

The Role of the Arts in Resilience

An Interview with Anna Devere Smith, Director / Producer, The Anna Devere Smith Pipeline

EDITORS' NOTE Anna Devere Smith is an actress, playwright, teacher, and author. Her most recent play and film, *Notes from the Field*, looks at the vulnerability of youth, inequality, the criminal justice system, and contemporary activism. The New York Times named the stage version of *Notes from the Field* among *The Best Theater of 2016* and Time magazine named it one of the *Top 10 Plays of the year*. HBO premiered the film version in February 2018. Looking at current events from multiple points of view, Smith's theater combines the journalistic technique of interviewing her subjects with the art of interpreting their words through performance. Her plays include *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight: Los Angeles*, *House Arrest*, and *Let Me Down Easy*. *Twilight: Los Angeles* was nominated for two Tony Awards and *Fires in the Mirror* was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize. Smith co-stars on the new ABC / Shonda Rhimes series, *For the People*. She also appears on the hit ABC series *Black-ish*. She previously starred as *Gloria Akalitus* on Showtime's *Nurse Jackie*, and as the *National Security Advisor* on NBC's *The West Wing*. Films include *The American President*, *Rachel Getting Married*, *Philadelphia*, *Dave*, *Rent*, and *The Human Stain*. In 2012, President Obama awarded her the *National Endowment for the Humanities Medal*. She was the recipient of the prestigious 2013 *Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize for achievement in the arts*. In 2015, she was named the *Jefferson Lecturer*, the nation's highest honor in the humanities. She was the 2017 recipient of the *Ridenhour Courage Prize* and the 2017 recipient of the *George Polk Career Award in Journalism*. Smith is the founding director of the *Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue* at New York University, where she is also *University Professor at Tisch School of the Arts*.



Anna Devere Smith

land a TV show that runs for nearly 20 years such as *Grey's Anatomy*. Most, however, have short-term employment, and no one can predict what will yield fruit. Hence, many work in a variety of media. In my case, I am an academic as well. This was a big decision to make, and for years being an actress and being a tenured professor did not work well. You have to declare what and when you will teach months in advance. At my level, as an actress I might get a job and not find out until a week or even a couple of days before

what my schedule will be. I was able, however, to figure out a way to put it all together. The center of my work is the kind of theater that I create. From that, a variety of other opportunities have come my way. So, for me, I focus on what I am doing at the moment.

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Did you know at an early age that you were attracted to the arts and had a creative side?

I was attracted to the arts, but the attraction did not lead to anything substantive until I was 23 years old.

You are involved in many different projects. Will you highlight your work and key areas of focus?

It is true that I am involved in different projects. This is not odd for performing artists. Some are fortunate enough, for example, to

What interested you in teaching and working with the next generation of leaders?

I like teaching because I like people and I like process. There's no way to market or

support process in the arts, other than through teaching environments. I also like new ideas, and I'm fascinated by what my students bring into the room. I've taught since 1974 and I never grow tired of meeting new people and learning about their imaginations. This may or may not indicate that I'm working with the next generation of leaders, per se.

Your work has been pivotal to helping people understand racial inequality and what it can mean for people's lives and livelihoods. How have the events of recent months impacted your work?

The events following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks have certainly impacted my work and my personhood, but it is too early to say how.

How do you define resilience and what do you see as the role of the arts in resilience?

I'm studying resilience at the moment so I'll have a better answer a year from now. For now, I think it's the ability to withstand and resurrect regardless of your circumstances. Art can give people courage. This is a mystery. You can't promise it and I don't think we as artists should promise it. It's such a personal and mysterious moment – the moment when a work of art unearths a potential that you may not be aware of. Regrettably, in an era that is possibly overly interested in pathologies, we think of works of art “triggering” troubling thoughts or feelings. There are even warnings in some theaters that this triggering may happen. Works of art are sometimes, and probably not that often, if you think of a lifetime, going to suggest something to the viewer or participant that is otherwise discreet.

How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?

Oh, you can't be in a sometime profession – and that's what I'd call the arts, except for the one-percent lucky few – a sometime profession. You can't survive in a sometime profession without resilience. Artists should be studied, particularly the ones who are not in the spotlight, to have an understanding of what keeps people going when rewards are in short supply.

Who are some of the resilient leaders you see today?

We just lost one of the most resilient – the late Congressman John Lewis. ●