



**LIMITED SEASON | RODA THEATER**  
**JULY 11, 2015 – AUGUST 2, 2015**  
**2014-2015 SEASON**  
**WRITTEN BY ANNA DEVEARE SMITH**  
**DIRECTED BY LEAH C. GARDINER**

# PRESS PACKET





## **REVIEWS**

# Anna Deavere Smith takes on 'school-to-prison pipeline' in new show



**Charles McNulty**

LOS ANGELES TIMES [charles.mculty@latimes.com](mailto:charles.mculty@latimes.com)



Anna Deavere Smith in San Francisco on July 16, 2015.

(Don Bartletti / Los Angeles Times)

With reports of police abuse, racial unrest and murderous hate crimes in the news on a daily basis since Ferguson, has Anna Deavere Smith, whose solo work has long grappled with issues of social justice, become discouraged?

"Oh, no!" she said, almost taken aback by the idea. "Because I'm a dramatist, I like moments when there's something unsettled. I'm in this business of looking at conflict. Conflict is never absent. It's just that when it gets exposed, more people are concerned about it."

After tackling such thorny topics as the riots after the Rodney King beating verdict in "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" and healthcare and mortality in "Let Me Down Easy," Smith has turned her attention to another flashpoint, the "school-to-prison pipeline." This is the subject of "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter," now at Berkeley Repertory Theatre through Aug. 2.

Because I'm a dramatist, I like moments when there's something unsettled. I'm in this business of looking at conflict. Conflict is never absent. - Anna Deavere Smith, actor and playwright

### **Essential Arts & Culture: A curated look at SoCal's wonderfully vast and complex arts world**

Smith, accompanied by bassist Marcus Shelby, transforms herself into the experts and witnesses she has consulted, including the late educational philosopher Maxine Greene, Councilman Michael Tubbs from Stockton, Taos Proctor, a Yurok fisherman and former inmate, and Dr. Victor Carrion of Stanford Early Stress Research Program. Together they deepen our understanding of the growing number of young people from largely poor, urban and minority communities who are stuck on what reformers are calling "pathways to prison."

As the term "school-to-prison pipeline" has gained greater currency — even the White House is using it — a belated spotlight has fallen on one of the key contributors to mass incarceration in this country. The debate over its source is fueled with controversy, but it's clear that the underlying situation has been exacerbated by inadequate school resources that make it harder for teachers to compensate for the environmental deficits of their students. In addition, "zero-tolerance" disciplinary policies have been criticized for criminalizing student misbehavior and increasing the suspension rates, leaving youngsters more vulnerable to the streets.

Conservatives point to broken homes and the failure of individual responsibility; liberals talk about unemployment, chronic stress and cutbacks in supportive services. The infestation of gangs, guns and drugs has made the situation more deadly.

But Smith is convinced — as is President Obama, who has made this a priority of his second term — that the moment has come to confront these concerns with holistic thinking and ingenuity.



Anna Deavere Smith's latest performance project looks at the "school-to-prison pipeline."

(Kevin Berne)

In keeping with her minimalist documentary theater style, patented in "Fires in the Mirror" and "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992," two urban mosaics of racial unrest, Smith impersonates her interview subjects by doing little more than finding the trick of their voices. She lets the verbatim testimonies do the talking and rebutting, but her moral authority and compassionate engagement are palpable throughout.

An expert interviewer, Smith is warm and personable when being interviewed. Sipping juice at the St. Regis hotel in San Francisco, she's clearly comfortably speaking in her own voice — something that rarely happens in her solo work.

As stately and elegant in person as she is onstage, Smith was in what might be described as a relaxed hurry — the normal state of affairs for an artist who is also an academic and White House-visiting public intellectual, not to mention an actress looking for work now that the Showtime series "Nurse Jackie" has ended. But she was eager to talk about what

Sherrilyn Ifill of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, whose words make up the piece's "overture," considers the civil rights challenge of our era.

"Basically, what she's saying is that we can do anything in this country," Smith explained. "They decided they wanted suburbs and they built a whole highway system to support it. You can do anything at this level, but we need to really pay attention in the next three years because this is going to be a time when there's a chance to do something new."

The reason, said Smith, is that the system of mass incarceration, which "has gotten completely out of control," has to come down — "that is one issue both Democrats and Republicans agree on."

The U.S. has less than 5% of the world's population and more than 20% of the world's prisoners. Among large nations, America not only has the highest rate of incarceration but imprisons more people than any other, according to the London-based International Centre for Prison Studies.

**I think Americans see that stuff and say, 'That's not us.' Technology is allowing us to have this conversation. The question is, how can you leverage this moment?** - Anna Deavere Smith, actor and playwright

At the Academy Awards this year, Common and John Legend, upon accepting their Oscars for the song "Glory" from the film "Selma," called worldwide attention to the problem in their galvanizing acceptance speech, in which Legend pointed out that "there are more black men under correctional control today than were under slavery in 1850."

Smith, who had tested out "Notes From the Field" in the Bay Area last summer, recognized opportunity when she saw it.

"Usually, the public and particularly the press resent it when a movie star says anything political," she said. "But this year there were about six people who, upon accepting their awards, made a statement about the need for further well being, whether it's about Alzheimer's or John Legend announcing that this country incarcerates more people than any other in the world. I read that in a 500-page report, but how many people are going to read a 500-page report? But they're going to remember John Legend."

Exposure can make it seem like a condition is worsening, but Smith sees it as a healthy development. "Since I started working on this project you could almost have a film festival of short videos of police attacking African Americans," she said. "That started with Ferguson. I think Americans see that stuff and say, 'That's not us.' Technology is allowing us to have this conversation. The question is, how can you leverage this moment?"

The presidential election, she said, only raises the stakes. Yet she's hopeful that, in a period when the discussion over inequality transcends race, a consensus is building around an economic argument for policy shifts.

"We've been spending enormous money on the back-end of the problem," she said. "You know how much it costs to have a person incarcerated? Sherrilyn Ifill says it's not that we've stopped investing in mental health resources, but that we've been doing it in prisons. The most eloquent people are saying these resources need to be put on the front end, so that interventions can be made in communities of poverty.

"It's not going to be cheap, but why not spend some of the money earlier?" she asked. "Because, remember, for a long time before these people were in prison they were doing things that were not productive for society."

How can an artist provoke real-world action? It's a question that Smith has been thinking about long and hard since she was an artist in residence at the Ford Foundation. It was the reason she started at Harvard the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, which has relocated to New York University, where Smith is a professor.



Anna Deavere Smith in "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education."

(Kevin Berne)

For the Berkeley production of "Notes From the Field," Smith has been conducting a novel experiment with her audience. In the second act, theatergoers are divided into groups that are led by a facilitator in the lobby and courtyard areas. Questions are raised to get the audience to link the material to their own lives. Pads and pens are distributed, along with snacks, and audience members are invited (though not compelled) to share their thoughts on what change might look like.

Before reconvening inside the theater for the coda, everyone is asked to make a commitment to do something tangible. The Twitter account [@adspipeline](#) and the hashtag "[NotesFromTheField](#)" have been set up so that these pledges can be shared on social media.

"There are so many opportunities to be passive," said Smith, who describes herself as the author of the second act and the audience as the actors. "You can watch television or a play and say, 'Isn't this awful?' But we need a lot more right now. What we're doing in Berkeley is an outgrowth of what I did last year, when I found that people standing up at the mike and talking isn't productive."

"The facilitators are telling me that connections are starting to be made," she said. "That's what the goal is. I'll come out of this and maybe logistically design it a little



differently. But just the fact that a friend of mine wrote to thank me for providing pads — how many people at intermission write something down they saw onstage? You talk to your friend, get a cup of coffee, go to the bathroom. Interrupting the evening like this asks you to have a different way of processing."



### 'Never Givin' Up' recites MLK's 'Letter' to call for justice

With Smith, a piece is never set until it is published. "Notes From the Field," which will no doubt change as it moves to other cities, is finding its structure. Not all of the monologues have the same potency, and the cogency of the work's overall argument would be enhanced by including a few more voices from the conservative end of the spectrum. Directed by Leah C. Gardiner, the production is nonetheless exceptionally moving. It left me in that state that Maxine Greene labeled "wide awakesness" — the ultimate aim of education and art in an ideal world.

When I asked Smith for her appraisal of Obama's presidency, she said something that applies equally well to her work as an artist, crediting him with helping to "frame our consciousness."

"Because he's a young president, this is just one step in a larger legacy of leadership," she said. "I think this is a great pulpit from which he has done certain things and announced other things. I think it's no small thing that starting with Trayvon Martin we've had this person in office who has given us a way of thinking about these issues. It really helped me, for example, to read his speech about Baltimore, because it basically said that if we think that fixing the police is going to fix this problem, we are in big trouble."

Smith said that she's trying to "paint a very large canvas" and knows that she can "do better" about including more divergent political views. But she did point out that the spokesperson in "Notes From the Field" for the "personal responsibility" position is a black student from West Baltimore who complains about the way boys from the neighborhood wear their jeans pulled down and hang out on the street corners all day.

She wants to provide audience members with multiple entry points "if for no other reason that it gives them a chance to say, 'Well, I'm not interested in economics, but I understand trauma because I'm 55 and I still haven't gotten over the way my father beat me.'"

The damaging effects of chronic stress on cognitive development is a crucial point of interdisciplinary discovery in the show, connecting poverty, violence, mental health, neuroscience and educational outcomes.

Linda Wayman, the principal of Strawberry Mansion High School in Philadelphia who figured in "Never Givin' Up," the show Smith performed this year at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, underscores just how important this new frontier of research is when she talks about the overlap between "special ed" and prison:

"I wound up with this school in the middle of North Philadelphia, with 38% of my students special ed. Special needs. Imagine we're in a high school where 38% of the students are special ed. And I think — now I don't know the numbers, but I believe that if you go into the prisons, I think 80, 85% are those special-need students. I'm talking 'bout the Pennsylvania State Penitentiaries. Eighty-five percent of the students are special ed. They never learned to read, honey. And the reason why they in jail, cause they gotta eat too. They gotta feed their families too."

Smith returned to something said by the chief judge of the Yurok Tribe — "If a child is suffering to the extent that they act out in school" — as an example of the kind of revolution in empathy that's needed right now.

"Just by starting the sentence in this way shows that it's not simply a bad child," she explained, simultaneously elucidating the compassionate power of her own art. "If you were from a middle-class background or a wealthy background, there would be all kinds of interventions being made. Those from more affluent backgrounds know how much they have had to do to get their kids through. Imagine when there's nobody there. What do we expect to be happening?"

## The heartbreaking path from school to prison

By [Robert Hurwitt](#)

Updated 2:30 pm, Thursday, July 16, 2015



Photo: Kevinberne.com

Image 1 of 6

Anna Deavere Smith transforms herself into many characters as she connects poverty with the high rates of incarceration of marginalized youth.

### **IMAGE 1 OF 6**

Anna Deavere Smith transforms herself into many characters as she connects poverty with the high rates of incarceration of marginalized youth.

[Anna Deavere Smith](#) delves deeply into another huge aspect of American life with her customary consummate artistry in “Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the [California Chapter](#).”

Transforming herself into many different people, remarkably re-created from her extensive interviews, she draws indelible connections between the high rates of incarceration of marginalized youth and other national problems in a manner as eye-opening and provocative as it is sure-handed and emotionally moving.

It's also, as the title may indicate, not finished. That's intentional. The piece that opened Wednesday at Berkeley Rep is labeled "a work in progress" for several reasons. This "California Chapter" is the first of several, with Baltimore, Philadelphia and probably more chapters to come. "Notes" could continue to evolve without ever finding a final form. And, as Rep Managing Director [Susan Medak](#) explained, the current format — designed to enhance discussion of the issues — is "a big experiment."

Smith sets the table with an eloquent [Sherrilyn Ifill](#) of the [NAACP Legal Defense Fund](#) detailing the shift in "massive public investment" projects from funding the growth of suburbs and the interstate highway system in the 1950s to the steady buildup of a huge incarceration system — noting how the commitment to funding public education declined after "my predecessor, [Thurgood Marshall](#)," won the battle over racial segregation in schools.

From there, Smith weaves her interviews into an extraordinary tapestry, depicting everything from the school-to-prison pipeline, with educators and African American, Latino and Yurok youth describing how school discipline infractions land kids in jail, to ever-larger issues of public policy: how our justice system works and the trauma of growing up in crime-ridden neighborhoods. As UCLA Professor [Pedro Noguera](#) asks: When a society throws its mentally ill on the streets, "who's really mentally ill?" The subject grows as wide as the fabric of society, but the artistry makes the expansion work, with director [Leah C. Gardiner](#)'s smooth segues and potent use of background video clips and composer [Marcus Shelby](#)'s bluesy deep bass lines. Smith's transformative powers are so great that you almost don't notice how even the shape of her face changes to fit each character, as her mouth and cheeks expand to conform with the person's speech patterns.

The discussion segment, at least in its present form, seems unnecessary. The audience is broken into small groups for an extended intermission, with facilitators running sessions too rigidly structured to promote any real discussion.

Smith's works ("Fires in the Mirror," "Twilight: Los Angeles") have never stopped prompting widespread public debate and action, and this is no different. Her portraits of a compassionate Philadelphia judge, detailing one man's path from innocent boy to convict, and principal [Linda Wayman](#), giving moving details about coping with kids in her high school, are guaranteed to stick in your mind and alter your thinking long after you've dried your eyes.

*Robert Hurwitt is The [San Francisco Chronicle](#)'s theater critic. E-mail: [rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com](mailto:rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: @RobertHurwitt*

THE DO LIST

## Tearing Down the System with Anna Deavere Smith



Award-winning playwright, actor and educator Anna Deavere Smith takes center stage as Kevin Moore, videographer of the Freddie Gray beating, in *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*, a one-woman show featuring stories about California's devastating school-to-prison pipeline. (Photo: kevinberne.com)

By Sam Hurwitt JULY 18, 2015

SHARE

THE **DO LIST**

## EVENT INFORMATION

### **'Notes from the Field: Doing time in Education, the California Chapter'**

Lauded documentary theater artist Anna Deavere Smith presents a show about breaking the school to prison pipeline.

***THROUGH AUG. 2***

Berkeley Repertory Theatre

- **Details and tickets**

Anna Deavere Smith is an old hand at tackling complex issues in down-to-earth terms without reducing their complexity. In her early solo shows *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, she explored how long-simmering racial tensions exploded into riots in Brooklyn and Los Angeles in the early 1990s. The performer's signature style of performing verbatim excerpts of her own interviews proved to be especially poignant in those documentary theater pieces as she embodied leaders, bystanders, activists and other figures on all sides of the divide talking about their experience of difference through the same face. The fact that Smith herself is a light-skinned African American woman only helped drive her points home.

Smith has continued to try to make sense of overwhelmingly complicated social issues by embodying contrasting perspectives in subsequent pieces such as *Let Me Down Easy*. This look at the thorny American health care system came to Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2011.

Smith's new piece at Berkeley Rep carries the unwieldy title *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*. It's the latest stage of a work in progress about the school-to-prison pipeline for underserved youth—primarily of color—from impoverished communities in the United States. Although it's a full-length drama, clocking in at two hours and 20 minutes, Smith is presenting it in an unfinished form.

The sections that are in place, however, appear polished. Smith humanizes her subjects by preserving their verbal tics, intonation and body language in a manner that's sometimes amusing, and that serves to accentuate rather than undermine their credibility. These aren't just disembodied points of view; these are real people with real lived experiences.

Smith becomes teachers, counselors, ex-cons, judges, activists, civic leaders and witnesses of police violence in segments skillfully woven together so that one speaker often seems to be using the last person's testimony as a jumping-off point.

Costume and set changes are minimal. Occasionally Smith puts on a jacket to become someone new. But more often, the shift is pure body language. In director Leah C. Gardiner's smooth staging, the stagehands seamlessly move chairs and tables to and fro between segments so that each interview has a different, albeit minimalist, setting.

This one isn't quite a solo show: Bay Area jazz composer Marcus Shelby is onstage the whole time, accentuating key sections with somber musical accompaniment on double bass.





Anna Deavere Smith portrays Stephanie Williams, emotional support teacher in Philadelphia, in *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*, a one-woman show featuring stories about California's devastating school-to-prison pipeline. (Photo: kevinberne.com)

Smith is taking on a huge and multifaceted subject here. She talks about children traumatized at an early age who are just passed along from school to school to juvenile hall without addressing what leads them to act out in the first place. Her subjects describe the criminalization of everyday life for people of color, in which police can stop you on any pretext and can brutalize or kill you for "resisting arrest" even when there was no crime they could arrest you for in the first place.

Ultimately, though, this is all the same system, a result of the allocation of funds and resources to the criminal justice system instead of education and social services. Whole segments of the population are effectively written off as a loss before they even get started.

How can a system so mammoth and so fixed possibly be changed? Well, that's where a bold experiment comes in. The whole second act of the show is "homework." The audience is split up into small groups assigned to different areas all over the theater grounds to participate in guided discussions with facilitators with dry-erase boards.

In our group, however, there really wasn't any conversation. We were asked to blurt out phrases about what needed to happen and what a better future would look like, all of which were written down on the board. We were asked to write down a description of positive change and to state what we individually are prepared to commit to do to help change this sad state of affairs. Only a couple of people came forward, and it was to talk about things they were already doing. Other groups seemed slightly livelier, but the format didn't seem to be designed for much back-and-forth discussion.

It was a frustrating experience to feel so impotent and disengaged in any solution to such entrenched systematic injustice. But making people uncomfortable may be part of the point. When we're asked what we're personally willing to do to change things, it's embarrassing to come up empty. As a part of the

theatrical experience, the brainstorming sessions seem awkward. But as a way of pursuing an issue further than just hearing about it for a couple of hours, it seems worth a try.

*Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter* runs through August 2, 2015 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in Berkeley. For [tickets and information](http://berkeleyrep.org) visit [berkeleyrep.org](http://berkeleyrep.org).



# **Review: Anna Deavere Smith's groundbreaking blend of theater and activism seen in 'Notes from the Field'**

*By Karen D'Souza*

[kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/16/2015 11:28:27 AM PDT **1 COMMENT** | UPDATED: 14 DAYS AGO

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.



KEVIN BERNE/BERKELEY REPERTORY THEATRE Anna Deavere Smith portrays Kevin Moore, a man who videotaped the arrest of Freddie Gray by Baltimore Police, in her solo show "Notes from the Field." Gray died in police custody after his arrest. ( brt )

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving it up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and

underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that of course is Smith's *métier*.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops and criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and ticks of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests connections between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence. Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley, thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones, and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2 Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

# Review: 'Notes from the Field,' a brave and messy theatrical experiment at Berkeley Rep

By Karen D'Souza [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/16/15, 11:30 AM PDT | UPDATED: 2 WEEKS AGO

# COMMENTS

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that of course is Smith's mtier.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Advertisement

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops, criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and ticks of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests connections, between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore, that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence.

Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley, thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

#### 'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

running time: two hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

OROVILLE  
**MERCURY-REGISTER**

## **Review: 'Notes from the Field,' a brave and messy theatrical experiment at Berkeley Rep**

By Karen D'Souza [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/16/15, 11:30 AM PDT | UPDATED: 2 WEEKS AGO

0 COMMENTS

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that of course is Smith's *mtier*.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Advertisement

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops, criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and ticks of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests connections, between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore, that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence.

Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley, thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

#### 'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

running time: two hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

## **Review: 'Notes from the Field,' a brave and messy theatrical experiment at Berkeley Rep**

By Karen D'Souza [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/16/15, 11:30 AM PDT | UPDATED: 2 WEEKS AGO

0 COMMENTS

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that of course is Smith's mtier.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops, criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and ticks of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests connections, between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore, that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that



not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence.

Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley, thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

#### 'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

running time: two hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)



# Review: Anna Deavere Smith's groundbreaking blend of theater and activism seen in 'Notes from the Field'

*By Karen D'Souza kdsouza@mercurynews.com*

POSTED: 07/16/2015 11:28:44 AM PDT [0 COMMENTS](#) | UPDATED: 14 DAYS AGO

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving it up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that of course is Smith's *métier*.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Advertisement

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops and criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and ticks of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests connections between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence.

Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley, thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones, and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

'NOTES FROM THE FIELD' Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

# Daily Democrat

## Review: 'Notes from the Field,' a brave and messy theatrical experiment at Berkeley Rep

By Karen D'Souza [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/16/15, 11:30 AM PDT | UPDATED: 1 WEEK, 6 DAYS AGO

0 COMMENTS

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that of course is Smith's *mtier*.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Advertisement

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops, criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and ticks of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests connections, between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore, that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence.

Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley, thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

#### 'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

running time: two hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

## Review: 'Notes from the Field,' a brave and messy theatrical experiment at Berkeley Rep

By Karen D'Souza [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/16/15, 11:30 AM PDT | UPDATED: 2 WEEKS AGO

0 COMMENTS

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that of course is Smith's mtier.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Advertisement

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops, criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and ticks of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests connections, between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore, that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence.

Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley, thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

#### 'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

running time: two hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)



## Review: Anna Deavere Smith's groundbreaking blend of theater and activism seen in 'Notes from the Field'

By Karen D'Souza [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/16/15, 12:01 AM PDT | UPDATED: 1 WEEK, 6 DAYS AGO

0 COMMENTS

Anna Deavere Smith has long championed the arts as a vital part of democracy, envisioning the theater as a town hall where social change can be sparked.

Over the years the consummate solo performer has been on the road searching for the hardships shaping the American character, from riots ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992") to health care ("Let Me Down Easy"). Now she's grappling with the racial and class divisions that fuel what she describes as the school-to-prison pipeline in the daring if unwieldy "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter." This highly unusual work-in-progress runs through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

What's truly radical about this piece, gently directed by Leah C. Gardiner, is that Smith outlines the issues in the first act but she turns the debate over to the audience in the second act, leaving it up to us to frame the discourse. While the play itself feels a little messy and underdeveloped, forcing the audience to engage is a bold and ambitious move that's nothing if not groundbreaking. And that, of course, is Smith's mtier.

While she is best known in pop culture circles for "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," in the theater she is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.

Advertisement

Hoping to spark a new war on poverty (not to mention social injustice), she interviewed teachers, students, cops and criminals from coast to coast. In "Notes," she seeks to bring the interviewees to life, verbatim, capturing the tones and tics of speech and body language that make each person unique.

From a strictly theatrical perspective, the play is less explosive than her previous works, and the narrative of the evening is less rigorously shaped. Smith also suggests

connections between crumbling public schools and recent riots in cities such as Baltimore that the narrative doesn't yet explicate fully enough.

Still, there are unforgettable characters, from the 8-year-old old handcuffed in the classroom and the mother who made her kids ride the bus around town just to see that not everyone lived in poverty to the kindergarten class where every kid has lost someone to gun violence.

Smith painstakingly makes connections between the failure of the schools and the chaos in our society, from Oakland to Baltimore. She also notes that rich kids are allowed to get into mischief while poor kids are stigmatized and punished. Overworked teachers, pressured to deliver metrics on lower rates of suspension and higher test scores, compound the problem by sending troubled kids home instead of dealing with the traumas that cause them to act out in the first place. A cycle of nihilism and violence keeps impoverished children from even hoping of a better life. College is a pipe dream for high schoolers who never learn to read.

The harshness of the play's message is tempered somewhat by Marcus Shelby's soothing jazzy accompaniment.

In Act 2 the audience is broken into discussion sections with a facilitator to come to some conclusions about how to change the system. My group was very Berkeley: thoughtful, well-educated and compassionate, although the process still felt awkward. The gathering never quite ignited in us the will to make meaningful change that Smith seems to envision, although many interesting ideas were broached, including making schools community hubs for health care and food, finding ways for affluent schools to donate to needy ones, and reforming Proposition 13 and channeling the funds back into education.

The structure of the evening also underscored the academic tenor of the piece, which is always stimulating but never quite as moving as it might be. The coda, which gives us a glimpse of a character from "Twilight" as well as insights from James Baldwin, may be the most memorable part of all.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Through: Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)



# This is the time: Anna Deavere Smith at Berkeley Rep

Chad Jones comments Anna Deavere Smith, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, plays, theater review



*Playwright, actor and educator Anna Deavere Smith is Sherrilyn Ifill, president and direct-counsel of the NAACP, one of many characters she plays in Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter, a one-woman show featuring stories about California's devastating school-to-prison pipeline. Below: Smith plays Kevin Moore, videographer of the Freddie Gray beating. Photos courtesy of [kevinberne.com](http://kevinberne.com)*

If you've ever seen a show by our foremost docudramatist, **Anna Deavere Smith**, you know the power she has over an audience. She conducts extensive interviews on her chosen topic, then she re-creates portions of those interviews in a cannily crafted show that is theatrical in its presentation and righteous in its political and emotional power. She makes her audience think, feel and converse for days (and beyond). Now, with *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter* at **Berkeley Repertory Theatre**, she is going even further. She's turning her show into a full-blown seminar.

In so many ways this show is attempting to be more than a show. For instance, you don't get a traditional program. You get an accordion-fold "toolkit" full of information, resources and social media connections (#NotesFromTheField). Smith performs for a solid 80 minutes, and then there's an abrupt shift in Act 2 when the audience breaks into small groups situated in every corner of the Roda Theatre for a 25-minute, facilitated discussion about identifying what change looks and feels like and how people can commit to helping that change come about. In my group (backstage, which was fun), we had 15 people, a facilitator named Peggy, excellent snacks (Tcho chocolate and animal crackers) and an intelligent, heartfelt (if rushed) conversation about issues that had come up in the play. The discussion itself wasn't world changing, but this notion of theater as civic engagement – we're already in the room together, why don't we take our interchange to the next level? – definitely is.



After the discussion, audience members head back to their seats for the 25-minute conclusion of the play, which is still a work in progress. Smith has compiled interviews from Baltimore and Philadelphia and is adding in the California contingent. Being unfinished is hardly a problem when you have a writer/performer/educator of Smith's caliber. She offers her trademark style of inhabiting each character and mimicking their voices down to every pause and stutter. In her compilation of interviews, which focus mainly on experts in their field and real people (there's only one politician represented, and he's a councilman in the trenches of Stockton), so it's not like she's falling into that modern news trap of "fair and balanced" coverage, forcing commentary from both sides. Nor is she banging us over the head with

her research and pushing her conclusions in our faces. Slowly and steadily she creates a composite of the overarching issues and gives us precise, intimate details from lives being lived in ways that illuminate those issues. Among the people she so expertly represents (the production is directed by **Leah C. Gardiner** and features live bass accompaniment by **Marcus Shelby**) are a man from the Yurok tribe in Northern California who is an excellent example of the poor public education pipeline to prison; education philosopher Maxine Greene (who died last year); a mentor from Oakland; the young man who shot video of Freddie Gray's violent arrest in Baltimore; one of the more visible protesters from the ensuing Baltimore riots; and a UCLA professor who notes that in stepping over or ignoring the mentally ill homeless people in our paths, we should really stop to consider "Who's really mentally ill?"

The most powerful characters come as a trio from Philadelphia toward the end of Act 1. First is an "emotional support teacher" who does the best she can but feels completely inadequate to deal with the dysfunction and damage among her students. She recounts an interaction with an out-of-control 11-year-old that is devastating.

Then we hear from a judge who, in sentencing a troubled young man to prison at 19, admits defeat and tells the young man – before sentencing him for crimes to which he pled guilty – that the system had utterly failed him by not providing him a safe place and a good education. And finally is a school principal, the first in her family to go to college, who demands that her students experience the world and push beyond the limitations of their circumstances. She's one person battling valiantly in an all-out war that, frankly, seems impossible to win, but she offers hope that it can be done.

There's a lot of hope and compassion in this show amid all the depressing glimpses of the reality our society has created with its choices of where to invest time, energy and money (prison!) and where not (education! mental health! poverty!). The overall effect of *Notes from the Field* is hopeful. Anna Deavere Smith is doing what she can do and doing it incredibly well. We are called upon to commit to a single action to help make change, and that's a hopeful directive as well. But the biggest take away comes as you exit the theater full of emotion and information and with the enthusiasm to, as one of the characters puts it, step into "wide awakeness."

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Anna Deavere Smith's *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter* continues through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre's Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley. Tickets are \$50-\$89 (subject to change). Call 510-647-2949 or visit [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).

## Anna Deavere Smith boldly seeks justice in ‘Notes from the Field’



Anna Deavere Smith portrays many characters, including Kevin Moore, videographer of the Freddie Gray beating, in the evocative “Notes from the Field” at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. (Courtesy kevinberne.com)

By Georgia Rowe on July 16, 2015 10:15 am



Anna Deavere Smith is back at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, and that’s good news for anyone who’s worried about the American juvenile justice system.

No one transforms current issues into hard-hitting documentary theater like Smith, whose previous one-woman shows have included “Let Me Down Easy,” about health care, and “Twilight: Los Angeles,” about the Los Angeles race riots of 1992.

With “Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter,” the great playwright-actress continues the tradition. Drawn from over 150 interviews with inmates, judges, teachers, principals, psychiatrists and juvenile justice experts throughout the U.S. – many of them in Smith’s

native Baltimore – the show examines the school-to-prison pipeline that effectively sends black, Hispanic, and Native American youths into a dismal downward spiral.

It's not quite accurate to call this a one-woman show: Smith is so adept at channeling the voices, inflections and unique characteristics of each interview subject, it's as if they're onstage. With the aid of a few props – a hat, a cane, a change of jacket or shoes – she transforms multiple voices into gripping theatrical roles.

There are flashes of humor, but most of the interviews range from wrenching to furious. The statistics are shocking – a high school principal says that 85 percent of penitentiary inmates were special education students. The director of Stanford's Early Stress Research program quietly notes that PTSD transmits from one generation to the next.

Kevin Moore, who videotaped Freddy Gray's death at the hands of Baltimore police, describes his camera as "the only weapon we have that's legal." A Philadelphia judge is haunted by the fate of a child who grew up in the system: "In my opinion," he says, "society failed him."

Deftly staged by Leah C. Gardiner, with film clips and a mournful original score played onstage by composer and double bassist Marcus Shelby, the show gathers the individual stories into a panoramic view of a broken system that condemns huge segments of the population to a marginalized underworld.

Smith is magnificent – with each role, she wants you to feel their pain, share their anguish, frustration, and outrage.

She doesn't stop there. After the 80-minute first half, audience members are asked to assemble in groups to discuss avenues for change. On opening night, the 25-minute sessions appeared to yield lively interactions.

Smith and Shelby return for a brief coda, but by then, "Notes from the Field" has already accomplished its goal – to create an urgent plea for justice. Smith, quoting the influential American writer James Baldwin, reminds us: "We are responsible for the future of this world."

## **REVIEW**

### **Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter**

*Presented by Berkeley Repertory Theatre*

**Where:** Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley

**When:** Most Tuesdays-Sundays; closes Aug. 2

**Tickets:** \$25 to \$89

**Contact:** (510) 647-2989, [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)



# OAKULTURE

*Documenting the Oakland cultural renaissance*

## Anna Deavere Smith's "Prison Pipeline" Play: Brilliant, Yet Conflicted.

July 20, 2015 by [Eric K. Arnold](#) [1 Comment](#)

Anna Deavere Smith's "[Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education](#)," is more than a play. Part documentary, part drama, it encourages audience members to become activists against the "school-to-prison pipeline," which connects our failed education system with the prison-industrial complex. The show's program also contains a "toolkit" which describes the racial inequity of zero tolerance school discipline policies and presents alternative methods such as the [restorative justice program](#) currently in place in the Oakland Unified School District and other proactive behavioral approaches which address the reality of post-traumatic stress syndrome among school-age children. But the show doesn't stop there. It devotes its intermission to interactively engaging attendees in advocacy, with Youth Speaks-trained facilitators pushing small workshop groups to make a commitment to action (more on this later).



Anna Deavere Smith



The first part of the show effectively reveals why Deavere Smith's one-woman shows have won many prestigious awards: her methodology, which involved interviewing 150 people on both sides of the pipeline, then honing their verbatim accounts into character studies and ultimately, monologues, is absolutely brilliant. This approach one-ups the "one-woman, many characters" style of Sarah Jones by using non-fictional source material, which is technically much more difficult to pull off. Deavere Smith uses simple stage props, varying speech patterns, and gesticulations to bring each character to life, with vocal inflections which range from the crisp articulation of a multi-degree holder, to the guttersnipe syntax of a high school dropout.

The vignettes, which feature education professionals, judges, lawyers, parents, students, and chronic truants (who have become fodder for the prison system), connect thematically, presenting a multi-faceted inquiry from almost all sides of the paradigm – we don't specifically hear from any law enforcement professionals or correctional facility employees – and segue with musical help from acoustic bassist Marcus Shelby, who provides jazzy textures throughout. In addition to supertitles identifying each interviewee, video clips which play on screens above the stage add further context. There is both a sense of urgency and topical relevancy, especially when Deavere Smith recounts the stories of the videographer who filmed Freddie Gray's arrest and a man charged with a \$500,000 bail for protesting Gray's death. Another story, of a Native American man who was never enfranchised by public education and becomes a violent ex-con who is now a concern for tribal authorities, resonates with poignancy. Though there are numerous comic moments, laughing at them felt a little awkward, since the overall tone is so serious.



Anna Deavere Smith as NAACP lawyer Sherrilyn Ifill

Watching the show, the connections between Oakland and Baltimore seem obvious and apparent – we're not dealing with a unique problem faced by individual cities as much as one on a national scope, institutionalized by years of economic investment into building prisons, instead of education –

which has predictably resulted, Deavere Smith tells us, in the types of outcomes we're seeing now. 85% of incarcerated people in Maryland, it is revealed, were Special Ed students. (In California, 75% of the prison population are high-school dropouts — an even higher number than the [nationwide average of 68 %](#). Meanwhile, the [private prison industry has grown at a staggeringly exponential rate over the past 25 years](#).)

“Notes From the Field” is ambitious in its reach, to be sure. But these types of problems can't be solved in a couple hours. The intermission workshop felt a little like drop-in activism for a constituency which has not had to deal personally with any of these issues, such as having an incarcerated family member, or being racially-profiled by police, in their lifetimes.

**It's counter-intuitive, to say the least, to announce — with all the pomp and circumstance of a critically-acclaimed theater performance — that the system is broken, while simultaneously helping to promote a company complicit in the economic exploitation end of the pipeline.**

The reality is a little bit thornier: Whole Foods, who has [recently been all over the Internets](#) for utilizing prison labor, is listed *as a sponsor of the production*.

However, when Whole Foods' connection to prison labor was pointed out in one of the workshops, one attendee reacted with an angry glare and sputtering disbelief, and the workshop's facilitator seemed to have difficulty grasping the implications of what that meant. It's counter-intuitive, to say the least, to announce — with all the pomp and circumstance of a critically-acclaimed theater performance — that the system is broken, while simultaneously helping to promote a company complicit in the economic exploitation end of the pipeline. That may not be the fault of Deavere Smith, but it does illuminate the inherent conflicts of even doing a production of this nature. If we're going to go there, identify the problem in no uncertain terms, and break the fourth wall to demand action be taken, as “Notes From the Field” does, we've got to be willing to address how deep the issue really goes, and realize that effecting substantive and meaningful change might just be incompatible with doing business as usual.



Anna Deavere Smith portrays videographer Kevin Moore

If we were to further nitpick, we'd point out that another of Berkeley Rep's sponsors, Wells Fargo, owns Wachovia, which was [investigated and fined by the Justice Department for laundering money for Mexican drug cartels](#) – whose influx of illegal narcotics is reportedly a causal factor in the hundreds of annual murders in Chicago, mostly of young black men. Even worse, [Wells Fargo also has invested tens of millions of dollars in private prisons](#), making it complicit in economic exploitation, sexual and physical assault, denial of health services, and racially-disproportionate practices. Again, this kind of disingenuousness undercuts Deavere Smith's message, through no fault of the messenger.

The play closed with a coda which transposed two short monologues: one drawn from Deavere Smith's earlier work, of a Latino man expressing his feelings about race in the aftermath of the 1992 LA Uprising, and another from a 1970 interview with James Baldwin. Both hit expected gracenotes, but for different reasons. The irony of a brown person insisting he's not racist because he has white friends while describing how he's been racially stereotyped his entire life isn't exactly subtle. And Baldwin seems prescient, as if anticipating [#blacklivesmatter](#), when he said, some 45 years ago, "The police in this country make no distinction between a Black Panther or a black lawyer or my brother or me. The cops aren't going to ask me my name before they pull the trigger."



Anna Deavere Smith as West Baltimore student India Sledge

That's not the exact quote Deavere Smith used, which came from [a seven-hour conversation with Margaret Mead](#) called "A Rap on Race," but in this context it suggests that until we fix our fractured education system and retool our discombobulate criminal justice system, we will not, and cannot, possibly evolve into a "post-racial" society, no matter how many Confederate flags are torn from F-150 trucks.

It's fitting that "Notes from the Field" is being presented just a few miles from Oakland, the spiritual center of the "New Civil Rights Movement" that #BLM has been called. In one of the interviews, Deavere Smith recounts how a teacher thought she missed the boat on civil rights activism by being born at the wrong time, until she realized that a new movement could happen at any moment. That statement apparently resonated with a silver-haired white woman seated one row up, who felt compelled to comment to Oakulture about it – seeking the approval of one of the few black men in the room, perhaps. But only time will tell whether that woman is willing to forgo prison-farmed organic tilapia and artisanal cheeses, for the movement's sake – or whether a war on bankers would yield better results than the war on drugs.

*"Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education"* runs through August 2 at Berkeley Rep. For tickets, visit [here](#) or call 510-647-2949.

# ROSS VALLEY REPORTER

## Unique show faces racial conflicts but may miss mark



Photo courtesy of kevinberne.com.

### Unique show faces racial conflicts but may miss mark

Anna Deavere Smith portrays Johns Hopkins research Professor Robert Balfanz and many other characters in "Notes from the Field."

Posted: Thursday, July 16, 2015 2:21 pm | Updated: 2:41 pm, Thu Jul 16, 2015.

By Woody Weingarten Marinscope Newspapers [0 comments](#)

Anna Deavere Smith beat the odds — and became a theatrical powerhouse.

