

## ANNA DEAVERE SMITH



Anna Deavere Smith is an actress, playwright, and author. It has been said that she created a new form of theater. When granted the prestigious MacArthur Award, her work was described as "a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism, and intimate reverie."

She has performed in film and television as well as on stage. She is probably most recognizable in popular culture as Nancy McNally, the National Security Advisor on NBC's former hit, *The West Wing*.

However, it is Ms. Smith's work in the theater that has been her intellectual focus. Looking at controversial events from multiple points of view, Ms. Smith's theater combines the journalistic technique of interviewing her subjects with the art of interpreting their words through her performance. *The New York Times* in reviewing her Broadway show *Twilight: Los Angeles*, about the 1992 Los Angeles riots, said of her performance, "[she is] the ultimate impressionist: she does people's souls." Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* proclaimed the work "an American Masterpiece." She does hundreds of interviews while creating a play. Using verbatim excerpts of the interviews, she has performed up to as many as 46 people in the course of an evening.

Ms. Smith performed *Twilight: Los Angeles* around the US and on Broadway. It received two Tony nominations, an Obie, a Drama Desk Award, a Special Citation from the New York Drama Critics, and numerous other honors. President and Mrs. Clinton and Vice President Al Gore attended her Washington, D.C. performance. She produced, wrote and performed the movie version of *Twilight* for PBS.

Another of her plays, *Fires in the Mirror*, examined a race riot that occurred in Crown Heights, Brooklyn (1991) when age old racial tensions between Black and Jewish neighbors exploded. It received an Obie Award, numerous other awards and was a runner up for the Pulitzer Prize. She performed the play around the US, in London and Australia. The film version of *Fires in the Mirror* was also broadcast on PBS.

*Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles* are two of several plays performed and created using her journalistic technique, and are part of an ongoing series that Ms. Smith calls *On the Road: A Search for American Character*.

Other works in the series include *House Arrest*, which deals with the American presidency, and *Hymn*, a collaboration with world famous choreographer and dancer, Judith Jamison, for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

She is currently developing a new play in the *On The Road* series called *Let Me Down Easy*. Its subject is the resilience and vulnerability of the human body. This play was inspired by work she did at the Yale School of Medicine where she was Visiting Professor. While at Yale, she created a performance for medical grand rounds, called *Rounding It Out* (2000).

She has been featured in several films, among them, *The American President*, where she played the Press Secretary to Michael Douglas's President. She was featured in Robert Benton's film, *The Human Stain*. She appeared in *Dave* and *Rent*. She was a regular on the CBS series *Presidio Med*, and had a recurring role on *The Practice*. She co-starred in HBO's 2007 film *Life Support*, which starred Queen Latifah. She has just completed work on *Dancing With Shiva*, a new film by Jonathan Demme, starring Anne Hathaway.

She founded and directed the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, which was originally funded, in large part, by the Ford Foundation. She was The Ford Foundation's first artist in residence (1997). The Institute was launched at Harvard University, where it was held for three summers (1998, 1999, 2000). The Institute is now being re-developed at New York University.

She was Artist in Residence at MTV Networks from 2001–2004. She was the Inaugural Harmon/Eisner Artist in Residence at The Aspen Institute in July 2006.

Her latest book is *Letters to a Young Artist* (Vintage Random House). Her book, *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines*, is based on her observations of time she spent in Washington, D.C. To prepare for that book, she followed both President Clinton and Bob Dole on their 1996 campaign trails. Other books include publications of her plays, *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight*, *House Arrest*, and *Piano*. Her articles and writings have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *O Magazine*, *O HOME*, *ELLE*, *THE ATLANTIC*, *A Public Space*, *Essence*, *Fortune*, and *The Drama Review*.

She is University Professor at New York University, where she is appointed in the Tisch School of the Arts, and affiliated with the New York University School of Law. She was Ann O'Day Maples Professor of the Arts at Stanford University where she taught from 1990 – 2000. She also taught at Carnegie Mellon and the University of Southern California.

She recently taught, at the invitation of Oprah Winfrey, at Oprah Winfrey's Leadership Academy For Girls in South Africa.

In 2007, Americans for the Arts presented her with the Kitty Carlisle Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Arts. She also received the Mayor's Award for Art and Culture by the Mayor of New York City in 2007.

She was the recipient of the Alphonse Fletcher Fellowship in 2006. The fellowship recognizes work by scholars, writers, and artists who address and carry out the broad social goals of the Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision of 1954. She was twice nominated for the NAACP Image Award. She will receive the prestigious New York Women in Communication's Matrix Award for her remarkable achievements and outstanding leadership roles in her field in Spring 2008.

She has several honorary degrees and medals of recognition – among them those that represent Barnard, Northwestern, Smith, Bates, Bryn Mawr, Wesleyan, Holy Cross, Cooper Union, and Radcliffe College. She will receive an honorary degree from Juilliard in 2008.

She is on the board of the Museum of Modern Art where she chairs the Committee on Film. She is also on the board of the Center for American Progress and of Studio in a School.