. Then imagine 30, and it becomes operatic. Smith's plays, like most operas, are passionate stories about clashing emotions. But Smith is a diva who can sing for a whole cast. With each aria, she gives voice to hidden emotions. As she crosses the stage, you can tell when she shifts characters, because the sound -- the musical language as unique to each person as a fingerprint -- has changed.

"Bam!" shouts Smith. Now she is Studs Terkel. "I was born in 1912. Nineteen-twelve! The year the *Titanic* went down, I came up!"

The magic is starting. It's not Smith's body that changes. Well, maybe her eyes squint and the shoulders hunch as she seems to lower her center of gravity to become a shorter, potbellied, white-haired man. But the transformation is clear in her voice.

"A lack of civility is not *belching* at the dinner table! A lack of civility is forgetting to *care* about your fellow *man!*"

We are no longer hearing the drama professor speaking with the broad vowels of the Mid-Atlantic. No, these inflections take us to a street corner in Chicago. Terkel bellows forth his story on the stage of the Herbst Theater with all the gusto of a man waving a cigar in the air, determined to be heard over the thunder of the El train rumbling on the tracks overhead.

She stormed the American stage in the 1990s with plays about racial and ethnic tensions. But Smith's preoccupation with that theme goes back to her childhood in a segregated neighborhood in Baltimore. She was the oldest of five kids in a black, middle-class family. After high school she went to Beaver College, a private women's school in a suburb of Philadelphia. There were only 12 blacks among the 500 or so students.

"I wanted to break my family's tradition [of attending all-black colleges] because I saw and felt the limitations of the black-and-white perspective," she says. Smith majored in English, acted in school plays and gained a reputation for her impersonations of classmates and professors. But beneath the jovial mimicry lay something serious: "I was acting out my alarm at the differences among us."

She remembers her grief over the killings of Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Kennedy and the anti-war protesters at Kent State. As a student, Smith nurtured a vision -- equality and peace between the races -- but had no sense of how to push for it. "My parents sent a nice, fairly quiet Negro girl to college in the hopes that the person who returned would have dignity and clear goals. Goals that would take her and her race a little further on the march toward equality," she says. "What came home was an individual with a lot of questions, wild hair and no goals. At least no goals that could be stated with a beginning, middle and end."

After graduation, Smith drove cross-country with friends, hoping to get involved in social activism in California. She wound up in San Francisco, where she casually enrolled in an acting class. There, watching actors "become" their characters, the young seeker found her mission: "I saw that people could change. I became fascinated by the possibility of this type of magical transformation as part of a larger mosaic of social change."

She also discovered a visceral connection with language. "The teacher asked us to find 14 lines of Shakespeare and say them over and over until something happened," she recalls. Smith chose a soliloquy by Queen Margaret from *Richard III*: "From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept a hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death!" And did something happen? "Ever-ry-thing happened," she says. "Repeating the words told me some things I knew intellectually but now understood in my bones: Queen Margaret was older and shorter than me; she was a less-than-happy person in a less-than-happy world. I had become Queen Margaret just by wearing her words. And I remembered something my grandfather said -- that if you say a word long enough, it becomes you."

Smith went on to earn an MFA in acting from the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. That's when she began recording speech, approaching strangers on the street to ask if she could take their "portrait" with her tape recorder. She studied the tapes, scrutinizing every stammer and pause. A new question had seized her: does a person's character imprint itself uniquely on his or her patterns of speech?

Not until she started teaching drama, at Carnegie-Mellon University in 1978, did Smith hit upon the idea of performing monologues drawn from those tapes. It began as a student exercise, an attempt to turn a bunch of privileged kids into the hardscrabble denizens of Pittsburgh. Smith handed out the tapes and said, "Repeat this exactly as it's said. Keep doing it over and over, and we'll see if you become it."

From there it was a short leap to crafting her own monologue performances. By 1990 -- the year Smith came to Stanford as the Ann O'Day Maples Professor in the Arts -- she had developed a dozen solo shows from the thousands of interviews she had taped.

Smith, of course, didn't invent the solo drama. Nor did she invent the multiple-character sketch revue, pioneered in Lily Tomlin's one-woman shows of the '70s. And she wasn't America's first introspective monologist. By 1979, U.S. audiences were already developing a taste for autobiographical reflection as Spalding Gray spilled his guts onstage.

Smith's unique contribution to the burgeoning "theater of personality" in the '80s was to bring in so many contrasting voices and to anchor them in a sociopolitical context. "She invented a new genre -- a synergy of ethnography, theater, storytelling and social action," says Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, a Harvard professor of education, MacArthur Foundation director and personal friend.

Smith's burning issue has been America's cultural fragmentation. "I am dazzled, spellbound, amazed at how many small fragments of the world are here in the United States," she said a few months before *Twilight* opened. "The story I am trying to tell is a story about social upheaval. It's a story about race and race conflict, and a story about hatred."