Despite being an African-American, despite writing one-woman shows with multivarious characters all played by Anna Deavere Smith, despite staging controversial in-your-face portraits of racial conflict. Now she's battling the odds again. But is likely to fail.

In the unique Berkeley Rep's "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education," she takes on the entire American educational system and its undermining attitude toward poor people of color. It simply may be too wide a target.

The experimental piece — part drama, part audience participation — covers dense terrain and poses tons of questions. But it provides only amorphous answers. I kept waiting for a specificity that never came.

Part of Smith's "Pipeline Project," which is seeking to alter school-to-prison practices she contends have decimated the future of a generation, "Notes" is based on 150 interviews she conducted.

In sub-divided sections of an 80-minute first act, she impersonates a riot videographer, an Oakland mentor, a Stockton councilman, a Stanford shrink, UCLA and Johns Hopkins professors, a protestor from Baltimore (where the playwright-performer was born), a Native American ex-con, an emotional support counselor and a high school principal — plus a Philadelphia judge who cried when sentencing a young man because society also was guilty. She recreates the individuals' stories precisely as told to her.

That, according to a National Endowment for the Humanities website profile, means "complete with false starts, coughs, laughter, and so on... 'If they said 'um'... I don't take the 'um' out.' As in the 64-year-old's previous shows, Smith's performance is phenomenally good. Although her olive drab jacket/shirt and dark pants stay put, she changes personalities by altering facial expressions, verbal pace and timbre — and footwear. Projected film clips of cops beating blacks and of rioting underline the painful pleas of her portrayal of youngsters being forced into the criminal justice system, of white officials who find few alternatives. I found it depressing.

But not as disheartening as the ostensibly novel audience breakout sessions about which in a pre-show briefing Susan Medak, Rep managing director, said, "You *are* the second act." The mostly white 23-member group I attended — one of 20 clusters in all — just didn't come alive. Its discussion was buried in idealistic but impractical notions, though the writing pads we'd been given carried the printed motto, "The change starts with you."

Participants proffered suggestions to "move beyond our comfort zone," "fight racism" and "stop police brutality" — without explaining how.

I had the distinct sense I was at a rally that couldn't gel. Smith, who labeled this special presentation "The California Chapter" and a "work in progress," punctuates all the heaviness with humor.

The opening night audience chuckled accordingly. If a bit uncomfortably. It also appeared to dismiss Marcus Shelby's plucky but sometimes sorrowful jazz bass accompaniment. Smith, who's probably best known for her TV roles on "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," initially gained fame through two early '90s documentary theater inventions, "Fires in the Mirror" and "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992." The first, dealing with the Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, earned her a Pulitzer Prize nomination. The second, about the Rodney King verdict aftermath, won two Tony nods. "Notes" is in effect a variation of the theme. Smith, who won a MacArthur fellowship for blending theatrical art, social commentary, journalism and "intimate reverie," believes she's now delivered "a chance to reimagine and recreate a new war on poverty. Education is a crucial part of that."

In a dramatic coda, she utilizes circa 1970 quotes from black writer James Baldwin that the problem is "the children and their children." Not that much, I guess, has changed. Yet 45 years have passed.

Smith's UCLA character adds a thought in "Notes." The "biggest problem in our country," he proclaims, "is indifference."

Anna Deavere Smith's latest magnum opus may be many things, but uncaring isn't any of them. *"Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter"* plays at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre's Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley, through Aug. 2. Night performances, 8 p.m. Sundays and Tuesdays through Fridays, 7 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Matinees, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Tickets: \$25 to \$89, subject to change, (510) 647-2949 or [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).



# THE DAILY JOURNAL

The Peninsula's homepage

## Spotlight shined on the school-to-prison pipeline

July 18, 2015, 05:00 AM By [Judy Richter](#) Daily Journal



### **Kevin Berne**

*Award-winning playwright, actor and educator Anna Deavere Smith portrays Stephanie Williams in 'Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter.'*

Playwright-actor-teacher Anna Deavere Smith has created and presented several one-woman shows dealing with important social issues or events.

Her latest is "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter," presented by Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

As she has done in her previous shows, she bases this work on hundreds of hours of interviews with people who have varying experience with, in this case, education and the criminal justice system.

She then re-creates these people using their exact words and manner of speaking.

She focuses on the school-to-prison pipeline, in which students failed by the schools are likely to land up in jail.

Many of them are people of color whose needs aren't served by their schools and community. Many are treated unfairly by the police, who are subject to frequent criticism in this show.

This aspect of the show is punctuated by videos of police mistreating young black people. One is a 14-year-old girl in her bathing suit who is thrown to the ground and handcuffed with her hands behind her back. Another is Freddie Gray, who died after being arrested by Baltimore police earlier this year.

One person interviewed by Smith and re-created in this show is a Baltimore deli worker who took a cellphone video. Others include educators, a judge, researchers and people who have been jailed.



There's a Philadelphia woman whose mother was determined to see her rise above poverty and get a good education. When she became the first person in her family to graduate from college, her mother ignored admonitions against applause.

Instead, when the woman crossed the stage to get her diploma, her mother jumped up and cried, "Thank you, Jesus."

The first act runs about 90 minutes, followed by a break of 25 minutes or so. During this time, the audience gathers in randomly assigned groups to talk about ways "to help dissolve the school-to-prison pipeline and inequities in the education system," a press release says.

Hence, "You are the second act," Berkeley Rep managing director Susan Medak told the opening night audience before Act 1. It's "a grand experiment" meant to generate conversation, she said.

The final part of the show, which totals about two and a half hours, is "Coda." This 10-minute section features Smith again and concludes with words by the late James Baldwin. This is perhaps the only weak spot in what otherwise is a compelling presentation by a gifted, thoughtful performer.

"Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education" will continue through Aug. 2 in Berkeley Repertory Theatre's Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley. For tickets and information call (510) 647-2949 or visit [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).

## Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education- The California Chapter

by Elaine Beale  
Contributor  
Monday Jul 20, 2015

- [PRINT](#)
- [EMAIL](#)
- [COMMENTS \(0\)](#)
- [LARGE](#)
- [MEDIUM](#)
- [SMALL](#)



Anna Devere Smith (Source:Joan Marcus)

For more than two decades, Anna Devere Smith has been writing and performing groundbreaking theater that asks its audiences to take an unflinching look at complex and incendiary subjects. Beginning in 1992 with "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992," which examined the uprisings around the beating of Rodney King, Smith has created astounding one-woman shows that emotionally engage audiences, challenge their assumptions, and press them to think deeply about disturbing social problems.

Her latest show, "**Notes From The Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter**," premiering at the Berkeley Rep, continues in this vein with a performance that takes an expansive look at the ways that our education system is failing youth of color -- preparing them not for jobs and careers, but instead for poverty and incarceration.

Smith is most recognized by the majority of people for her roles in the television shows "Nurse Jackie" and "The West Wing," but it is for her theatrical work that she's received her greatest accolades (including a National Humanities Medal from President Obama and a MacArthur Award). Her one-woman shows are what one might call "non-fiction theater." She tackles her subjects by conducting mind-boggling hours of interviews with an immense range of people, from those directly affected by the issue she's examining to policy experts, academics and community leaders.

Selecting excerpts from those interviews, she then weaves together a story -- performing her subjects' comments verbatim as she slips into their characters, embodying their physical attributes, mannerisms and gestures so convincingly that it's easy to forget it's actually Smith up there on stage.

In "Notes" she opens as Sherrilyn Ifill of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund who calmly indicts a government that, following the desegregation of public schools, has systematically disinvested in education and while massively investing in prisons. Other "players" include teens and adults who've paid the personal price for those policy decisions, a school teacher who tells a harrowing tale of working with traumatized children, Kevin Moore, the young man who videotaped Freddie Gray's arrest in Baltimore (while that video plays on a screen at the rear of the stage), and UCLA Professor Pedro Noguera, who talks about the dreadful personal numbing required to shut ourselves off from the suffering we see around us.

After talking about his own personal experience of passing homeless people on the street as he makes his way to work each day, he speculates that perhaps a society that tosses its mentally ill onto the streets might not be quite so mentally healthy itself.

All this is accomplished with stunning artistry, not just by Smith herself but by musician Marcus Shelby who punctuates her performance with an emotionally resonant bass. And Director Leah C. Gardiner's choice of a sparse stage, minimal props and the absence of theatrical artifice give a disarmingly raw impact to the material. By the conclusion of Act One, we've been required by Smith to bear witness to the consequences of a sick society that treats millions of its members like human detritus.

Act Two, however, is rather different, requiring the audience to break into small groups for discussion of the issues addressed in the play and to consider how they might contribute to positive change. Unfortunately, while the intent is laudable, the result is awkward, with this short and over-facilitated meeting of strangers leading to little genuine interaction and questionable results.

There's a brief reconvening in the theater where Smith revisits a character from "Twilight" and treats the audience to the wise and droll words of James Baldwin. And while these stand alone as powerful performances, they don't quite feel of a piece with Act One.

Indeed it's the show's first act that makes it more than worth seeing. Intelligent, honest and brilliantly performed, this alone is a fiercely powerful call to action.

*"Notes From The Field" runs through August 2 at The Berkeley Rep, 2025 Addison Street in Berkeley. For information or tickets, call 510-647-2949 or visit **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.***



Supporting the East Bay community since 1961

# THE PIONEER

## Education takes center stage



ILLUSTRATION BY BRITTANY ENGLAND/THE PIONEER

**Kris Stewart,**

*Online and Social Media Editor*

July 22, 2015

Music played throughout the Berkeley Repertory Theater as people scurried to their seats before Anna Deavere Smith's most recent show began. The lights dimmed and the audience sat silently as the actress and playwright took the stage.

Each of the four acts of Smith's "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education," carried an equally heavy tone. There were bursts of laughter throughout the performance, but for the majority of the show the audience sat in silence as they watched Smith step in and out of other people's shoes.

"Notes from the Field" features Smith acting out the various points of view of interviewees she spoke with about the American education system, such as community leaders like Michael Tubbs, a councilman in Stockton; Arnold Perkins, Chairman of The Mentoring Center in Oakland; and Abby Abinanti, Chief Judge of the Yurok Tribe in San Francisco and Klamath.



*Award-winning playwright, actor, and educator Anna Deavere Smith portrays India Sledge, a student from West Baltimore in Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California*

*Chapter, a one-woman show featuring stories about California's devastating school-to-prison pipeline. PHOTO COURTESY OF KEVINEBERNE.COM*

Smith created and wrote "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education," with the intention to spark conversation about the current state of education in California. Racial disparity, classism and the correlation between education and incarceration were included among the themes presented in the production.

"Um, I'm always asked that question, 'What is the number one civil rights issue of the day?' and I'm very uncomfortable with that question," said Smith, as she portrayed Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel NAACP Legal Defence and Educational Fund, in the play. "It is impossible to talk about the criminal justice system — mass incarceration — without talking about education."

Smith is known for her documentary approach to theater. Her production "Twilight 1992" was a similar presentation in which she took actual testimony from people throughout the community in efforts to tell the story of the Los Angeles riots seen through a variety of lenses.

Smith's "Notes from the Field" is designed to spark conversation about the school to prison pipeline, the many ways in which children — especially poor children in urban environments — land in prison.

Before the final act, attendees were split into several groups as Tupac's "The Rose That Grew From Concrete" played in the background. Each group was asked a series of questions in an attempt to trigger discussion about inequality in America.

The first prompt on the board read, "Now is the moment." People responded with words and phrases like change, healing, love, organized rebellion, dethrone the king, envision anew and break the pattern. Attendees were then asked to describe what the idea of change feels like. Responses varied from anxious and exciting to painful and frightening.

To close the presentation, Smith portrayed James Baldwin, reciting commentary given in a public discussion with Margaret Mead about power and privilege from 1970: "You and I, we become whatever we become. The curtain will come down eventually. But what should we do about the children?" Smith concluded, in the words of Baldwin, "We are responsible for the future of this world."

The three week engagement runs through August 2.



## The Pipeline Of Broken Dreams

07/21/15

Daniel Schifrin

Special To The Jewish Week

image:

[http://www.thejewishweek.com/sites/default/files/images/daniel\\_schifrin\\_0.jpg](http://www.thejewishweek.com/sites/default/files/images/daniel_schifrin_0.jpg)

Daniel Schifrin

In one-woman shows like “Fires in the Mirror,” about the Crown Heights riots, and “Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992,” about the violence following the Rodney King affair, Anna Deavere Smith helped create a new kind of theater. Playing dozens of characters, all based on extensive interviews with real people, Smith provoked an unusual level of audience empathy, in part because she literally embodied those peoples’ stories. The violence she chronicled – which is at base a failure of empathy – was reversed in the telling of the story.

In her new work, called “Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education – The California Chapter,” Smith explores the school-to-prison pipeline, a journey – undertaken primarily by people of color – from poor and broken schools to well-funded and high-functioning jails.

In the middle of what Smith is calling a work-in-progress, now on stage at the [Berkeley Repertory Theater](#), audience members were surprised that their intermission was replaced by small group discussion. Minyans of strangers gathered together in the courtyard and by the bathrooms to reflect on what they had heard; imagine what a healthier society would feel like; and offer one thing they could do to make that vision a reality.

As Smith explained in the program: “I want to sound an alarm. I see the theater as a convening place, where you, for the most part strangers to one another, can come together to exchange ideas, suggest solutions, and possibly, when I’m gone, mobilize around what should be done.”

Although one person in my row complained that “I feel like I’m back in school,” most of us were moved and challenged by our assignment. All of us had spent this violent year watching the primary result of the pipeline of broken dreams – the deaths of African-Americans, or the deaths of the dreams of African-Americans, or both. And now we were presented with a conduit for conversation.

What we – mostly middle-aged white people planning on expensive post-performance gelato – didn’t say, was that we were still likely to get home in one piece from a theater in a safe part of town.



I write this on the eve of Tisha b'Av, when we read the Book of Lamentations, which we call by the first Hebrew word in the book, "Eicha," or "How?" How, Jeremiah asks, have we allowed ourselves to sin Jerusalem into destruction? How do we recover from this failure? How do we understand the covenant that we hope still stands between us and God?

Rabbinic commentators suggest that Jerusalem is not just the actual, historical city, but a mythic construction, a metaphor for our collective psyche, even a living being. The language of these Lamentations embodies Jerusalem as a disgraced wife, or a forlorn daughter.

New ideas in urban planning, a field not known for poetic language, also call upon the metaphor of the body. When neighborhoods are cut off from the rest of the city — without access to good schools, food, parks and gardens — they wither and die. And if enough appendages die, the whole body shuts down.

Sometimes it feels like the disconnect between parts of our cities, between the racial elements within our collective Jerusalem, has made us morally anemic. Do we not see the disconnect between those groups for whom the covenant with America has held, and those for whom it has been broken?

Eicha doesn't only dwell in sadness; it also rises up in righteous rage, at the politicians who cover up our nation's sins with re-direction and entertainment, blame and bling: "Your prophets have seen false and senseless visions for you, and they have not exposed your iniquity to straighten out your backsliding, but have prophesied for you false and misleading oracles."

The genius of Torah, of its stories, is that it compels us to break down the walls between us and them, between yesterday and today. The ritual of reading Eicha requires the painful attendance of community, forcing us to listen, to feel, to ask questions.

The genius of political theater is that it breaks down the "fourth wall," the wall separating not only customer and entertainer, but also art and action, fiction and reality. I ask the question, then, of our moral literatures: What is the purpose of our collective stories if not to encourage the presence of empathies? And if encouragement is insufficient to force their attendance onto the stage of wisdom, then perhaps we deserve the breaking not just of the fourth wall of fiction, but of the first, second and third walls of the city itself.

Read more at <http://www.thejewishweek.com/features/culture-view/pipeline-broken-dreams#LQyBJZg3GeoJ5GaY.99>

## Policy pivots along ‘School-to-Prison-Pipeline’ with Anna Deavere Smith (Review)

She’s so powerful that she can use words like “impactful,” and you want to believe them.

[CY ASHLEY WEBB](#) -

JUL 21, 2015



Award-winning playwright, actor, and educator Anna Deavere Smith portrays Sherrilyn Ifill, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*, a one-woman show featuring stories about California’s devastating school-to-prison pipeline. (Photo: Kevin Berne)

# Notes from the Field: Doing Time In Education, the California Chapter.



3 out of 5 stars - 'Worth a Look'

## **Berkeley Rep**

Created, written & performed by Anna Deavere Smith

Music composed and performed by Marcus Shelby

[berkeleyrep.org](http://berkeleyrep.org)

Even her name can give you the shivers: Anna Deavere Smith.

If you're a certain age, she introduced you to the power of a one-woman show drawn from multiple characters. There was nobody like her before – nobody so smart, nobody who didn't so much do impressions as crawl inside her characters. Her *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* made you marvel at its sheer audacity and smarts. She's so powerful she can use words like “impactful,” and you want to believe them. Since the 1992 *Fires*, she's been all over the American scene, picking up a MacArthur fellowship and a Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize for sharing her luminous intelligence along the way. Right now, she's at [the Berkeley Rep](http://the Berkeley Rep), presenting *Notes from the Field: Doing Time In Education, the California Chapter*.

Initial seeds of the work — a treatment of what Deavere calls the “School-to-Prison-Pipeline” — go back to 2010, although interviews for it (like her other works, this is based on her interview subjects) didn't begin until 2013. As Smith tells it, Ferguson happened, which energized the whole project and brought a whole new urgency.

Out of these interviews — and the coincidence of Ferguson with election year politics — comes Deavere's conviction that we're enjoying a brief window where we can pivot to realign priorities. The strength behind this conviction powered her performance as she cycled through on interview subject after another, flipping back and forth between first students and teachers, judges, principals and others who struggle with delivering an unsupported product.

She brings you a judge, who carefully parses his words, apportioning the system's responsibility while delivering a sentence. She becomes Taos Proctor, a Yurok fisherman. She becomes a

mother who spent Sundays riding the bus to other parts of town with her kids and opening a crack into another world. These are characters who will take up residence in your head.

Smith's performance was elevated by accompaniment of jazz bassist Marcus Shelby who delivered a sexy, spare musical figures that rounded out the program.

Smith warns her audience "I bring the work to the stage at a midway point – not quite finished." This lack of completion bedevils the work. Much of the second act was given over to audience discussion groups, followed by a short coda.

I suspect other groups were better than mine – a disproportionately large group whose facilitator apologized for the inability of everyone to hear as he led everyone through a flip chart brainstorming session which engaged some to in the group to call for revolution and others to pledge to talk to their grandchildren more.

Anna Deavere Smith will be at the Berkeley Rep in the Roda Theatre through August 2.

