

The Only Way to Survive

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. *Time* magazine named it one of the Top 10 Plays of the year. HBO premiered the film version in February 2018.



Anna Devere Smith

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-starred on the ABC / Shonda Rhimes series, *For the People*, and also appeared on the 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 was the founding director of the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue at New York University, where she is University Professor at Tisch School of the Arts.

How do you balance your work as a performing artist as well as an academic?

I teach a straight five- or six-hour class on Sundays. That way, if I do have a job somewhere, I can get back on Sundays to teach. If I have control of my schedule, for example in the self-generated work I do in the theater, I organize that work to be performed during semesters I am not teaching. I only teach one semester a year.

What attracted you to teaching and what is your teaching style?

My mother was a teacher, five of my aunts were teachers, and all my mother's friends were teachers. I grew up with it, so it seemed natural. Also, the classroom is just about the only place process can live except think tanks. Regrettably, there are very few – if any – think tanks for art. Or rather, I'd call them think and do tanks.

You have been a leader in addressing the issue of racial inequality. Will you discuss this work, and do you feel progress is being made in this effort?

I am African American, and I think the majority of African Americans in my generation had to address racial inequality whether at work or in daily life. On the one hand, we have women of color and white women on the Supreme Court of the United States. In their rise to that esteemed position, they benefited either explicitly or implicitly from affirmative action, and affirmative action is gasping for breath at the moment. My play *Twilight* is set in the 1990s. It revolves around the Los Angeles riots that ensued as a result of the not guilty verdict for four police officers who were captured on video tape brutally beating Rodney King, a black motorist. The play just celebrated its 30th anniversary and went into rehearsal just days after a video was released showing the killing of motorist Tyre

Nichols by Memphis police officers. Data tells us that the gap between rich and poor has widened. In most elite colleges, grades are inflated, but poor kids stumble along in schools that lack the resources to meet their needs. Some of those schools have metal detectors and police officers walking the halls.

What is your hope for race relations in this country?

Equity of opportunity. Healthy and safe environments for people to live in. Advances in the science and art of mental health.

You have studied the issue of resilience. What interested you in focusing on resilience and what have you learned about resilience?

It is the only way to survive.

What advice do you offer to young artists hoping to build a sustainable and fulfilling career?

Be entrepreneurial and flexible. Question the systems in which work is made. Create self-sufficient cultures where resources can be shared. For example, have a collective who shares lawyers and accountants and watch everybody's billable hours. Be activist. Ask questions about pay inequality between those who make art or perform and administrators who run arts institutions. Question any situation in which you begin to believe you are paying to work. Do not allow others to infantilize you, which is especially a hazard for performers new to the business. ●

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