SOFTWARE & TECH

Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror

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Introduction: A Mirror to America’s Racial Divide

In the landscape of American theatre, few works have managed to capture the raw, unfiltered complexity of race relations as powerfully as Anna Deavere Smith's seminal one-woman show, **Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities**—often referred to simply as *Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror*. Premiering in 1992, this groundbreaking piece of documentary theatre emerged from the ashes of real-life tragedy and violence that erupted in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn in August 1991. Smith’s unique artistic approach—using verbatim interviews, meticulous research, and her own transformative performance—created not just a play, but a living, breathing archive of voices that continue to resonate today.

More than three decades later, **Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror** remains essential viewing and reading for anyone seeking to understand the deep fractures in American society. The work is a masterclass in empathy, journalism, and performance art, and it serves as a crucial case study for how theatre can confront social injustice without resorting to easy answers or partisan slogans. In this article, we will explore the historical context of the Crown Heights riot, Smith’s innovative creative process, the play’s structure and content, its enduring themes, and its legacy in the world of documentary theatre and beyond.

The Crown Heights Riots: The Catalyst for the Play

To fully appreciate **Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror**, one must first understand the events that inspired it. On August 19, 1991, a car in the motorcade of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, ran a red light and struck two Guyanese immigrant children, Gavin Cato and his cousin Angela. Gavin Cato was killed. Shortly thereafter, a group of Black youths, angered by the accident and what they perceived as a delayed emergency response, attacked a visiting Jewish scholar from Australia, Yankel Rosenbaum, who was fatally stabbed. This set off three days of violent clashes between the Black and Jewish communities of Crown Heights, a neighborhood already tense with economic hardship, cultural misunderstandings, and long-standing grievances.

The riots were not a simple story of one group against another. They were a complex tapestry of pain, fear, historical trauma, and systemic inequality. African American residents accused the Jewish community of receiving preferential treatment from city services, particularly police and ambulances. Jewish residents, many of them Hasidic, felt under attack and isolated. The media coverage often sensationalized the events, deepening the chasm. Smith arrived in Crown Heights shortly after the riots, determined to capture the authentic voices of those who lived through the turmoil—not to judge, but to listen.

Anna Deavere Smith’s Documentary Theatre Method

Anna Deavere Smith is widely recognized as a pioneer of documentary or verbatim theatre. Her process is painstaking: she conducts hundreds of interviews with people directly involved in or affected by a particular event. She then selects excerpts from these interviews—sometimes just a few lines, sometimes longer monologues—and performs them verbatim, capturing not only the words but also the vocal rhythms, pauses, accents, and gestures of the original speakers. For **Fires in the Mirror**, Smith interviewed over 50 individuals, ranging from community activists and religious leaders to ordinary residents, teenagers, and even police officers. She distilled these interviews into 28 distinct monologues, which she performs solo, switching characters in seconds with only minimal

costume changes.

What makes Smith's work so powerful is her refusal to flatten her subjects into caricatures. She gives voice to every point of view—the anguished, the angry, the defensive, the bewildered—without editorializing. As she once stated, "I am not a journalist; I am a performer who uses the words of others. My job is to find the music in language." This commitment to authentic representation is the core of *Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror*. She does not tell the audience what to think; she shows them what people actually said, allowing the contradictions and emotions to speak for themselves.

Structure and Key Monologues in "Fires in the Mirror"

The play is structured not chronologically but thematically, weaving together voices from all sides. Some of the most memorable monologues in **Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror** include:

- "The Rabbi's Daughter" – A young Jewish woman describes her experience of the riot, conveying fear and a sense of siege.
- "Seven Eleven" – A Black teenager recounts his interactions with local stores and the simmering resentment.
- "The Minister" – Reverend Al Sharpton delivers an impassioned, fiery speech that Smith captures with remarkable precision.
- "The Scholar" – A Jewish intellectual reflects on the historical relationship between Black and Jewish communities, offering a more detached analysis.
- "The Mother of Gavin Cato" – One of the most heartbreaking pieces, in which the grieving mother speaks about her son and the aftermath.