*Explore. Create. Live. Follow Stark Insider on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). Join our 9,000 subscribers who read SI on tablets and smartphones on [Google Newsstand](#). Prefer video? Subscribe to [Stark Insider on YouTube](#), the largest arts & travel channel in San Francisco.*



## **Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education: The California Chapter**

Anna Deveare Smith, Creator, Writer, Performer

Leah C. Gardiner, Director

Marcus Shelby, Bass Violin

Berkeley Rep

Jul. 11-Aug. 2, 2015

[Berkeleyrep.org](http://Berkeleyrep.org)

Anna Deveare Smith's "Notes from the Field: The California Chapter" is a rallying cry to end the School-to-Prison Pipeline that, in alarming numbers, is effectively depriving mostly Black and Latino youth, but others as well, of their rightful adulthood. Under the leaky umbrella of capitalist economics, the justice "system" colludes with the education "system," though neither function systemically, or otherwise, except to create conditions for entrance into the penal "system." There, businesses that supply or contract out to prisons which are more and more privately owned, profit legally from the crime game, while systemically depriving, demoralizing, and pauperizing those behind bars, along with their families and communities. Today, the percentage of African-American males in prison exceeds the percentage that was enslaved in the ante-bellum South. If such outcomes are written into the laws and policies that wreak havoc with Black lives how can that not depreciate all lives, and our culture as a whole?

Smith's one-woman show consists of serial narratives scripted from interviews with the variegated personalities who are prisoners, their family members, students, teachers, administrators, cops, politicians and educators. We see in Smith's portrayals, how they relate to, or worse, justify making a niche for themselves in this Stockholm syndrome-like labyrinth. Out of the concrete and steel matrix that is home to both the prison and educational systems, she extrudes a grim artifact of a tableau, animated by virtue of her exquisitely faithful rendering of each character's voice, body language, unconscious tics and moments of epiphany—a King of Hearts treatment of the insanity and chaos that shelters in place in each individual life. Still, Smith is determined that we don't fall prey to the Berkeley-esque tendency to see saviors and victims, where she is showing us dungeons and dragons. To this end, in the program notes, she cites a dressing-room exchange with the actress Eve Best, on the subject of victimhood, in which she replied to Best's query, "What ever happened to mischief?" by saying, "Privileged kids get mischief. Poor kids get pathologized." She also finds a place in the show to include Tupac Shakur's reference to the rose that grows in concrete, an echo of a James Baldwin metaphor, and we hear it again in the strains of Ben E. King's "Spanish Harlem," that plays us out as we exit the theater.

Smith conceives of Act II as a chance to convert each audience member from a passive listener into an activist with a voice. It's an inspired idea that, in its 20-minute execution, drowns in a shallow pool of upper middle class mediocrity. If Smith could curate the breakout workshops personally, with the same fastidiousness that characterizes Act I, there might be a better result. Unfortunately, like a soufflé that has risen majestically in the presence of heat, when the concept meets the cold night air in the courtyard/bar where the workshops occur, it falls flat. Workshop participants self-consciously, or in some cases, smugly, reach for demands that they know have been raised and re-raised, decade upon decade, since the 1950s. With all their learnedness, they somehow fail to grasp that unless backed up by the power of a broad-based movement in the streets, under the raised (and mailed) fist of masses in motion, such a checklist of demands crumples. The listless recitation of the list's items: more money for education, more better communication between bureaucracies and the "affected" population, more philanthropy, has less the makings of an actionable program and more the stuff of the adjective "kneejerk" as in the descriptor for the noun "liberal." There is no mention of how to build a leadership. No one invokes the names of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, or the cities of Ferguson, or Baltimore, where horrific acts of police brutality were answered with a sea of protest, raising high the slogan "Black Lives Matter!" Similarly, the glum-faced workshop members offer up no words of encouragement on which to build that reflect recent victories: the Confederate Flag's removal, the gay marriage decision two weeks earlier, and the rolling victory of state after state enacting the \$15 minimum wage. So, in the end, good idea, wrong audience.

I'd have liked to be in a "Notes from the Field" workshop with the young people from Baltimore and Ferguson, who speak so wisely about how to build a movement and the cadre to lead it. You might win even post-activism seniors in Berkeley to an action perspective that doesn't for once throw money at a problem without winning masses of people to challenge the education system to quit futzing around with statistics, standardized tests, and every fad that comes down the pike, and instead, educate our young people with the social expectation and tenacity that characterizes Cuba's, this week, called by the World Bank, "the best education system in Latin America." There is no school-to-prison pipeline there.

Whatever the weaknesses of Act II, "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education," is a rare chance to see Smith, in all the roles she brings to life with such prescience, and the information she packs together into one explosive bombshell of a teach-in, accompanied by the incomparable Bay-Area jazz musician, Marcus Shelby, in a tone poem for our times. See it, and be sure to bring a copy of Che Guevara's "Socialism and Man" to Act II.



*Notes from the Field:*  
*Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*  
Berkeley Repertory Theatre

Also see Richard's reviews of [Call Me Miss Bird's Eye: A Celebration of Ethel Merman](#) and [Company](#) and Eddie's review of [Like Is a Dream](#)

When theatre companies host "talkback" sessions, where audiences have the opportunity to discuss a show with members of the creative and/or production team, it usually happens *after* the show. In her newest work of documentary theatre, *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*, Anna Deavere Smith incorporates the talkback into the work itself. Act two takes the form of small group discussions in which audience members, working with a facilitator, spend 25 minutes or so sharing ideas on how to address the issues raised in act one. But with the challenge Smith lays out—America's broken education system and the impact of its brokenness on poor children of color—25 minutes makes about as much of a dent as a cream puff hitting an armored car.



**Anna Deavere Smith**

But one must start someplace, and the genius of Anna Deavere Smith has always been her ability to harness the points of view of many people. Over her career she has interviewed thousands of people and brought their experiences and stories to the hundreds of thousands of people who have attended her performances. (If you are unfamiliar with Ms. Smith, she is well known for interviewing people about specific subjects or events—the 1992 riots in LA, women's relationship with justice and the law, the vulnerability of the human body—and then recreating these conversations on stage, using the verbatim words of her subjects.) By adding her audience to the conversation, Smith expands her reach even further. It's theatre as crowdsourcing. In the program, Smith states she wants to "Sound an alarm" and bring strangers together to "exchange ideas, suggest solutions, and ... mobilize around what should be done."

In the first act, Smith introduces us to a wide range of humanity, including a Yurok tribe member whose violent and dissociative youth put him afoul of both teachers and the law; Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense



and Educational Fund; the man who captured the video of Freddie Grey's mistreatment by Baltimore police; and Pedro Noguera, Executive Director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education. Smith does a brilliant job of inhabiting these personalities, especially physically. It's wonderful to see her slip off a hat, put on a coat, flop down in a chair—and transform herself from a new elementary school teacher dealing with her very troubled children into a foul-mouthed male convict. There is a clock hanging above the stage that slowly moves from stage right to stage left, but upon which the time never changes. Symbolic, perhaps, of lots of talk from leaders, but no real progress on solving what Smith calls the school-to-prison pipeline.

*Notes from the Field* is, interestingly, a bit of an educational experience itself. There is much to be learned about what's going on in some of America's schools—especially if, like most of the audience at the Roda Theatre, you have the benefit of white privilege. When, for example, Baltimore schools wanted to reduce suspension rates as an indicator of progress, they offered bonuses to teachers and changed the grounds for suspension. Then there's that second act small group experience (20± people in 20 groups scattered throughout the lobby and courtyard), complete with a writing prompt and "homework" assignments.

All this is testament, though, to Smith's passion on the subject, and her commitment to inspiring real change from a bottom-up movement. She wants to enlist every member of the audience into her cause. *Mamma Mia!* or *One Man, Two Guvnors* this is not. There are a few laughs here, and some diverting moments, but mostly it's hard-nosed reality coming at you. *Notes from the Field's* impact comes from its truth±and its request that we in the audience start speaking that truth.

*Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter* runs through August 2, 2015, in the Roda Theatre at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison Street, Berkeley. Shows are Tuesdays and Fridays at 8:00 p.m., Wednesdays at 7:00 p.m., Thursdays at 8:00 p.m. Saturdays at 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. (no evening show on 7/19), and Sundays at 2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. Tickets from \$50-\$89, with discounts available for students, seniors, groups and anyone for whom cost would be a barrier. Tickets are available online at [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org), or by calling the box office at (510) 647-2949 or during box office hours: Tuesday-Sunday 12:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.



## **FEATURES**

## Anna Deavere Smith explores race, schools and the road to prison

By [Robert Hurwitt](#)

Updated 4:12 pm, Friday, July 3, 2015



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Playwright-actor Anna Deavere Smith works on her newest solo work "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education: The California Chapter" at Berkeley Repertory theater's Harrison campus in Berkeley, Calif., on Wednesday, June 24, 2015.

Playwright-actor Anna Deavere Smith works on her newest solo work "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education: The California Chapter" at Berkeley Repertory theater's Harrison campus in Berkeley, Calif., on Wednesday, June 24, 2015.

"This is one of those rare moments when people do begin to think about race relations in this country," [Anna Deavere Smith](#) says over the phone from [Berkeley Repertory Theatre](#), where she's in rehearsal for the premiere run of her latest solo piece. The new work, with the complicated but accurate title "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the [California Chapter](#)" is about the treatment of African American and other

disadvantaged youth in our schools and what's increasingly being called the school-to-prison pipeline.

"I started thinking seriously about these matters in 2010, and I started my work, my interviews in 2013," Smith says. "A lot has happened very quickly in this country during that time. ... You can't really think about inequities in education without looking at the broader canvas of racial inequity in America. And you can't think about school discipline without thinking about the ways in which the types of discipline that are of greatest concern mimic some of the practices in prisons.

"So it's a problem, and it's an opportunity. I did my first staged readings of this piece here at the Rep last July and left town and — boom! Ferguson. And just since then, because of technology, Americans have watched any number of bad interactions between authority and young African American males, and these videos have taken the country by storm and have caused a lot of people to go, 'Wait. What? Something's going on here about men of color. What is this? Wow! Whoa! No! How could that happen?'" Smith, who grew up in Baltimore and studied acting at [American Conservatory Theater](#), is a past master of turning big, complicated, controversial subjects into stirring, lucid works of theater.

### **Fiery work**

Her work includes "Fires in the Mirror," about the fiery 1991 racial conflict between blacks and Orthodox Jews in New York's Crown Heights; "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992," about the race riots after the brutal police beating of [Rodney King](#) (the video is currently being streamed by PBS); and "Let Me Down Easy," about the American health care system (all presented by Berkeley Rep).

She may be more widely recognized for her TV work, from "The West Wing" to "Nurse Jackie," which, she notes, "sadly, is concluding. We wrapped our whole seven years in December, and I believe the final episode has just aired. But, of course, some people are probably still on Season 2, so I don't want to ruin anything for them."

But it's her theater work that has earned her a MacArthur Fellowship; a National Humanities Medal; honorary degrees from Yale, Juilliard and Radcliffe; and numerous prestigious professorships — at Harvard, Stanford and, currently, [New York University's Tisch School of the Arts](#).

She's also on the board of San Francisco's [Grace Cathedral](#), where she was confirmed and has been invited to preach once again this summer.

With her ongoing "On the Road: A Search for American Character" series, she's crafted a widely influential form of reportorial theater. For each show, she conducts upward of 100 interviews, some of which become her text as she transforms herself, with preternatural precision of speech and gesture, into each person. The effect is both to create a prism of opinions on the topic and, through her performance, to reflect not only our diversity, but also on our more deeply shared humanity.

### **New direction**

With "Notes," she's taking her quest in a new direction, though the process is the same. She started with interviews — "with judges, politicians, parents, students, police officers, heads of prisons, people who are incarcerated, kids in juvenile hall, public defenders. This is the first project in the series — I think I've done 18 of these plays now — the first time I've been welcomed into a Native American community. I spent some time with the Yurok tribe, up by the Oregon border. That was a great gift."

She's narrowed the topic to "the disproportionate ways in which poor kids of color get thrown out of school, and when you're not in school, you're in trouble. And when you're in trouble in this country, a lot of these kids end up incarcerated. And to put so many young people in the criminal justice system is to rob our country of its resources and a part of our future."

But the structure is different, and not just because there will be several chapters of "Notes" — with somewhat different rosters of characters for Northern California, Baltimore, Philadelphia and an as-yet-undetermined Southern community.

"The piece is made specifically to raise awareness and cause conversation," Smith says. To that end, it's "part performance, part town hall." After Smith performs the first act, the audience is broken up into "groups of about 20 for facilitated conversations" — then returns to the theater for Smith's "coda."

### **Rich experience**

"I want to emphasize how rich this experience has been for me, every step of the way," Smith adds. "There are a whole lot of people I've fallen in love with and admire because of how hard they work with very few resources. One of the things I hope to do is to bring attention to that."

“And it’s a kind of homecoming piece for me. Partly that’s because some of it is going back to Baltimore, where I was raised. But it’s also because I come from educators: My mother, my aunt, their friends were all teachers. It’s in my blood. And because it’s the Bay Area and Berkeley Rep. I really feel this has been a breeding ground for my work.”

*Robert Hurwitt is The [San Francisco Chronicle](#)’s theater critic. E-mail: [rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com](mailto:rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: @RobertHurwitt*

### **Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California**

**Chapter:** Previews begin Saturday, July 11. Opens July 14. Through Aug. 2. \$25-\$89. Berkeley Rep’s [Roda Theatre](#), 2015 Addison St., Berkeley. (510) 647-2949. [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).

## The School-to-Prison Pipeline

In her latest show, Anna Deavere Smith distills the experiences of 170 people to interrogate why so many young people end up in the criminal justice system.

In her new solo play at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, *Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter*, [Anna Deavere Smith](#) takes on how kids—many of them poor blacks or Latinos—are being pushed out of schools into the criminal justice system through zero-tolerance policies, school-based arrests, and law enforcement stationed on campuses.

As she's done in her previous shows, such as *Fires in the Mirror* covering the 1991 riots in Crown Heights, and *Let Me Down Easy*, about health care, Smith interviewed people connected with the issue—in this case of judges, teachers, administrators, cops, students, and prisoners — recorded them on video and then recreates what they've said with every “um” and “uh” in their speech, as well as every tic and expression in their bodies.

To start *Notes From the Field*, Smith embodies Sherrilyn Ifill, the head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, who talks about how way as a society decide what to invest in.

Ifill grew up watching documentaries on civil rights with her father, and felt she'd missed being part of something important.

But there's still a lot of “heaviness and pain” in this country, she says, and now there's a moment to make a difference—with education.





Smith wants her play, which is showing through August 2, to help people tap into that moment. She says she tries to be humble about what theater can do, but her hopes for what it can accomplish are anything but modest.

She thinks theater gives us a place to come together, and to engage with others—a kind of forum as it was for the Greeks.

“The theater is all about dialogue, so it suggests we could be in dialogue,” she says. “It invites different points of view. It’s at the center of democracy. It gives us the opportunity to think and feel, and it gives us the opportunity to share ideas, which is difficult to do.”

Smith, a professor, playwright and actor known for her roles as a hospital administrator in *Nurse Jackie* as well as a national security advisor in *The West Wing*, made her name with this style of documentary theater in *Notes From the Field*.

Smith did about 170 interviews for this play, and she compares the process to having a big piece of paper up on the wall with every person she talked to adding some color and increasing her understanding.

“I don’t know how you get people marching in the streets about education. It’s sort of hard. But it’s not impossible.”

Along with *Ifill*, the show includes a Yurok fisherman talking about his time in prison and a principal in Philadelphia saying that her mother noted that everyone in the family was poor—and that none of them had been to college.

So let’s try that, she told her daughter.

Many of the interviewees gave her hope with what they’re doing on behalf of kids, Smith says.

For, example, there’s the Chief Justice of California, Tani Cantil-Sakauye, who at a recent conference for judges addressed how children are affected by trauma.

“I like how she talked about it simply,” Smith says. “If you’re not in school, you’re in trouble.”

Smith was also inspired by City Councilman [Michael Tubbs](#) in Stockton, California, a city that filed for bankruptcy protection in 2012, who Smith calls a passionate advocate for kids of color, and Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, founder of Center for Youth Wellness, who studies the effect of toxic stress on children.

Burke Harris has partnered with San Francisco’s Chief of Police, which Smith applauds.

Then there’s a neuroendocrinologist at the Rockefeller University who also looks at the effect of outside environment on the brain and ways to increase its plasticity. Smith is particularly excited to see him involved.

“There are people in the science of this now, which I would say is really great because we trust scientists—we’re not so sure about sociologists,” Smith says. “I think there are lots of people doing good stuff, lots of people. And I think that’s what makes it exciting if you look at it as a problem to solve.”

Smith, a professor at New York University, wanted to do a project on education and felt this was a good way in. Lots of other aspects of American life interest her, she says—the military, guns, and war among them.

“Susan Sontag told me I should do a play on war way back in the ‘90s, and I thought that was kind of a scary idea,” she says. “I haven’t really dealt with money. It’s implied in everything I do because what I do is about social justice by and large. So a lot of American culture is untapped for me.”

Smith did her interviews for *Notes from the Field* in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she got her MFA in acting from the American Conservatory Theater, in Philadelphia, and in her hometown of Baltimore where her mother—and her mother's friends were all teachers.

She went to Baltimore in May, soon after a police officer shot unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, so the issue of racial inequality in schools as well as in society at large was foremost on people's mind.

Smith started this project thinking education could be the next civil rights movement. Now she's not as sure.

*Notes From the Field* includes some video of [Freddie Gray's arrest](#), for which Baltimore police officers were charged with homicide.

She also interviewed the man who videotaped it, a deli worker, who still seems baffled by the brutality with which Gray was treated.

He says he was convinced people needed to see it and took it to all the news outlets he could think of. Smith also includes videos of the protests in Baltimore, and an interview with a protestor who got arrested who talks about how the police feel they can treat him and his friends any way they want.

"I think with Ferguson and technology (she means the impact of video technology) and the number of short, sad films we have about police officers and communities and the things they do to citizens, I would say right now people are thinking more about that," she says. "That's what makes people march in the streets. I don't know how you get people marching in the streets about education. It's sort of hard. But it's not impossible."

For the second act of *Notes from the Field*, the audience splits into smaller groups and Youth Speaks, an arts education program, facilitate discussions with audience members on how to create change in the schools and for children.

Coming back after the second act, Smith embodies a Latino artist she talked with for her play about racial unrest after the Rodney King verdict, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.

The painter talks about how white teachers always treated him badly growing up in Southern California, and how he doesn't want to hate anymore.

She also impersonates writer James Baldwin in a 1970 interview with anthropologist Margaret Mead. Baldwin quotes a poem by an incarcerated youth: "Walk on water. Walk on a leaf. Hardest of all is walking grief."

Smith thinks the theater is a natural place for activism to find a voice. Look at how directly the arts and popular culture were involved in movements of the '60s and '70s, such as civil rights and the anti-war movement, she says.

"Aretha Franklin singing a song like [Think](#)—'Think about what you're trying to do to me'—it's not just about a love affair," she says.

Or as Bonnie Raitt told her during an interview once: "The blues and a lot of this music is basically saying, 'Don't treat me this way. Don't do me like this.' It's speaking to the social problems of the time. It's speaking to the need for justice. I think that expression is always a part of human transformation."

## Chatting With Anna Deavere Smith

By [Lou Fancher](#) Wednesday, Jul 8 2015

### [Comments](#)



• *MARY ELLEN MARK*

- Anna Deavere Smith

Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter July 11 - Aug. 2, at Berkeley Rep, 2025 Addison St., Berkeley; \$50 - \$89; 510-647-2949 or [berkeleyrep.org](http://berkeleyrep.org).