"A key to Anna's success is the confidence with which she addresses racial issues," says Tony Taccone, artistic director of the Berkeley Repertory Theater. "I'm about Anna's age, and for the most part, my generation does not speak up on this subject. It's tender, volatile ground. Anna walks right into this vortex and speaks boldly. She extracts the private things we only say to each other and gets right to the heart of the matter."

As her two big hits drew raves in the early '90s, Stanford's new drama professor became the darling of American theater. And the honors just kept coming. The citation for her 1996 MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant praised her "creative, singular and pioneering" work. The following year, she spent six months in New York as a Ford Foundation artist-in-residence, conceiving a summertime arts institute that would later be piloted at Harvard.

Today, Smith relies on a retinue of managers and assistants to coordinate the details of her far-flung projects and commitments. She has appeared in movies, including *An American President* (1995), in which she played the White House press secretary. This summer she's filming a television version of *Twilight*.

At Stanford, colleagues view her celebrity with mixed emotions. "What she brings to the faculty is a real-world perspective on the practice of theater," says drama professor Harry Elam. "She has a commitment to teaching and to being a caring, supportive colleague -- but it is harder now, for obvious reasons. There are so many demands on her time."

"If we get frustrated," comments one department colleague who requested anonymity, "it's because we don't get enough time on her dance card. When I see her walking down a hallway, I think to myself: this is someone who knows what she's going to do every week for the next two years."

Smith typically spends spring quarter, and sometimes winter, away from the Farm working in professional theater. In the summer she heads to Harvard to lead her Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, launched in 1998 as a three-year experiment. That leaves fall for Stanford, where she teaches undergraduate courses like Theater Games, Acting for Directors and special classes addressing social issues through theater.

Students lucky enough to take her classes or assist on her productions say the experience is exhilarating. "Having Smith as my teacher was part of the incentive to choose Stanford," says Amanda Gibbon, '01, who took Theater Games last fall. "What I found amazing was how astute she is as a listener. It makes for such an alive atmosphere, because she's so reactive."

And Smith's demeanor? "She's not . . . well, she definitely has a warmer side, but in class she's very focused, very much in a get-things-done mode," Gibbons says. In fact, Smith can come across as guarded and aloof -- but also intense. "Her energy is always so singularly focused," says Laura Penn, managing director of Seattle's Intiman Theater. "When Anna was performing *Twilight* at the Intiman, I used to say I could feel her come into the building."

The latest work cannot -- at least not yet -- be counted as a triumph. Most recently presented in April as a "work in progress," *House Arrest* is a significant departure that has disappointed critics. The *Daily Variety* lamented, "Smith barely utilizes her trademark concept. . . . Instead, a cast of 12 cavort and amble across the stage."

Relying on other actors is a high-stakes gamble for an artist who made her name as a solo performer. And by presenting the long-awaited play before it's finished, Smith is conducting her experiment in full view, under potentially unforgiving circumstances. Notes Sharon Ott, artistic director of the Seattle Repertory Theater, "Her evolution to the next step is happening in the glare of an incredible spotlight."

House Arrest has had problems almost from the start. Smith has been working on it since 1995, when she joined the press corps covering Clinton's reelection campaign. She gathered more than 300 interviews, including two private talks with the president -- one taped, the other off the record. ("He's a very, very likable guy," she told the *L.A. Times* this spring.) But when *House Arrest* premiered in November 1997 in Washington, D.C., reviews were mainly negative ("overlong, unfocused") and Smith began to revise it. Then, in early February, Clinton delivered the finger-wagging denial that would alter the presidency forever.

Smith started over to highlight the Lewinsky scandal, scrapping each new revision as further headlines emerged. *House Arrest* engagements were postponed across the country -- until L.A.'s Mark Taper Forum finally presented it this past April in rough, condensed form, billing it as a "workshop" and soliciting audience feedback.

It was clear to everyone that *House Arrest* had yet to click. Still, observers did note a spark of promise. "It may have been a sprawl, a mess, even. But it had something going for it," the *L.A. Times* reviewer allowed. And judging from the debates in the feedback sessions, the audience, though dazed, was hardly dozing.

Back in her apartment in San Francisco's Noe Valley a few weeks later, Smith herself seems a bit dazed. She says she's barely begun to evaluate the latest incarnation of her play. She's still planning to refine it and still hopeful that her actors can achieve the magical transformations that have made her solo shows so powerful. "Great acting is when actors are able to take the wisdom they have collected about humanity and illuminate the world with that wisdom," she says. "I'm bargaining that they will have a big enough well of humanity to shed light on their characters, to love whoever they happen to have on that tape."

Smith is philosophical about the risk she's taking. "I have begun to ask myself new questions," she admits. "What does the artist have to gain or lose by exposing him or herself in a less-than-finished way? What does the public stand to gain or lose?"

"I still don't know," she laughs. "But, you see, I'm more interested in the questions than the answers."

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