These monologues are juxtaposed in ways that highlight both irreconcilable differences and shared humanity. A key structural element is Smith's use of the word "friction"—the sense that identities bump against each other, sparking heat and sometimes fire. The title itself, *Fires in the Mirror*, suggests a hall of mirrors where the same conflict is reflected differently depending on who is looking. Smith's performance forces the audience to sit with the discomfort of multiple truths.

Themes and Analysis: Race, Identity, and Empathy

The Complexity of Identity

One of the central themes of **Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror** is the fluid, often contradictory nature of identity. The play's subtitle—"Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities"—signals that identity is not fixed. Characters identify themselves by race, religion, neighborhood, nationality, or family. A Hasidic Jew from Crown Heights may see the world very differently from a Jewish intellectual from Manhattan. A Guyanese immigrant mother has a perspective distinct from an African American teenager born in Brooklyn. Smith does not attempt to synthesize these views but presents them as overlapping, conflicting layers of a prism.

The Limits of Language

Throughout the play, characters struggle to articulate their experiences. They repeat words, stumble, change direction. Smith's transcription of these hesitations and repetitions is deliberate. She shows that language often fails to capture the depth of pain or anger. The "fires" in the title are not just the literal fires set during the riots; they are the inner fires of frustration that words cannot quench. By leaving these raw verbal fragments intact, Smith invites the audience to listen beyond the words to the emotional truth.

Empathy Without Sentimentality

Smith's work is often praised for fostering empathy, but it is not an easy, sentimental empathy. She does not ask the audience to "feel sorry" for any character. Instead, she asks us to **understand** why each person feels the way they do—even if we disagree. For example, she performs the words of a young Black man who expresses anger at Jewish store owners, but she also performs the words of a Hasidic woman who describes being spat on. Neither is demonized; both are humanized. This rigorous empathy is perhaps Smith's greatest contribution to discussions of race in America.

Critical Reception and Legacy

When **Fires in the Mirror** premiered at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1992, it was met with widespread acclaim. Critics praised Smith's chameleon-like ability to inhabit over two dozen characters with startling authenticity. The play was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and won numerous Obie and Drama Desk awards. It was later adapted into a film for PBS, introducing the work to an even larger audience. In the years since, it has become a staple of college syllabi in theatre, sociology, and American studies.

The legacy of **Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror** extends far beyond the stage. Smith's methodology has influenced a generation of documentary theatre practitioners, including those behind works like *The Laramie Project* and *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. Her commitment to listening as a form of activism has been cited by journalists, community organizers, and educators. In a time when public discourse is increasingly polarized, *Fires in the Mirror* offers a model for how to engage with difference: not by shouting, but by truly hearing.

Why "Fires in the Mirror" Matters Today

In 2024, America continues to grapple with racial violence, police brutality, anti-Semitism, and the fragmented nature of identity politics. The events of Crown Heights are not ancient history; they are a precursor to later conflicts like those in Ferguson, Charlottesville, and across the nation. **Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror** remains profoundly relevant because it refuses to reduce conflict to a single villain or victim. Instead, it shows how fear, miscommunication, and historical grievances can spiral into tragedy. It also demonstrates that art can be a safe space to examine these tensions without immediate resolution—a space for reflection rather than reaction.

For those new to the work, reading the published script or watching the film is a powerful experience. But the true magic of *Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror* is best experienced live, as one witnesses a single performer channel the voices of an entire community. It reminds us that the first step toward healing is listening—and that sometimes, the most radical act is to let others speak.

Conclusion: A Lasting Mirror

Anna Deavere Smith's **Fires in the Mirror** is more than a play; it is a document of a fractured moment in American history and a timeless tool for building understanding. Through her meticulous craft, Smith transformed a local riot into a universal meditation on belonging, grief, and the stories we tell about ourselves and others. For educators, artists, and citizens seeking to navigate the complexities of race and identity, this work remains indispensable. As Smith herself might say, the answers are not in the script—they are in the space between the speaker and the listener, in the fire that illuminates as much as it burns.

Whether you encounter it on the page, on screen, or on stage, **Anna Deavere Smith Fires In The Mirror** challenges you to look not away, but squarely into the reflection—and to see yourself among the many faces in the glass.

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