Playwright, actor, and educator Anna Deavere Smith isn't volunteering to be a modern day Atlas. After hoisting the world of America's school-to-prison pipeline onto her shoulders during a two-and-a-half-year play development, Smith cleaves the unwieldy orb into two halves like a piece of oversized fruit.

*Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education — The California Chapter* is the two-act, one-performer, me-then-you production coming to Berkeley Rep on July 11. Act 1 has the award-winning actor embodying a cast of characters drawn from over 150 interviews Smith conducted to illustrate how the criminal justice system disproportionately thrusts African-American, Latino, and Native American youth straight out of middle and high school classrooms and into juvenile detention centers and prisons. After Smith strides through approximately 60 minutes of portrayals, from elegant to ugly to anguishing, Act 2

"Students rich and poor are living in fear today. At NYU, we see it in the suicide rate," says Smith. "Poor kids are more vulnerable because they have less of a support network at home. It's a miracle for some of these kids to make it through school."

Of course, messing with the tropes of the theatrical experience could backfire. Interactivity is a tricky business, especially in a new work, but fans of Smith say fearlessness is her strong suit.

"Anna isn't afraid of taking a huge risk that this may not work," Medak says. "Or maybe it's more honest to say that she finds it very frightening (as do I), but that doesn't keep her from trying it."

Indeed, Medak initially advised that the piece be postponed so the Rep could have more time to frame the play and fine-tune the experience. But Smith maintained that now was the time. And she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"She seems to have an innate capacity to know what is in the zeitgeist. She understands the urgency of an issue," Medak says. "The other thing about Anna is that she is restless. She is always pushing."

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

#### 'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

When: Saturday through Aug.2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949,

[www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

# Why Anna Deavere Smith matters

*By Karen D'Souza*

[kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/06/2015 12:00:00 PM PDT [0 COMMENTS](#) UPDATED: 21 DAYS AGO

Anna Deavere Smith returned to her hometown of Baltimore in the wake of the riots and found herself shaken by the devastation.

A master monologist who has dedicated her life and work to exploring the fault lines of race and class and politics in American life, she channeled her feelings of grief into her latest solo show "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter," which runs Saturday through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Turning headlines into art has long been her stock in trade.

"It was very powerful for me to see the city where I grew up become an archaeological site," says the always eloquent Smith. "There are blocks and blocks and blocks of broken down buildings in ruins. That was very moving for me. It was hard to see."



Actress Anna Deavere Smith is photographed at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre studio in Berkeley, Calif., on Wednesday, June 24, 2015. Smith created, wrote and is performing in "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter," a one-woman show running from July 11 to Aug. 2 at Berkeley Rep. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group) ( JANE TYSKA )

## THEATER GAME CHANGER

Smith, who may be best-known for her role as the formidable hospital administrator Gloria Akalitus on Showtime's hit "Nurse Jackie" and her spin through "The West Wing," is a pioneer of documentary theater. Her painstaking methodology involves interviewing

countless people and then bringing those characters to life onstage with unerring accuracy, taking pains to re-create every sigh and every shrug.

"Ms. Smith is so meticulous in her attention to the details of voice, language and physical bearing that give people definition -- the sentences that trail off, the hiccups of syntax, the heavy or elegant tread -- that the ample use of costumes, props and sets is probably superfluous," as the New York Times put it. "You are always aware of Ms. Smith as a commanding stage presence -- she is an expert herself on the use of the body as an aesthetic precision tool -- but the personas of her subjects come through with a shining clarity, as easily as light moves through glass."

Make no mistake, Smith is no snob. She's a highly intellectual actor and writer, and she relishes the stimulation of university life (she is doing a residency at Stanford in the fall and will be performing there as part of the Stanford Live series), but she's also a sucker for good television. And she admits that she will miss the "Nurse Jackie" crew terribly now that the Showtime comedy about a troubled nurse (played by Edie Falco) has wrapped.

"I loved working on 'Nurse Jackie,' " she says. "It was a privilege for me, and I was very sad to see it end."

Her most lasting legacy remains in the theater, where her groundbreaking and precise blend of journalism and art has inspired performers from Sarah Jones to Echo Brown.

"She's extraordinary!" says director Amy Glazer. "She is masterful at capturing the essence of a particular character -- of transforming herself so totally into whatever gender, race or ethnicity she chooses to capture. She's also so specific in finding the precise behavior that reveals a particular character, and through character comes destiny."

From "Fires in the Mirror," an ode to the Crown Heights riots, to "Let Me Down Easy," an examination of health care in America, Smith has sought to make the stage a town hall where we might debate the issues of the day.

"Forgive me if this sounds grandiose, but I see theater as a gathering place, a place to come together and look at civic matters," says the 64-year-old Pulitzer nominee, who studied at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater. "I am always trying to be part of the broader conversation. If we say that art can make social change, how do we pull people into it? This is the moment to look at ourselves in the mirror."

Now she's taking that stance to the next level by framing "Notes," which traces the unsettling pipeline between California's schools and its prisons. (She also has versions of the play tailored to other regions.) After her performances onstage, the audience will be broken into discussion groups to engage the issues head-on. She will tackle the issue, along with race relations, during her residency at Stanford in October.

"The police are in the streets; the police are in the schools," says Smith. "We need to take a hard look at criminal justice in this country. We need to look at the rates of mass incarceration. Have we decided that some of the people in our country are disposable?"

## **CALL FOR ACTION**

Framing the discussion isn't enough for Smith -- she also wants to goose people into actually doing something. In each of her works, the point is to get past the bitterness and regret that shrouds a tragedy so that lasting change can be made.

"The challenge is how to move people from outrage to action," notes Susie Medak, managing director of Berkeley Rep, where Smith has held court many times over the years.

Smith, who has taught everywhere from Stanford to New York University, says the crisis in education is not limited to low-income schools -- it's just that the stress and strain is more keenly felt there.

"Students rich and poor are living in fear today. At NYU, we see it in the suicide rate," says Smith. "Poor kids are more vulnerable because they have less of a support network at home. It's a miracle for some of these kids to make it through school."

Of course, messing with the tropes of the theatrical experience could backfire. Interactivity is a tricky business, especially in a new work, but fans of Smith say fearlessness is her strong suit.

"Anna isn't afraid of taking a huge risk that this may not work," Medak says. "Or maybe it's more honest to say that she finds it very frightening (as do I), but that doesn't keep her from trying it."

Indeed, Medak initially advised that the piece be postponed so the Rep could have more time to frame the play and fine-tune the experience. But Smith maintained that now was the time. And she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"She seems to have an innate capacity to know what is in the zeitgeist. She understands the urgency of an issue," Medak says. "The other thing about Anna is that she is restless. She is always pushing."

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

## **'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'**

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith



When: Saturday through Aug. 2 Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949,

[www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)



## Why Anna Deavere Smith matters

*By Karen D'Souza*

[kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/06/2015 12:00:00 PM PDT [0 COMMENTS](#) UPDATED: 22 DAYS AGO

Anna Deavere Smith returned to her hometown of Baltimore in the wake of the riots and found herself shaken by the devastation.

A master monologist who has dedicated her life and work to exploring the fault lines of race and class and politics in American life, she channeled her feelings of grief into her latest solo show "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter," which runs Saturday through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Turning headlines into art has long been her stock in trade.

"It was very powerful for me to see the city where I grew up become an archaeological site," says the always eloquent Smith. "There are blocks and blocks and blocks of broken down buildings in ruins. That was very moving for me. It was hard to see."



Actress Anna Deavere Smith is photographed at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre studio in Berkeley, Calif., on Wednesday, June 24, 2015. Smith created, wrote and is performing in "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in

Education, The California Chapter," a one-woman show running from July 11 to Aug. 2 at Berkeley Rep. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group) ( JANE TYSKA )

## THEATER GAME CHANGER

Smith, who may be best-known for her role as the formidable hospital administrator Gloria Akalitus on Showtime's hit "Nurse Jackie" and her spin through "The West Wing," is a pioneer of documentary theater. Her painstaking methodology involves interviewing countless people and then bringing those characters to life onstage with unerring accuracy, taking pains to re-create every sigh and every shrug.

Advertisement

"Ms. Smith is so meticulous in her attention to the details of voice, language and physical bearing that give people definition -- the sentences that trail off, the hiccups of syntax, the heavy or elegant tread -- that the ample use of costumes, props and sets is probably superfluous," as the New York Times put it. "You are always aware of Ms. Smith as a commanding stage presence -- she is an expert herself on the use of the body as an aesthetic precision tool -- but the personas of her subjects come through with a shining clarity, as easily as light moves through glass."

Make no mistake, Smith is no snob. She's a highly intellectual actor and writer, and she relishes the stimulation of university life (she is doing a residency at Stanford in the fall and will be performing there as part of the Stanford Live series), but she's also a sucker for good television. And she admits that she will miss the "Nurse Jackie" crew terribly now that the Showtime comedy about a troubled nurse (played by Edie Falco) has wrapped.

"I loved working on 'Nurse Jackie,' " she says. "It was a privilege for me, and I was very sad to see it end."

Her most lasting legacy remains in the theater, where her groundbreaking and precise blend of journalism and art has inspired performers from Sarah Jones to Echo Brown.

"She's extraordinary!" says director Amy Glazer. "She is masterful at capturing the essence of a particular character -- of transforming herself so totally into whatever gender, race or ethnicity she chooses to capture. She's also so specific in finding the precise behavior that reveals a particular character, and through character comes destiny."

From "Fires in the Mirror," an ode to the Crown Heights riots, to "Let Me Down Easy," an examination of health care in America, Smith has sought to make the stage a town hall where we might debate the issues of the day.

"Forgive me if this sounds grandiose, but I see theater as a gathering place, a place to come together and look at civic matters," says the 64-year-old Pulitzer nominee, who studied at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater. "I am always trying to be part of the broader conversation. If we say that art can make social change, how do we pull people into it? This is the moment to look at ourselves in the mirror."

Now she's taking that stance to the next level by framing "Notes," which traces the unsettling pipeline between California's schools and its prisons. (She also has versions of the play tailored to other regions.) After her performances onstage, the audience will be broken into discussion groups to engage the issues head-on. She will tackle the issue, along with race relations, during her residency at Stanford in October.

"The police are in the streets; the police are in the schools," says Smith. "We need to take a hard look at criminal justice in this country. We need to look at the rates of mass incarceration. Have we decided that some of the people in our country are disposable?"

## **CALL FOR ACTION**

Framing the discussion isn't enough for Smith -- she also wants to goose people into actually doing something. In each of her works, the point is to get past the bitterness and regret that shrouds a tragedy so that lasting change can be made.

"The challenge is how to move people from outrage to action," notes Susie Medak, managing director of Berkeley Rep, where Smith has held court many times over the years.

Smith, who has taught everywhere from Stanford to New York University, says the crisis in education is not limited to low-income schools -- it's just that the stress and strain is more keenly felt there.

"Students rich and poor are living in fear today. At NYU, we see it in the suicide rate," says Smith. "Poor kids are more vulnerable because they have less of a support network at home. It's a miracle for some of these kids to make it through school."

Of course, messing with the tropes of the theatrical experience could backfire. Interactivity is a tricky business, especially in a new work, but fans of Smith say fearlessness is her strong suit.

"Anna isn't afraid of taking a huge risk that this may not work," Medak says. "Or maybe it's more honest to say that she finds it very frightening (as do I), but that doesn't keep her from trying it."

Indeed, Medak initially advised that the piece be postponed so the Rep could have more time to frame the play and fine-tune the experience. But Smith maintained that now was the time. And she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"She seems to have an innate capacity to know what is in the zeitgeist. She understands the urgency of an issue," Medak says. "The other thing about Anna is that she is restless. She is always pushing."

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

'NOTES FROM THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

When: Saturday through Aug. 2 Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949,

[www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)



## Why Anna Deavere Smith matters

By Karen D'Souza

Anna Deavere Smith returned to her hometown of Baltimore in the wake of the riots and found herself shaken by the devastation.

A master monologist who has dedicated her life and work to exploring the fault lines of race and class and politics in American life, she channeled her feelings of grief into her latest solo show "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter," which runs Saturday through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Turning headlines into art has long been her stock in trade.

"It was very powerful for me to see the city where I grew up become an archaeological site," says the always eloquent Smith. "There are blocks and blocks and blocks of broken down buildings in ruins. That was very moving for me. It was hard to see."



Actress Anna Deavere Smith is photographed at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre studio in Berkeley, Calif., on Wednesday, June 24, 2015. Smith created, wrote and is performing in "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter," a one-woman show running from July 11 to Aug. 2 at Berkeley Rep. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group) ( JANE TYSKA )

### Theater game changer

Smith, who may be best-known for her role as the formidable hospital administrator Gloria Akalitus on Showtime's hit "Nurse Jackie" and her spin through "The West Wing," is a pioneer of documentary theater. Her painstaking methodology involves interviewing countless people and then bringing those characters to life onstage with unerring accuracy, taking pains to re-create every sigh and every shrug.

---

"Ms. Smith is so meticulous in her attention to the details of voice, language and physical bearing that give people definition -- the sentences that trail off, the hiccups of syntax, the heavy or elegant tread -- that the ample use of costumes, props and sets is probably superfluous," as the New York Times put it. "You are always aware of Ms. Smith as a commanding stage presence -- she is an expert herself on the use of the body as an aesthetic precision tool -- but the personas of her subjects come through with a shining clarity, as easily as light moves through glass."

Make no mistake, Smith is no snob. She's a highly intellectual actor and writer, and she relishes the stimulation of university life (she is doing a residency at Stanford in the fall and will be performing there as part of the Stanford Live series), but she's also a sucker for good television. And she admits that she will miss the "Nurse Jackie" crew terribly now that the Showtime comedy about a troubled nurse (played by Edie Falco) has wrapped.

"I loved working on 'Nurse Jackie,' " she says. "It was a privilege for me, and I was very sad to see it end."

Her most lasting legacy remains in the theater, where her groundbreaking and precise blend of journalism and art has inspired performers from Sarah Jones to Echo Brown.

"She's extraordinary!" says director Amy Glazer. "She is masterful at capturing the essence of a particular character -- of transforming herself so totally into whatever gender, race or ethnicity she chooses to capture. She's also so specific in finding the precise behavior that reveals a particular character, and through character comes destiny."

From "Fires in the Mirror," an ode to the Crown Heights riots, to "Let Me Down Easy," an examination of health care in America, Smith has sought to make the stage a town hall where we might debate the issues of the day.

"Forgive me if this sounds grandiose, but I see theater as a gathering place, a place to come together and look at civic matters," says the 64-year-old Pulitzer nominee, who studied at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater. "I am always trying to be part of the broader conversation. If we say that art can make social change, how do we pull people into it? This is the moment to look at ourselves in the mirror."

Now she's taking that stance to the next level by framing "Notes," which traces the unsettling pipeline between California's schools and its prisons. (She also has versions of the play tailored to other regions.) After her performances onstage, the audience will be broken into discussion groups to engage the issues head-on. She will tackle the issue, along with race relations, during her residency at Stanford in October.

"The police are in the streets; the police are in the schools," says Smith. "We need to take a hard look at criminal justice in this country. We need to look at the rates of mass incarceration. Have we decided that some of the people in our country are disposable?"

### **Call for action**

Framing the discussion isn't enough for Smith -- she also wants to goose people into actually doing something. In each of her works, the point is to get past the bitterness and regret that shrouds a tragedy so that lasting change can be made.

"The challenge is how to move people from outrage to action," notes Susie Medak, managing director of Berkeley Rep, where Smith has held court many times over the years.

Smith, who has taught everywhere from Stanford to New York University, says the crisis in education is not limited to low-income schools -- it's just that the stress and strain is more keenly felt there.

"Students rich and poor are living in fear today. At NYU, we see it in the suicide rate," says Smith. "Poor kids are more vulnerable because they have less of a support network at home. It's a miracle for some of these kids to make it through school."

Of course, messing with the tropes of the theatrical experience could backfire. Interactivity is a tricky business, especially in a new work, but fans of Smith say fearlessness is her strong suit.



"Anna isn't afraid of taking a huge risk that this may not work," Medak says. "Or maybe it's more honest to say that she finds it very frightening (as do I), but that doesn't keep her from trying it."

Indeed, Medak initially advised that the piece be postponed so the Rep could have more time to frame the play and fine-tune the experience. But Smith maintained that now was the time. And she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"She seems to have an innate capacity to know what is in the zeitgeist. She understands the urgency of an issue," Medak says. "The other thing about Anna is that she is restless. She is always pushing."

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

**'NOTES FROM  
THE FIELD'**

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

When: Saturday through Aug. 2  
Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.  
Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949,  
[www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

# Why Anna Deavere Smith matters

*By Karen D'Souza*

[kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/06/2015 12:00:00 PM PDT

Anna Deavere Smith returned to her hometown of Baltimore in the wake of the riots and found herself shaken by the devastation.

A master monologist who has dedicated her life and work to exploring the fault lines of race and class and politics in American life, she channeled her feelings of grief into her latest solo show "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter," which runs Saturday through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Turning headlines into art has long been her stock in trade.

"It was very powerful for me to see the city where I grew up become an archaeological site," says the always eloquent Smith. "There are blocks and blocks and blocks of broken down buildings in ruins. That was very moving for me. It was hard to see."



Actress Anna Deavere Smith is photographed at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre studio in Berkeley, Calif., on Wednesday, June 24, 2015. Smith created, wrote and is performing in "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education,

The California Chapter," a one-woman show running from July 11 to Aug. 2 at Berkeley Rep. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group) ( JANE TYSKA )

## Theater game changer

Smith, who may be best-known for her role as the formidable hospital administrator Gloria Akalitus on Showtime's hit "Nurse Jackie" and her spin through "The West Wing," is a pioneer of documentary theater. Her painstaking methodology involves interviewing countless people and then bringing those characters to life onstage with unerring accuracy, taking pains to re-create every sigh and every shrug.

Advertisement

"Ms. Smith is so meticulous in her attention to the details of voice, language and physical bearing that give people definition -- the sentences that trail off, the hiccups of syntax, the heavy or elegant tread -- that the ample use of costumes, props and sets is probably superfluous," as the New York Times put it. "You are always aware of Ms. Smith as a commanding stage presence -- she is an expert herself on the use of the body as an aesthetic precision tool -- but the personas of her subjects come through with a shining clarity, as easily as light moves through glass."

Make no mistake, Smith is no snob. She's a highly intellectual actor and writer, and she relishes the stimulation of university life (she is doing a residency at Stanford in the fall and will be performing there as part of the Stanford Live series), but she's also a sucker for good television. And she admits that she will miss the "Nurse Jackie" crew terribly now that the Showtime comedy about a troubled nurse (played by Edie Falco) has wrapped.

"I loved working on 'Nurse Jackie,' " she says. "It was a privilege for me, and I was very sad to see it end."

Her most lasting legacy remains in the theater, where her groundbreaking and precise blend of journalism and art has inspired performers from Sarah Jones to Echo Brown.

"She's extraordinary!" says director Amy Glazer. "She is masterful at capturing the essence of a particular character -- of transforming herself so totally into whatever gender, race or ethnicity she chooses to capture. She's also so specific in finding the precise behavior that reveals a particular character, and through character comes destiny."

