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A Chameleon Who Crosses Racial Divides

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BODY:

A DECADE ago, the nation was shocked by a videotape depicting the brutal beating of an African-American man, Rodney King, by four Los Angeles police officers. The shock turned into rioting and looting on the streets of L.A. when a mostly white jury found the officers not guilty.

"The riots involved people of every color and every race," said Anna Deavere Smith, the actress and dramatist whose play "**Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992**" seeks to reflect the rage, pain and bewilderment of those harrowing days and their aftermath. "The Korean-owned stores were burned by black and brown people. The majority of the people killed were black and brown. Frankly, I took the opportunity of the riot as a way to create a discussion of race and class. I really didn't want that discussion to end with my performance on the stage."

It hasn't.

Ms. Smith, who has recurring roles in "The Practice" on ABC and "The West Wing" on NBC, has reshaped her one-woman play, which had its premiere at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1993 and then played in New York and around the nation, into a 90-minute drama that will be shown on PBS tonight at 9. Using

verbatim dialogue from her own interviews, she leaps into characters as diverse as a Korean grocer, a juror, a black teenage gang member, Charlton Heston, a pregnant woman injured in the riots, a policeman accused in the King beating, a talent agent, Rodney King's aunt and a Beverly Hills real estate agent. Scenes of the riots themselves, which left 45 dead and resulted in \$1 billion in property destruction and damage, are thrown into the steady stream of these characters, resulting in an often bleak picture of the national chasm of race, class and culture.

In turning toward television, Ms. Smith said she had one aim: "I want this to get into schools, into community centers as inspiration to get people to talk about racial difference in America. The theater has, after all, social class limits. Only certain kinds of people go to the theater."

Tonight's production, a slightly altered version of a film that had its premiere at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival, is part of WNET's "Stage on Screen," a series that seeks to bring theatrical drama to television. The prim-time showcase began last October with a live broadcast of "The Man Who Came to Dinner," George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's classic stage comedy, with Nathan Lane. On May 20, "Stage on Screen" will present the A.R. Gurney drama "Far East." Jac Venza, executive producer of "Stage on screen" and director of culture and arts programming for Channel 13, said that WNET was especially interested in the Anna Deavere Smith performance because of its timeliness and its blend of theater and documentary elements. "We want to present different kinds of theater. We're trying to say to an audience that this is another dramatic form," said Mr. Vena, referring to "**Twilight**."

Clearly the drama is a hybrid -- part theater, part documentary, part movie. To help synthesize the different forms, Ms. Smith turned to Marc Levin, a documentary and feature filmmaker whose 1998 movie, "Slam," deals with a young black man in Washington who struggles with the prison system and emerges a poet. "We really hit it off," Mr. Levin said. "The basic creative challenge was to combine the documentary reality with the very stylized theatrical presentation of a one-woman show. How do you do that without taking away from either of them? It was a question of balance and rhythm."

The two looked at performance films made by Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray and John Leguizamo. But "no one really does what Anna does," said Mr. Levin, who helped weave news clips and archival interviews into the scenario. If there was a disagreement, it was about the use of rap music, especially gangsta rap. "I felt it was the appropriate sound for some of the riot footage, some of the characters," said Mr. Levin. "At first she said, 'Wait a minute, Marc.' But slowly she got into it. She began seeing it a little differently. She accepted its misogynist noise and violence."

Ms. Smith, 51, grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Baltimore, far from the underclass that she dramatizes. The oldest of five children, she attended an all-girls high school and then Beavers College, outside Philadelphia, where she majored in English and was stirred by student demonstration. "I marched in anti-Vietnam War protests, burned my bra," she said. "Martin Luther King was killed. Everything in college seemed so irrelevant."

After graduating in 1971, Ms. Smith moved to San Francisco "determined to do something political." Almost by accident she drifted into acting school at the American Conservatory Theater. "I was stunned, I was fascinated," she recalled. "This was how I wanted to spend my life."

What stunned her, Ms. Smith said, was that acting involved total transformation -- "the way you breathe, the way you speak, the way you walk." She graduated from the American Conservatory Theater in 1976, and began teaching at Carnegie-Mellon in Pittsburgh. There she began developing a theatrical style that depends heavily on journalism -- on interviewing people, listening to them and trying to seize "that person's individuality in a moment." In 1996, the MacArthur Foundation awarded her a "genius" grant, saying Ms. Smith had "created a new form of theater -- a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism and intimate reverie."

Ms. Smith, who has taught at Stanford University, is planning to move from San Francisco to New York, where she teaches at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts as well as the law school. ("I teach lawyers about listening to clients and listening to society,"

she said.) She is hardly a stranger to the city. In 1992, her one-woman show "Fires in the Mirror," which depicted the 1991 racial riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and focused on the tormented relations between African-Americans and Hasidic Jews, opened to acclaim at the Joseph Papp Public Theater. One year later, she set her sights on Los Angeles.

A major impetus for the filming of "**Twilight**," Ms. Smith said, came from a performance of the play in Washington in the mid-90's. Two Supreme Court Justices, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen G. Breyer, told her afterward that the show should be presented in every high school in America. "The kids who are in high school today, 16 or 17 years old, would have been 6 or 7 when the riots happened," Ms. Smith said. "Race and class are the big dividing lines in our society. We have so much work to do."

She said she could not characterize herself as optimistic or pessimistic about race relations in the nation. "We can't heal," she said, "until we look at the wound carefully."

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GRAPHIC: Photos: On the cover, clockwise from top: Anna Deavere Smith as Angela King, Rodney King's aunt; as Charles Lloyd, lawyer for Soon Ja Du; as Elaine Young, real estate agent; as Henry "Keith" Watson, co-assailant of Reginald Denny; and, seated, as herself. (Photographs by Janette Beckman/WNET Ms. Deavere on stool and Adger W. Cowans/WNET); Police officers with handcuffed looting suspects in Los Angeles on April 30, 1992. Below left Anna Deavere Smith as Young-Soon Han, a former liquor store owner, and (right) as Gina Rae (a k a Queen Milkah), a community activist. (AP)(pg. 4); Anna Deavere Smith as Henry "Keith" Watson, co-assailant of Reginald Denny, and as Elvira Evers, cashier. (Photographs of Anna Deavere Smith by Adger W. Cowans/WNET); Jac Venza, left, director of culture and arts programming for WNET and producer of "Stage on Screen," and Marc Levin, director of "**Twilight**." (Joseph Sinnott); (Courtesy Marc Levin)(pg. 5)

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