From "Fires in the Mirror," an ode to the Crown Heights riots, to "Let Me Down Easy," an examination of health care in America, Smith has sought to make the stage a town hall where we might debate the issues of the day.

"Forgive me if this sounds grandiose, but I see theater as a gathering place, a place to come together and look at civic matters," says the 64-year-old Pulitzer nominee, who studied at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater. "I am always trying to be part of the broader conversation. If we say that art can make social change, how do we pull people into it? This is the moment to look at ourselves in the mirror."

Now she's taking that stance to the next level by framing "Notes," which traces the unsettling pipeline between California's schools and its prisons. (She also has versions of the play tailored to other regions.) After her performances onstage, the audience will be broken into discussion groups to engage the issues head-on. She will tackle the issue, along with race relations, during her residency at Stanford in October.

"The police are in the streets; the police are in the schools," says Smith. "We need to take a hard look at criminal justice in this country. We need to look at the rates of mass incarceration. Have we decided that some of the people in our country are disposable?"

#### Call for action

Framing the discussion isn't enough for Smith -- she also wants to goose people into actually doing something. In each of her works, the point is to get past the bitterness and regret that shrouds a tragedy so that lasting change can be made.

"The challenge is how to move people from outrage to action," notes Susie Medak, managing director of Berkeley Rep, where Smith has held court many times over the years.

Smith, who has taught everywhere from Stanford to New York University, says the crisis in education is not limited to low-income schools -- it's just that the stress and strain is more keenly felt there.

"Students rich and poor are living in fear today. At NYU, we see it in the suicide rate," says Smith. "Poor kids are more vulnerable because they have less of a support network at home. It's a miracle for some of these kids to make it through school."

Of course, messing with the tropes of the theatrical experience could backfire. Interactivity is a tricky business, especially in a new work, but fans of Smith say fearlessness is her strong suit.

"Anna isn't afraid of taking a huge risk that this may not work," Medak says. "Or maybe it's more honest to say that she finds it very frightening (as do I), but that doesn't keep her from trying it."

Indeed, Medak initially advised that the piece be postponed so the Rep could have more time to frame the play and fine-tune the experience. But Smith maintained that now was the time. And she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"She seems to have an innate capacity to know what is in the zeitgeist. She understands the urgency of an issue," Medak says. "The other thing about Anna is that she is restless. She is always pushing."

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Read her at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza), and follow her at [Twitter.com/karendsouza4](https://twitter.com/karendsouza4).

'NOTES FROM  
THE FIELD'

Written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith

When: Saturday through Aug. 2

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2015 Addison St.

Tickets: \$50-\$89; 510-647-2949,

[www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

# Why Anna Deavere Smith matters

By Karen D'Souza [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com)

POSTED: 07/06/15, 12:00 PM PDT | UPDATED: 3 WEEKS, 3 DAYS AGO

[# COMMENTS](#)

Anna Deavere Smith returned to her hometown of Baltimore in the wake of the riots and found herself shaken by the devastation.

A master monologist who has dedicated her life and work to exploring the fault lines of race and class and politics in American life, she channeled her feelings of grief into her latest solo show "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter," which runs Saturday through Aug. 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Turning headlines into art has long been her stock in trade.

"It was very powerful for me to see the city where I grew up become an archaeological site," says the always eloquent Smith. "There are blocks and blocks and blocks of broken down buildings in ruins. That was very moving for me. It was hard to see."

Theater game changer

Advertisement

Smith, who may be best-known for her role as the formidable hospital administrator Gloria Akalitus on Showtime's hit "Nurse Jackie," and her spin through "The West Wing," is a pioneer of documentary theater. Her painstaking methodology involves interviewing countless people and then bringing those characters to life onstage with unerring accuracy, taking pains to re-create every sigh and every shrug.

"Ms. Smith is so meticulous in her attention to the details of voice, language and physical bearing that give people definition -- the sentences that trail off, the hiccups of syntax, the heavy or elegant tread -- that the ample use of costumes, props and sets is probably superfluous," as The New York Times put it. "You are always aware of Ms. Smith as a commanding stage presence -- she is an expert herself on the use of the body as an aesthetic precision tool -- but the personas of her subjects come through with a shining clarity, as easily as light moves through glass."

Make no mistake, Smith is no snob. She's a highly intellectual actor and writer, and she relishes the stimulation of university life (she is doing a residency at Stanford in the fall and will be performing there as part of the Stanford Live series), but she's also a sucker

for good television. And she admits that she will miss the "Nurse Jackie" crew terribly now that the Showtime comedy about a troubled nurse (played by Edie Falco) has wrapped.

"I loved working on 'Nurse Jackie,' " she says. "It was a privilege for me, and I was very sad to see it end."

Her most lasting legacy remains in the theater, where her groundbreaking and precise blend of journalism and art has inspired performers from Sarah Jones to Echo Brown.

"She's extraordinary!" says director Amy Glazer. "She is masterful at capturing the essence of a particular character -- of transforming herself so totally into whatever gender, race or ethnicity she chooses to capture. She's also so specific in finding the precise behavior that reveals a particular character, and through character comes destiny."

From "Fires in the Mirror," an ode to the Crown Heights riots, to "Let Me Down Easy," an examination of health care in America, Smith has sought to make the stage a town hall where we might debate the issues of the day.

"Forgive me if this sounds grandiose, but I see theater as a gathering place, a place to come together and look at civic matters," says the 64-year-old Pulitzer nominee, who studied at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater. "I am always trying to be part of the broader conversation. If we say that art can make social change, how do we pull people into it? This is the moment to look at ourselves in the mirror."

Now she's taking that stance to the next level by framing "Notes," which traces the unsettling pipeline between California schools and its prisons. (She also has versions of the play tailored to other regions.) After her performances onstage, the audience will be broken into discussion groups to engage the issues head-on. She will tackle the issue, along with race relations, during her residency at Stanford in October.

"The police are in the streets; the police are in the schools," says Smith. "We need to take a hard look at criminal justice in this country. We need to look at the rates of mass incarceration. Have we decided that some of the people in our country are disposable?"

### Call for action

Framing the discussion isn't enough for Smith -- she also wants to goose people into actually doing something. In each of her works, the point is to get past the bitterness and regret that shrouds a tragedy so that lasting change can be made.

"The challenge is how to move people from outrage to action," notes Susie Medak, managing director of Berkeley Rep, where Smith has held court many times over the years.

Smith, who has taught everywhere from Stanford to New York University, says the crisis in education is not limited to low-income schools -- it's just that the stress and strain is more keenly felt there.



places the audience center stage — and spread in small groups all over the theater in the hope that discussions will continue long after the curtain falls.

Smith is the recipient of a MacArthur Award, the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, two Tony nominations and two Obies, among other honors. This isn't the first time she's used her uncanny ability to inhabit multiple characters within a documentary-style theater piece to provoke audience engagement. Her *Twilight: Los Angeles* (1992) addressed racial tensions after the Rodney King verdict, and *Let Me Down Easy* (2009), explored the frailty of the human body and the American health care system.

Although *Notes* began with interviews and town halls concentrated on the over-incarceration of black and brown kids, Smith says the play's lens widened during the last year.

"A lot has happened that tells us we can't just think about schools. We have to think about the larger canvas," she says. "All of my works require that large canvas. I'm trying to understand the problem from multiple perspectives."

Having spoken with students, teachers, parents, psychologists, school administrators, community activists, members of law enforcement, and leaders in the juvenile justice movement, Smith mentions the undeniable impact of black men killed in recent years by white men or white police officers: Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and, sadly, others. "I'm hoping this version of the play is a call to action. We're moving into an important election year. I hope people will think differently as they head to the ballot box," she says.

Last year, at town halls in Baltimore and Philadelphia, plus Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the Rep's Osher Studio, audiences participated in small group discussions after the staged reading, giving people an opportunity to share their thoughts publicly.

"For the staged production, we've really thought about how we can cause substantive conversations instead of people just standing up and pontificating," Smith says.

Working with director Leah C. Gardiner, Smith says the first act has gained relevancy. "I work with her because she's talented. She's younger — she comes to it with a different experience than people my own age. She studied [my earlier works] in school. My peers watched from a parallel perspective."

Gardiner is also the parent of a 9-year-old black son for whom these matters are especially pertinent, Smith adds. "Every story requires different kinds of intelligence to understand it. It all comes together in this play in a brief amount of time."

A "playbill" designed by project manager Sarah McArthur as more than the standard who's who will serve as a kind of audience tool kit. Touch-points for second act conversations, lists of local organizations involved with juvenile justice, and requests for post-show ideas to be sent to a project website offer audiences extended participation.

"In the intermission, the audience has no voice," Smith says. "But in the randomly put together groups that make the second act, two molecules can collide and create relationships. People may come away with an email or an address and follow up."

Smith says people have witnessed what's happening in the world and are poised to talk about the subject: "Audiences are more focused on young black males than they've been in a long while. Everything from Ferguson to now, audiences see what happened. They see Jon Stewart put jokes aside, they hear Obama's speech after what happened in South Carolina. The audience coming to this show is shifting already. Their filter is the most interesting to me. They're more connected to what's going on. People ask me what the takeaway is. There's not a takeaway, it's a mix of what they bring and what I give."

Bay Area bassist and bandleader Marcus Shelby has been a part of the project from its inception. At last year's town halls, Shelby and saxophonist Andrés Soto appeared with Smith. For the stage production, Shelby alone will join Smith as a sonic counterpoint, partner, elaborator — a kind of co-captain whose music Smith says heightens the drama or stitches together the patchwork of characters she portrays.

Smith says Shelby has been inspirational.

"Being a one-person show for so long, it's good to have another artist on stage with me," she says. "Music is in the language of the people I interviewed."

"It's all original music," Shelby says. "Working with Anna has pushed me musically, but the subject material is something I understand."

Smith and Shelby agree that the problems facing America's racially and economically divided society aren't solvable through a simple application of art. Nevertheless, they insist the need for *Notes* — for frank conversations — is undeniable.

"I'm humble about what art can do," Smith says. "We can convene people. We can raise awareness. Can we change the world? No. Listen, I'm not going to teach kindergarten or go do art in a penitentiary, I do what I do best. But I hope it will cause people who do work in those environments to do good work."



# Actress Anna Devere Smith Gives a Crash Course in the School-to-Prison Pipeline

*Her latest show explores how poor minority kids are being pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system.*

By [Emily Wilson](#) / [Truthdig](#)

July 22, 2015

•

[Print](#)

1 COMMENT

In her latest solo show, “Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter” at the [Berkeley Repertory Theatre](#) through Aug. 2, Anna Devere Smith looks at the “school-to-prison pipeline.” The term refers to how kids—mostly poor and nonwhite—are being pushed out of school into the criminal justice system through such means as expulsions or suspensions for minor infractions, more police presence in schools, and school-based arrests.

Smith starred as a hospital administrator in television’s “Nurse Jackie” and appeared on “The West Wing” as a security adviser. She’s also been in more than a dozen movies, including “Philadelphia” and “Rachel Getting Married,” but what she’s best known for is creating the sort of documentary theater on display in “Notes From the Field”—in which she interviews subjects associated with some issue or event, videotapes them, and then transforms herself onstage, re-creating their speech patterns and expressions.

Smith conducted her interviews for her new show in the San Francisco Bay Area (where she got her MFA from American Conservatory Theater), Philadelphia and Baltimore, her hometown. She was in Baltimore soon after

unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Mo., by white police Officer Darren Wilson. She includes a Baltimore protester in her show, as well as the videographer who filmed the arrest of Freddie Gray, who died in custody in Baltimore. Six Baltimore police were charged in connection with Gray's death.

Smith, a professor at New York University, wanted to do a piece on education and thought that looking at the prioritization of incarceration over education would be a way into that topic. She talked with judges, teachers, students, principals and people who have been locked up to find out all she could about why marginalized minors are ending up in jail. For the second act, the audience splits into smaller groups and facilitators from **Youth Speaks**, an arts organization, lead a discussion. Jazz composer Marcus Shelby joins her onstage, playing bass.

Smith sat down with Truthdig before her show opened to talk about people being more comfortable with science than sociology, how expression is vital to transformation, and what it takes to create a movement.

**What did people say in the interviews you hadn't thought of before?  
What was particularly interesting to you?**

People I talked to over time—and I think I've done about 170 interviews now—if you think of a piece of music like a fugue or a jazz piece and everybody is adding something. Or it's almost like I put a big piece of paper up, and everyone is adding a different color. Everyone that I talked to increased my understanding of what this [is about]. The chief justice of California, Tani Cantil-Sakauye, I just loved the way she talked about it very simply—if you're not in school, you're in trouble.

**What did people say about what could or should be done?**

There are a lot of people doing things. I would say one very efficient way to think about it is what we've done as a country is put a lot of resources on the back end, right? So what happens to people in prison? There's a lot of therapy. Now colleges are going to prison [to offer courses]. The question is what if we just shifted the whole economics of this and put resources on the front end? The question is what do people need to get through?

The irony is it's not just about poor kids. I teach kids with a lot of advantages. My friends have kids in really fine schools. I don't know anybody who doesn't feel they have to do a lot of buffering and a lot of work to make sure their kids get through, whatever that "through" means. If you're raising a black boy in any social class, you're probably concerned about what happens to him. If you have a kid in private schools, you're concerned about getting placed in college and which college. We're in an extremely competitive environment where I don't think anyone takes his or her success for granted anymore.

### **Was anyone doing something to try and have more resources for kids in schools?**

That's policy, right? That's what the play is trying to push towards ... an awareness that these are policy changes that have to happen that have to do with where the money is getting spent. But people are doing things to demonstrate to us how money and time and research could [be] well spent. Nadine Burke Harris, who's right here in San Francisco, she writes about toxic stress and differentiates between that and ADHD. She's looking very carefully at the lives of kids in this poor community. And guess who she's collaborating with? Of all people, the chief of police in [the] city of San Francisco! So there you see a collaboration, which recognizes things around kids' lives which present obstacles.

On the other end of the spectrum, there's a neuroendocrinologist at Rockefeller University—which I think has more Nobel prizes than any other place per capita—about the brain. There are people in the science of this now, which I would say is really great because we trust scientists—we're not so sure about sociologists. I would say science is there. And then you have people like a very promising councilman in Stockton, [Calif.], Michael Tubbs, who's a great, charismatic spokesman on behalf of kids of color. I think there are lots of people doing good stuff, lots of people. And I think that's what makes it exciting if you look at it as a problem to solve. How do you get penicillin or a lot of other things?

### **What do you think theater achieves?**

I try to be modest and humble about what theater can achieve or any of the arts can achieve. For me what the theater does, there's many great works of art we would assign to social change and the era I came up in, the '60s and

'70s, what would that movement, the civil rights movement and anti-war movement be without popular culture? Aretha Franklin singing a song like "Think": "Think about what you're trying to do to me." It's not just about a love affair. Or Bonnie Raitt, one time when I was interviewing her, put it best: The blues and a lot of this music is basically saying, "Don't treat me this way. Don't do me like this." Again, it's not just about a lover. It's speaking to the social problems of the time. It's speaking to the need for justice. I think that expression is always a part of human transformation.

So the theater brings two things: one, it's a live convening place, and two, it's in language. In some ways, I feel that cripples me in the theater. My friends who are musicians and visual artists can travel all over the world with their work, and I can only do my work in English. But on the other hand, because it is in language, it's less abstract. So we can exchange ideas, and the theater is all about dialogue, so it suggests we could be in dialogue. It invites different points of view. It's a kind of forum. With the Greeks it was. It's at the center of democracy. It gives us the opportunity to think and feel, and it gives us the opportunity to share ideas, which is difficult to do. We don't have that many convening places where we're together with strangers.

### **The audience is breaking into discussion groups moderated by Youth Speaks. What made you want to do that?**

I experimented with this stuff in the '90s. I had an institute at Harvard called the Institute on Arts and Civic Dialogues. I produced work by people on social change. The idea ... was put out to provoke conversation on social issues. I'm picking up where I left off with that. I think it's very hard to have a conversation with an audience of 500 people. I'm sure you've been in those audiences where someone gets up and they grab the mic, and it's like, "Is there a question?" [Laughs.] So I thought if we divide this audience up into small groups, randomly put together, we have this wonderful opportunity to create small pockets of conversation. I knew Youth Speaks had a method [for] creating conversation. Hopefully, it will accrue over performances.

### **You've said you think education is a forum for civil rights.**

Some people think education will be the next civil rights movement. But more people were talking like that before Ferguson. I think with Ferguson and technology and the number of short, sad films we have about police officers

and communities and the things they do to citizens, I would say right now people are thinking about that more. That's what makes people march in the streets. I don't know how you get people marching in the streets about education. It's sort of hard. But it's not impossible. One of my colleagues I talked to at NYU, professor Pedro Noguera, he talks about how to have a movement, you've got to have a large umbrella. So he thinks to have a movement it's got to be beyond race and more broadly about social and economic inequality. Certainly we saw that with Ferguson and videos.



## **Anna Deavere Smith Gives a Crash Course in the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

*Posted on Jul 21, 2015*

By **Emily Wilson**



Big Think via **YouTube**

In her latest solo show, “Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter” at the **Berkeley Repertory Theatre** through Aug. 2, Anna Deavere Smith looks at the “school-to-prison pipeline.” The term refers to how kids—mostly poor and nonwhite—are being pushed out of school into the criminal justice system through such means as expulsions or suspensions for minor infractions, more police presence in schools, and school-based arrests.

Smith starred as a hospital administrator in television’s “Nurse Jackie” and appeared on “The West Wing” as a security adviser. She’s also been in more than a dozen movies, including “Philadelphia” and “Rachel Getting Married,” but what she’s best known for is creating the sort of documentary theater on display in “Notes From the Field”—in which she interviews subjects associated with some issue or event, videotapes them, and then transforms herself onstage, re-creating their speech patterns and expressions.

Smith conducted her interviews for her new show in the San Francisco Bay Area (where she got her MFA from American Conservatory Theater), Philadelphia and Baltimore, her

hometown. She was in Baltimore soon after unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Mo., by white police Officer Darren Wilson. She includes a Baltimore protester in her show, as well as the videographer who filmed the arrest of Freddie Gray, who died in custody in Baltimore. Six Baltimore police were charged in connection with Gray's death.

Smith, a professor at New York University, wanted to do a piece on education and thought that looking at the prioritization of incarceration over education would be a way into that topic. She talked with judges, teachers, students, principals and people who have been locked up to find out all she could about why marginalized minors are ending up in jail. For the second act, the audience splits into smaller groups and facilitators from Youth Speaks, an arts organization, lead a discussion. Jazz composer Marcus Shelby joins her onstage, playing bass.

Smith sat down with Truthdig before her show opened to talk about people being more comfortable with science than sociology, how expression is vital to transformation, and what it takes to create a movement.

**What did people say in the interviews you hadn't thought of before? What was particularly interesting to you?**

People I talked to over time—and I think I've done about 170 interviews now—if you think of a piece of music like a fugue or a jazz piece and everybody is adding something. Or it's almost like I put a big piece of paper up, and everyone is adding a different color. Everyone that I talked to increased my understanding of what this [is about]. The chief justice of California, Tani Cantil-Sakauye, I just loved the way she talked about it very simply—if you're not in school, you're in trouble.

**What did people say about what could or should be done?**

There are a lot of people doing things. I would say one very efficient way to think about it is what we've done as a country is put a lot of resources on the back end, right? So what happens to people in prison? There's a lot of therapy. Now colleges are going to prison [to offer courses]. The question is what if we just shifted the whole economics of this and put resources on the front end? The question is what do people need to get through?

The irony is it's not just about poor kids. I teach kids with a lot of advantages. My friends have kids in really fine schools. I don't know anybody who doesn't feel they have to do a lot of buffering and a lot of work to make sure their kids get through, whatever that "through" means. If you're raising a black boy in any social class, you're probably concerned about what happens to him. If you have a kid in private schools, you're concerned about getting placed in college and which college. We're in an extremely competitive environment where I don't think anyone takes his or her success for granted anymore.

**Was anyone doing something to try and have more resources for kids in schools?**

That's policy, right? That's what the play is trying to push towards ... an awareness that these are policy changes that have to happen that have to do with where the money is getting spent. But people are doing things to demonstrate to us how money and time and research could [be] well spent. Nadine Burke Harris, who's right here in San Francisco, she writes about toxic stress and differentiates between that and ADHD. She's looking very carefully at the lives of kids in this poor community. And guess who she's collaborating with? Of all people, the chief of police in [the] city of San Francisco! So there you see a collaboration, which recognizes things around kids' lives which present obstacles.

On the other end of the spectrum, there's a neuroendocrinologist at Rockefeller University—which I think has more Nobel prizes than any other place per capita—about the brain. There are people in the science of this now, which I would say is really great because we trust scientists—we're not so sure about sociologists. I would say science is there. And then you have people like a very promising councilman in Stockton, [Calif.], Michael Tubbs, who's a great, charismatic spokesman on behalf of kids of color. I think there are lots of people doing good stuff, lots of people. And I think that's what makes it exciting if you look at it as a problem to solve. How do you get penicillin or a lot of other things?

### **What do you think theater achieves?**

I try to be modest and humble about what theater can achieve or any of the arts can achieve. For me what the theater does, there's many great works of art we would assign to social change and the era I came up in, the '60s and '70s, what would that movement, the civil rights movement and anti-war movement be without popular culture? Aretha Franklin singing a song like "Think": "Think about what you're trying to do to me." It's not just about a love affair. Or Bonnie Raitt, one time when I was interviewing her, put it best: The blues and a lot of this music is basically saying, "Don't treat me this way. Don't do me like this." Again, it's not just about a lover. It's speaking to the social problems of the time. It's speaking to the need for justice. I think that expression is always a part of human transformation.

So the theater brings two things: one, it's a live convening place, and two, it's in language. In some ways, I feel that cripples me in the theater. My friends who are musicians and visual artists can travel all over the world with their work, and I can only do my work in English. But on the other hand, because it is in language, it's less abstract. So we can exchange ideas, and the theater is all about dialogue, so it suggests we could be in dialogue. It invites different points of view. It's a kind of forum. With the Greeks it was. It's at the center of democracy. It gives us the opportunity to think and feel, and it gives us the opportunity to share ideas, which is difficult to do. We don't have that many convening places where we're together with strangers.

### **The audience is breaking into discussion groups moderated by Youth Speaks. What made you want to do that?**

I experimented with this stuff in the '90s. I had an institute at Harvard called the Institute on Arts and Civic Dialogues. I produced work by people on social change. The idea ... was put out to provoke conversation on social issues. I'm picking up where I left off with that. I think it's very hard to have a conversation with an audience of 500 people. I'm sure you've been in those audiences where someone gets up and they grab the mic, and it's like, "Is there a question?" [Laughs.] So I thought if we divide this audience up into small groups, randomly put together, we have this wonderful opportunity to create small pockets of conversation. I knew Youth Speaks had a method [for] creating conversation. Hopefully, it will accrue over performances.

**You've said you think education is a forum for civil rights.**

Some people think education will be the next civil rights movement. But more people were talking like that before Ferguson. I think with Ferguson and technology and the number of short, sad films we have about police officers and communities and the things they do to citizens, I would say right now people are thinking about that more. That's what makes people march in the streets. I don't know how you get people marching in the streets about education. It's sort of hard. But it's not impossible. One of my colleagues I talked to at NYU, professor Pedro Noguera, he talks about how to have a movement, you've got to have a large umbrella. So he thinks to have a movement it's got to be beyond race and more broadly about social and economic inequality. Certainly we saw that with Ferguson and videos.

# EAST BAY EXPRESS

OAKLAND, BERKELEY, AND EAST BAY NEWS, EVENTS, RESTAURANTS, MUSIC, & ARTS

JULY 07, 2015MUSIC

## Marcus Shelby's Conversant Bass

Anna Deavere Smith enlisted local bassist Marcus Shelby for a play about mass incarceration in America.

By Lou Fancher



- Bassist Marcus Shelby has long coupled music and activism.

• PETER VARSHAVSKY

### Show Details

*Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education* runs for three weeks beginning Saturday, July 11 at the Berkeley Rep. \$50+. [BerkeleyRep.org](http://BerkeleyRep.org).

The paired surnames "Smith and Shelby" evoke a welding company, an establishment recognized for bending metal with searing heat, emblazoning imagery on steel — or soldering bridges.

Playwright, actor, and educator Anna Deavere Smith and local bassist, composer, and educator Marcus Shelby — whose lightning-sharp and thunderous *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter* opens on Saturday at Berkeley Rep — might like the analogy.

After all, the one-performer, one-man band production aims to brand an indelible mark on the heart of America's "school-to-prison pipeline," which shuttles young Black, Latino, and Native American individuals into incarceration at a fearsome rate.

*Notes* is the culmination of Smith's two years spent interviewing students, teachers, parents, members of law enforcement, juvenile justice activists, and conducting Town Halls that included a staged reading by Smith and audience input. With *Notes*, the MacArthur Award-winning actor looks to coalesce all of that material and generate dynamic audience conversations that spill out of the theater and enact change — with the help of Shelby.

Shelby has long coupled music and activism. One of his projects, "Harriet Tubman," about the life of the freedom fighter, was commissioned in 2006 by Stanford University. He made "Soul of the Movement," a twelve-part suite on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement in 2009. And "Beyond the Blues: Ending the Prison Industrial Complex" is an ongoing series of conversations at San Francisco's Red Poppy Art House inspired by Shelby's visits to local prisons.

"I've been going into the prisons and hearing stories that have to do with historical trauma," Shelby said. "I've been hearing about schools with security guards instead of hall monitors. About resources and policies deferred from early childhood education and after-school activities and pushed into punishment and control. I've visited juvenile justice centers with my bass. I talk about the history of the blues and musicians who've used their music to do great things."

Shelby said Smith recruited him for *Notes* early on.

"She likes bass," he said. "It's a voice she likes to communicate with on stage. It's different than a second actor. Her voice blends well with it." Understating, he added, "She doesn't have a tiny voice."

Not only does Smith have one enormous voice, she employs multiple voices in the show, assuming a vast range of characters, including young people in Baltimore, old people in Stockton, cowboys, and high school principals. "They all have their own speech inflection and volume," Shelby said. "You have to lean in to capture the dynamic."

Last year, Shelby and saxophonist Andrés Soto joined Smith at Town Hall-style readings at Rep's Osher Studio and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Their stage movements were minimal. Their playing seemed more peripheral, though still a useful counterpoint to Smith's dramatic, poignant, or painful monologues.

With new director Leah C. Gardiner and movement coach Michael Leon Thomas leading the stage production of *Notes*, Shelby and his bass will move in yet-to-be-determined ways. The rest of the planning is "airtight," he said, allowing him to concentrate on transitions and moments of silence. "Some of the music is improvisational and some of it's set. It's blues, but the motifs and shapes are specific to the script. I have to be compatible. If I can't find the right [music], I might not play. Silence is golden; it's far better than playing the wrong thing."

Relying partly on impulse, Shelby said he and Smith built a vernacular unique to *Notes* based on theme and variation, call and response, tone and timbre — just like a jazz duo.

"The bass is a voice in the room that can be a character, a soundscape, the equivalent of an environmental element like a chair or another prop. At times, I'm trying to push the energy of the moment, adding drama. Or, for a heavy, long speech, I can accompany with an arc. In transitions, I sew the last expression to the next, mood-wise and tone-wise."

Smith emphasized the joy of working with Shelby.

"I'm crazy about Marcus. Been crazy since he came to a class that I taught and we spent a whole day working with him and his band," the playwright and actor said. "He's so open and knowledgeable. He's curious and a consummate professional. He's inspiring to me."

Since Act I is a documentary-style portrayal of related but individual characters that present a thematic arc, if not a narrative one, Smith explained that Shelby's music plays a major, unifying role.

"You know the bass keeps everything together in a band, right?" she asked. "My plays are fragments and he keeps it all together."

When Shelby visits prisons and juvenile justice centers with his bass, it's no less important than when he headlines at SFJazz. "I may even play harder because you can't fake anything," he said, suggesting that his contributions to Smith's production will tap the same raw, honest expression.

As moving as it might be, Shelby and Smith don't present *Notes* as a solution to the nation's racial divide and school-to-prison pipeline. That's why Smith has the audience in *Notes'* second act gather in pod-like clusters throughout the theater and directs them to engage in real-life, substantive conversations.

As Shelby said, "Like choreography, music can give a viewpoint or create something beautiful to counter things that aren't. All art forms do that. When I go into prisons and juvenile justice centers, I'm leery of teaching and preaching. I can talk to the people about something I love, music. It's a language, so it doesn't have special power. It's just about humanity."





## **BROADCASTS**



# Your Call: What will it take to end the school to prison pipeline?

By MALIHE RAZAZAN • JUL 20, 2015



Listen to the podcast here:

<http://kalw.org/post/your-call-what-will-it-take-end-school-prison-pipeline>

49:30

On the July 20th edition of Your Call, we'll speak with Anna Deavere Smith about her new one woman show, Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter.

It's playing now at the Berkeley Rep. Smith performs portraits from interviews she conducted with judges, prisoners, students, and teachers. She then invites the audience become agents of change. With so much talk about prison reform, what will it take to see real change? It's Your Call with Rose Aguilar, and you.

**Guests:** Anna Deavere Smith, award winning actor and playwright



# Anna Deavere Smith tackles the school-to-prison pipeline

By JEN CHIEN • JUL 21, 2015



• Anna Deavere Smith portrays Sherrilyn Ifill, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education*, The California Chapter [KEVINBERNE.COM](http://KEVINBERNE.COM)

Listen:

<http://kalw.org/post/anna-deavere-smith-tackles-school-prison-pipeline>

10:06

There's a disturbing national trend many call the school-to-prison pipeline -- where students, often low-income children of color, are pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. That's the subject of actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith's new show at Berkeley Repertory Theater, "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter". The show uses Smith's signature style of documentary theater, where she interviews people and then performs their words verbatim, using her acting skills to embody their voices and mannerisms.

She's trying something new this time around: during the second act, the audience is randomly broken up into small groups to discuss the themes of the play and issues of race and inequality with facilitators from local arts education non-profit Youth Speaks. Anna Deavere Smith spoke with KALW's Jen Chien about her new work, and what she hopes audiences will come away with.

**And I kind of thought, is my job just to sort of elicit applause and if I'm lucky a standing ovation? How come nobody is coming backstage and saying "What can I do?" And that really bothered me.**

To listen to the whole interview, click the audio player above.

*Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter is playing at [Berkeley Rep](#) through August 2, 2015.*

**Web Resources:** Berkeley Repertory Theatre: [Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education—The California Chapter](#)



NOTES FROM THE FIELD: Anna Deavere Smith talks about her play



Watch the broadcast here:

<http://www.ktvu.com/clip/11720728/2015/07/29/notes-from-the-field-anna-deavere-smith-talks-about-her-play>



## **Tag: Anna Deavere Smith**

**07.06.15 - 3:00PM**

Anna Deavere Smith – July 6, 2015

### **Arts-Waves on Cover to Cover**

Anna Deavere Smith talks about her latest theatrical work, "Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter," playing at Berkeley Rep, with host Richard Wolinsky.

 **LISTEN**

**DOWNLOAD |**  
**PODCAST**

Listen at <https://kpfa.org/tag/anna-deavere-smith/>



**JULY 25, 2015**

Live from the SF Ferry Building - Show 1124



Live from the SF Ferry Building! Sedge welcomes:



**ANNA DEAVERE SMITH**, playwright, actor and educator in town with her one-woman show *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*.

**ANNIE BARROWS**, brings us her wise, witty and eccentric novel *The Truth According to Us*, set in Macedonia, West Virginia in 1938.

**JOSHUA MOHR**, the writer who the New York Times calls "Beat-poet cool" looks at life's digital realities in his acclaimed new novel *All This Life*.

**MAURICE TANI** & friends -- a fixture in the local alt-country scene for more than a decade with his band 77 El Deora.

**GLASSYBABY**, our ferry building feature this week -- a shop specializing in colorful, hand-blown votives, with a mission of healing.

**MIKE GREENSILL** the Bay Area's premier jazz and cabaret piano player.



**Audio Archive**  
 Search for guests or keywords:  
  
  
**Episodes by Date**  

<
July 2015
>

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
28	29	30	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18

« Full episode for Thu, Jul 16, 2015

 Tweet
  Share
  Email

## Anna Deavere Smith Takes on School-to-Prison Pipeline in New Play



[Download audio \(MP3\)](#)

Anna Deavere Smith is debuting a new one-woman show at the Berkeley Repertory Theater called "Notes from the Field." Smith did more than 100 interviews with Californians and now brings those voices to the stage. *Reporter:* Queena Kim

Listen at <http://audio.californiareport.org/archive/R201507160850/b>





## **LISTINGS AND MENTIONS**

# PLAYBILL®

## Anna Deavere Smith Tackles School-to-Prison Pipeline in New Solo Show

By [Olivia Clement](#)

27 Jul 2015

Playwright, actor and educator [Anna Deavere Smith](#), whose earlier works have explored racial tensions, law enforcement and deficiencies in the healthcare system, now turns her attention to the "school-to-prison pipeline," where children from poor communities in the U.S. are pushed into the criminal justice system.

*Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education The California Chapter* is a one-woman show created, written and performed by Smith. It began performances July 11 at California's [Berkeley Repertory Theatre](#) and continues through Aug. 2.



Anna Deavere Smith in *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education The California Chapter*

Photo by Kevin Berne

The term "the school-to-prison pipeline" concerns the national social trend by which children are pushed out of the classroom and funneled into juvenile centers and prisons, creating what Smith coins "a lost generation of youth from poor communities." The trend is garnering greater currency and is now a focal point of Obama's second term, in attempting to reverse the pattern and give these children the

benefit of a greater education.

In Smith's solo play, she performs portraits woven together from the interviews she conducted with nearly 150 individuals in Northern California and across the nation, affected by the pipeline's consequences. In her second act, she engages the audience into being active agents of change.

The show features music composed and performed by bassist and jazz musician Marcus Shelby with direction by [Leah C. Gardiner](#).



# NOTES FROM THE FIELD's Anna Deavere Smith Heads to White House 'Rethink Discipline' Conference

July 22

8:12 PM2015

[Print Article](#) [Email Link](#)

by [BWW News Desk](#)



After an exuberant reception from critics and audiences alike for her performance in [Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter](#), playwright, actor, and educator Anna Deavere Smith today takes a break from her one-woman show currently playing at [Berkeley Rep](#) to participate in "[Rethink Discipline](#)," a conference at the White House hosted by the U.S Departments of Education and Justice. Smith joins teams of superintendents, principals, and teachers from across the country for a day-long conference to discuss ways to create positive school climates and ways to implement effective discipline practices.

Directed by Obie Award winner [Leah C. Gardiner](#), performances for [Notes from the Field](#) resumes

Thursday, July 23 and runs through Sunday, August 2

in the Roda Theatre. Individual tickets start at \$50 and are currently on sale to the general public. Tickets can be purchased by phone at (510) 647-2949 or online at [berkeleyrep.org](http://berkeleyrep.org).

In Notes from the Field, Smith puts the issue of racial inequities in the nation's school system front and center. Created, written, and performed by Smith, this theatrical event reveals the school-to-prison pipeline, which, by pushing children out of the classroom into the criminal justice system, has created a lost generation of youth from poor communities. In act one, Smith performs striking portraits culled from interviews she conducted with nearly 150 individuals in Northern California and elsewhere in the nation affected by the pipeline's devastating policies - capturing the dynamics of a rapidly shifting social issue through her trademark performance technique. In act two, Smith invites the audience to engage in facilitated reflections and be active agents to help dissolve the school-to-prison pipeline and inequities in the education system.

Of Smith's critically lauded performance in Notes from the Field, the San Francisco Chronicle writes, "Transforming herself into many different people, remarkably re-created from her extensive interviews, [Anna Deavere Smith] draws indelible connections between the high rates of incarceration of marginalized youth and other national problems in a manner as eye-opening and provocative as it is sure-handed and emotionally moving."

Adds Bay Area News Group/San Jose Mercury News, "In the theater [Smith] is famed as an innovator who has striven to take documentary theater to new heights. Here she is experimenting at the crossroads of art and public policy.... Unforgettable characters."



# Youth Speaks Joins Anna Deavere Smith's 'NOTES FROM THE FIELD' at Berkeley Rep

July 8

5:15 PM2015

[Print Article](#) [Email Link](#)

by [BWW News Desk](#)



Youth Speaks is proud to announce they have been invited to participate in Anna Deavere Smith's [Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter](#), a special presentation about the nation's school-to-prison pipeline. Directed by Obie Award-winner [Leah C. Gardiner](#) and featuring music by Bay Area favorite, jazz musician Marcus Shelby, this limited engagement starts previews Saturday, July 11, and runs through Sunday, August 2, 2015, at Berkeley Rep's, Roda Theatre. Individual tickets start at \$50 and can be purchased by phone at (510) 647-2949 or online at [berkeleyrep.org](#).

In act one, Smith performs striking portraits culled from interviews she conducted with nearly 150 individuals in Northern California and elsewhere in the nation affected by the pipeline's devastating policies,

capturing the dynamics of a rapidly shifting social issue through her trademark performance technique. For act two, Smith has invited Youth Speaks Founder and Executive Director James Kass and Emerging Artists Program Artistic Director Sean San José to use their unique pedagogy to develop with her a facilitated conversation for the audience. Kass and José will train selected individuals to facilitate these sessions, which will engage the audience in conversation to actively work toward change. With the

compelling and inspiring Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter, Smith believes that we all have the imagination, the wit, and the heart to make a difference.

"James Kass and Youth Speaks have an exceptional training methodology that has been impactful in driving conversations forward and affecting change," says Smith. "The school-to-prison pipeline is a national crisis and we are in desperate need of a solution. No solution will be possible without the public will. The theatre is a convening place. This is a time when theatergoers will have a chance to share ideas with one another. By inviting James and Youth Speaks to train the facilitators, it is my hope that these guided discussions will raise consciousness and inspire action."

"We're honored to be a part of such an important project with such [a fantastic](#) thinker and artist like Anna Deavere Smith. At Youth Speaks, we excel at conversation, and we're privileged to be in this one," adds Kass.

Anna Deavere Smith is an actress and playwright and has appeared at Berkeley Rep in Let Me Down Easy, Fires in the Mirror, and Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992. She is said to have created a new form of theatre. She has created more than 18 one-person shows based on hundreds of interviews, most of which deal with social issues. Twilight: Los Angeles, about the Los Angeles race riots of 1992, was performed around the country and on Broadway. PBS is currently streaming that play due to its relevance to current events. Her most recent one-person show, Let Me Down Easy, focused on health care in the U.S. Three of her plays have been broadcast on American Playhouse and Great Performances (PBS). In popular culture you have seen her in Nurse Jackie, Blackish, Madame Secretary, The West Wing, The American President, Rachel Getting Married, Philadelphia, and others. Books include Letters to a Young Artist and Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines. She is founder and director of the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue at New York University where she is a University Professor. Recently she was named the 2015 Jefferson Lecturer by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The lecture, established in 1972, is the highest honor the federal government confers for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities. Prizes include the National Humanities Medal presented by [President Obama](#), a MacArthur fellowship, the Dorothy and [Lillian Gish](#) Award, two Tony nominations, and two Obies. She was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize for her play Fires in the Mirror. She has received several honorary degrees, among them from Yale University, Juilliard, the University of Pennsylvania, Spelman, Williams, Northwestern, and Radcliffe. She serves on the boards of the Museum of Modern Art, the Aspen Institute, the American Museum of Natural History, and Grace Cathedral-San Francisco. She is a University Professor at New York University.

About Youth Speaks - Founded in 1996, Youth Speaks is a multi-faceted organization that understands and believes that the power, insight, creativity, and passion of young artists can change the world. Through the intersection of arts education and youth development practices, civic engagement strategies and high quality artistic presentation, Youth Speaks creates safe spaces that challenge young people to find, develop, publicly present, and apply their voices as creators of societal change. Youth Speaks exists to shift the perception of youth by combating illiteracy, alienation, and silence, creating a global movement of brave new voices bringing the noise from the margins to the core. For more information, visit [www.youthspeaks.org](http://www.youthspeaks.org)

The Emerging Artists Program will include a newly inaugurated three-year fellowship program comprised of alumni of Youth Speaks and Brave New Voices Network partners. The fellowship will provide its participants with training and mentorship on presenting, producing, managing and marketing new works and performance pieces. Program participants will be able to learn all aspects of performance, participate in workshops led by diverse Bay Area companies, and develop their own work. The goal of the Emerging Artists Program is to launch a new theater company running, devising, producing, presenting, and creating new works within three years.

About Berkeley Rep - [Berkeley Repertory Theatre](http://www.berkeleyrep.org) has grown from a storefront stage to an international leader in innovative theatre. Known for its core values of imagination and excellence, as well as its educated and adventurous audience, the nonprofit has provided a welcoming home for emerging and established artists since 1968. In four decades, four million people have enjoyed more than 300 shows at Berkeley Rep. These shows have gone on to win five Tony Awards, seven Obie Awards, nine Drama Desk Awards, one Grammy Award, and many other honors. Its bustling facilities - the 600-seat Roda Theatre, the 400-seat Thrust Stage, the Berkeley Rep School of Theatre, the Osher Studio, and a spacious new campus in West Berkeley - are helping revitalize a renowned city. For more information, visit [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).



# Openings at major Bay Area theaters this week, July 12

Chronicle Staff Report

Updated 8:20 pm, Saturday, July 11, 2015

## Opening

**Matilda the Musical:** SHN presents the national tour of Matthew Warchus' Broadway production of Dennis Kelly and Tim Minchin's hit musical adaptation of Roald Dahl's story of the girl who takes a stand against an unjust adult world. Previews begin Wednesday, July 15. Opens Friday, July 17. Through Aug. 15. Orpheum Theatre, 1192 Market St., S.F. (888) 746-1799. [www.shnsf.com](http://www.shnsf.com).

**Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter:** Anna Deavere Smith unveils her newest solo show, drawing upon extensive interviews and embodying their subjects to explore the school-to-prison pipeline. Previews begin Saturday, July 11. Opens July 15. Through Aug. 2. Berkeley Rep's Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley. (510) 647-2949. [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).



# THE DOLLIST

## Anna Deavere Smith's 'Notes from the Field'



Anna Deavere Smith stars in *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter* at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. (Photo: Mary Ellen Mark)

### ***Berkeley Repertory Theatre***

July 11 - August 2

### **SHARE**

A visit from Anna Deavere Smith is always a special occasion. Smith pioneered her own stunning style of solo performance with expertly mimicked verbatim excerpts of her own interviews with people offering many different perspectives on everything from racial tension in America (*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*) to the health care system (*Let Me Down Easy*). Now she's back with a new piece with the unwieldy title *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter*, part of a larger work in progress about the school-to-prison pipeline for underserved youth from poor communities in this

country. In a departure from Smith's usual format, in the second act she invites the audience to join the conversation and to work toward solutions to the problem. — Sam Hurwitt

## SPONSORED BY

[Become a KQED sponsor](#)

### Details

**Start:**

July 11

**End:**

August 2

**Cost:**

\$25-\$89

**Event Categories:**

[East Bay](#), [Theater](#)

**Website:**

<http://www.berkeleyrep.org/season/1415/9293.asp>

### Venue

[Berkeley Repertory Theatre](#)

2025 Addison St.

Berkeley, CA 94704 United States [+ Google Map](#)

**Phone:**

(510) 647-2900

**Website:**

<http://www.berkeleyrep.org/>

# *The* BAY AREA REPORTER



Solo performer Anna Deveare Smith explores a broken school system in *Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter* at Berkeley Rep in July. Photo: Courtesy of PBS

## **Pipelines to prisons**

Berkeley Rep lends a serious side to summer with its special attraction. In her latest one-woman show, Anna Deveare Smith speaks in the words and personalities of dozens of people she interviewed about the connection between increasing early expulsions from high school and subsequent incarceration – what she calls "the school-to-prison pipeline." *Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter* begins a three-week run on July 11 at Berkeley Rep, which developed the piece in collaboration with Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Smith has performed her solo shows internationally, and Berkeley Rep audiences have seen her tackle topical subjects in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *Fires in the Mirror*, and *Let Me Down Easy*. Directed by Leah C. Gardiner and with musical guest Marcus Shelby, the new show takes different tacks in its two acts. The first act follows in her tradition of portraying multiple characters derived through interviews. In the second act, Smith invites the audience to enter into an exchange about how an educational system that sheds off future lawbreakers might be redirected.

"This thing I'm working on is to really be a member of a conversation," Smith told web magazine AlterNet last year. "I hope, in our audience, there will be judges and professors and jailers and kids. And what am I? I'm an artist. I want to bring that fact of being an artist into the conversation. It's not about a finished work of art. It's about using certain skill sets I've developed over time to convene this conversation."

Ticket info at (510) 647-2949 or go to [berkeleyrep.org](http://berkeleyrep.org).

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

## Sacramento and regional theaters prepare their summer seasons

Dramas, comedies and musicals set the stage for an entertaining summer

It's the time of year for Shakespeare festivals, especially outdoors

---

Music Circus has four Wells Fargo Pavilion premieres among its six shows







“Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land” is in repertory through October at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. **Jenny Graham**

BY MARCUS CROWDER

[mcrowder@sacbee.com](mailto:mcrowder@sacbee.com)

Summer naturally brings out the Shakespeare in regional theaters, but there’s a tremendous amount of variety as well. Here’s a summary of selected productions taking place outside and indoors in Northern California and southern Oregon.

## B Street

The busy theater works year-round producing shows on two stages, and this summer’s productions have a sense of immediacy about them. “The Explorers Club” by Nell Benjamin, June 13-July 26 on the Mainstage; “Grounded” by George Brant, in B3 July 7-Aug. 8; and the B Street commission and world premiere “Bars and Measures” by Idris Goodwin, Aug. 18-Sept. 19.

**Where:** 2711 B St., Sacramento

**Information:** (916) 443-5300; [www.bstreettheatre.org](http://www.bstreettheatre.org)

## Capital Stage

The science morality drama “Uncanny Valley” by Thomas Gibbons, part of the National New Play Network’s Rolling World Premiere series. Directed by Jonathan Williams, June 17-July 19.

**Where:** Capital Stage, 2215 J St., Sacramento

**Information:** (916) 995-5464; [capstage.org](http://capstage.org)

## Davis Shakespeare Festival

The Davis Shakespeare Ensemble under the artistic direction of Rob Salas presents “Twelfth Night” and “The Mystery of Edwin Drood” in repertory June 25-Aug. 2. Working in both productions will be Matt K. Miller, Susanna Risser, Matt Edwards, Martine Fleurisma and Kristi Webb.

**Where:** Veterans Memorial Theatre, 203 E. 14th St., Davis.

**Information:** (530) 802-0998, [www.shakespearedavis.org](http://www.shakespearedavis.org)

## Fair Oaks Theater Festival

“Seussical The Musical,” directed by Bob Irvin, June 19-July 19; “12 Dancing Princesses,” directed by Tracy Shearer, July 11, 18, 25 and Aug. 1; “The Great American Trailer Park Christmas Musical,” Aug. 7-Sept. 6; “The Best of

Broadway: Broadway Re-Viewed!" directed by Bob Irvin and Corey D. Winfield, Sept. 11-27.

**Where:** The Veterans Memorial Amphitheatre, 7991 California Ave., Fair Oaks

**Information:** (916) 966-3683; [www.fairoakstheatrefestival.com](http://www.fairoakstheatrefestival.com)

## Music Circus

The 65th Music Circus Season features six Tony Award-winning shows and four Wells Fargo Pavilion premieres. "My Fair Lady," June 9-14; "Big River," June 23-28; "Bye Bye Birdie," July 7-12; "Peter Pan," July 21-26; "West Side Story," Aug. 4-9; "Hair," Aug. 18-23.

**Where:** Wells Fargo Pavilion, 1419 H St., Sacramento

**Information:** (916) 557-1999; [www.californiamusicaltheatre.com](http://www.californiamusicaltheatre.com)

## Sacramento Shakespeare Festival

The long-running festival produced by Sacramento City College presents two of Shakespeare's most popular titles in repertory July 3-Aug. 2. "Romeo and Juliet," directed by Christine Nicholson, and "As You Like It" directed by Lori Ann DeLappe-Grondin.

**Where:** William A. Carroll Amphitheatre, William Land Park, 3901 Land Park Drive, Sacramento

**Information:** (916) 558-2228. [www.sacramentoshakespeare.net](http://www.sacramentoshakespeare.net)

## Oregon Shakespeare Festival

OSF has become a nonprofit arts industry leader as it commissions, produces and markets great theater that's both accessible and challenging. OSF's outdoor venue, the Allen Elizabethan Theatre, opens in June with "Antony and Cleopatra," the world premiere musical "Head Over Heels" (music and lyrics by the Go-Go's) and a new adaptation of "The Count of Monte Cristo." Six plays already have opened and are playing in repertory, including most recently "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land." The 2015 season concludes Nov. 1. No plays are staged on Mondays.

**Where:** The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Ore.

**Information:** [www.osfashland.org](http://www.osfashland.org)

## California Shakespeare Theater

The prestigious East Bay theater presents the last season of artistic director Jonathan Moscone. The plays are “Twelfth Night,” directed by Christopher Liam Moore, May 30-June 21. “Life Is a Dream” by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, directed by Loretta Greco, begins previews July 8, runs July 11-Aug. 2. The special one-night presentation “Virgins to Villains: My Journey With Shakespeare’s Women,” written and performed by Robin Goodrin Nordli, July 20. “The Mystery of Irma Vep” by Charles Ludlam, directed by Jonathan Moscone, begins previews Aug. 12, runs Aug.15-Sept. 6. “King Lear,” directed by Amanda Dehnert, begins previews Sept. 16, runs Sept. 19-Oct. 11.

**Where:** Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way, Orinda

**Information:** (510) 548-9666. [www.calshakes.org](http://www.calshakes.org)

## Murphys Creek Theatre

The nonprofessional theater company will present its popular Theatre Under the Stars production at Feeney Park Amphitheatre with “The Winter’s Tale,” directed Graham Green, June 19-July 18; and “Equivocation” by Bill Cain, a smart play about Shakespeare and his times, Aug. 7-Sept. 6.

**Where:** Feeney Park Amphitheatre off of Highway 4 and the Black Bart Playhouse, 580 S. Algiers, Murphys

**Information:** [www.murphyscreektheatre.org](http://www.murphyscreektheatre.org)

## Main Street Theatre Works

The rural theater presents under-the-stars performances of “Chemical Imbalance: A Jekyll and Hyde Play” by Lauren Wilson, June 19-July 18; and “Vanya and Sonia and Sasha and Spike” by Christopher Durang, Aug. 7-Sept. 5.

**Where:** Kennedy Mine Amphitheatre, 1127 N. Main St., Jackson

**Information:** (209) 295-4499; [www.mstw.org](http://www.mstw.org)

## Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival

The festival, in its beautiful outdoor setting, offers Shakespeare’s popular tragedy of young lovers “Romeo and Juliet,” directed by Charles Fee, July 10-Aug. 22; and the venerable musical fantasy about young lovers “The Fantasticks” by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, directed by Victoria Bussert, July 17-Aug. 23.

**Where:** Sand Harbor State Park, 2005 Highway 28, Incline Village, Nev.



**Information:** (800) 747-4697; [www.laketahoeshakespeare.com](http://www.laketahoeshakespeare.com)

## Berkeley Rep

From the innovative company comes “Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter,” a special presentation of a new theater piece created, written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith, directed by Leah C. Gardiner, with music composed and performed by Marcus Shelby, July 14–Aug.1.

**Where:** Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley

**Information:** (510) 647–2949; [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

## Santa Cruz Shakespeare

The resuscitated much-loved festival has a full slate of four productions: “Much Ado About Nothing,” directed by Laura Gordon, July 3-Aug. 30; “The Liar” by David Ives, adapted from Corneille, directed by Art Manke, July 24-Aug. 29; “Macbeth,” directed by Kirsten Brandt, Aug. 8-30; and “The Rover” by Aphra Behn, directed by Katie Burris, Aug. 18-26.

**Where:** Sinsheimer-Stanley Festival Glen, Theater Arts Center, Meyer Drive at Heller Drive, UC Santa Cruz.

**Information:** (831) 459-2159. [www.santacruzshakespeare.org](http://www.santacruzshakespeare.org)

Read more here: <http://www.sacbee.com/entertainment/arts-culture/article22465896.html#storylink=cpy>



## **Playwright Takes on School to Prison Pipeline... LAT Calls for Real Oversight of the LASD... LAPD Praised for Handling of Mentally Ill...Update on SB 124, Juvie Solitary**

📅 July 6th, 2015 by 🧑 Celeste Fremon

### **RENOWNED PLAYWRIGHT ANNA DEAVERE SMITH TURNS HER CREATIVE FOCUS ON RACE AND THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE**

Playwright/actress Anna Deavere Smith has never been one to be scared off by complex subject matter.

When Smith premiered *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, her searing and revelatory one woman play about the aftermath of the Rodney King verdicts—first performing it in Los Angeles in 1993, then a year later in New York—reviewers fell over themselves praising the work. At the same time, [they also argued with each other](#) about whether Smith's creation was really *theater*, or some strange new kind of journalism.

The confusion had to do with the fact that Smith had gathered the material for the play that would make her a critical success by interviewing nearly 300 people, many of whom had some direct connection to the riot, some of whom did not. Then, from those interviews, she shaped monologues for more than 40 “characters,” real people whom she inhabited on stage, one after the other, with eerie accuracy.

The parts she played included former LAPD chief Daryl F. Gates, a south LA teenager, one of the members of the Rodney King jury, a Beverly Hills real estate agent, a former Black Panther party head now living in Paris, truck driver Reginald Denny, the widow of a Korean American grocer killed during the madness, a pregnant cashier hit by a random bullet who managed, against odds, to save herself and her baby—and several dozen more.

All of this came together to produce what [NY Times' theater reviewer David Richards](#) called, “an epic accounting of neighborhoods in chaos, a city in anguish and a country deeply disturbed by the violent images, live and in color, coming over the nightly airwaves.”

Now, 22 years later, Smith is working on another play that makes use of her signature form of documentary theater to illuminate another crucial cultural moment. (Smith has authored around 18 of these documentary plays thus far.) The new play, which has the working title of [“The Pipeline](#)

[Project.](#)” investigates what the playwright describes as “the school-to-prison pipeline—the cycle of suspension from school to incarceration that is prevalent among low-income Black, Brown, Latino, and Native-American youth.”

**As she did with *Twilight*, for the last year or so, Smith has been interviewing hundreds of people** including students, teachers, parents, police, thought and policy leaders, psychologists, community activists, heads of prisons, people who are incarcerated, kids in juvenile hall, public defenders...and many more, as she fashions her theatrical characters.

**Smith said that she got the idea after educators and reformers** approached her to see if art could affect policy change. And so: *The Pipeline Project*.

**Most recently, she has been performing pieces of the work-in-progress at select regional theaters in Berkeley, CA,** Baltimore, MD, and Philadelphia, PA. Then after each performance, Smith engages in an extended dialogue with the audience, sort of town hall meeting style, all of which she uses to continue to recalibrate her material.

**Eventually Smith will have a full length theater piece, that she'll debut around the country.**

**In the meantime, Californians will have the opportunity to see the work-in-progress version** starting this coming Saturday, July 11, when Smith will begin previews at Berkeley Rep's Roda Theatre. This pre-play play will run through August 2.

[Robert Hurwitt of the San Francisco Chronicle](#) talked to Smith while she was in rehearsal for her **Berkeley opening**, about what she wants from this part of the process, and from the Pipeline Project as a whole.

**Here's a clip:**

**“This is one of those rare moments when people do begin to think about race relations in this country,” Anna Deavere Smith** says over the phone from Berkeley Repertory Theatre, where she's in rehearsal for the premiere run of her latest solo piece. The new work, with the complicated but accurate title “Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter” is about the treatment of African American and other disadvantaged youth in our schools and what's increasingly being called the school-to-prison pipeline.

**“I started thinking seriously about these matters in 2010,** and I started my work, my interviews in 2013,” Smith says. “A lot has happened very quickly in this country during that time. ... You can't really think about inequities in education without looking at the broader canvas of racial inequity in America. And you can't think about school discipline without thinking about the ways in which the types of discipline that are of greatest concern mimic some of the practices in prisons.

**“So it's a problem, and it's an opportunity.** I did my first staged readings of this piece here at the Rep last July and left town and — boom! Ferguson. And just since then, because of technology, Americans have watched any number of bad interactions between authority and young African American males, and these videos have taken the country by storm and have caused a lot of people to go, ‘Wait. What? Something's going on here about men of color. What is this? Wow! Whoa! No! How could that happen?’”

---

***Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter:*** Previews begin Saturday, July 11. Opens July 14. Through Aug. 2. \$25-\$89. Berkeley Rep's Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley. (510) 647-2949. [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).

## Curtain Calls: Lopez-Morillas' 'Dream' return to Cal Shakes

By Sally Hogarty

Columnist

POSTED: 07/22/2015 10:37:35 AM PDT [0 COMMENTS](#) | UPDATED: 8 DAYS AGO

Nilo Cruz obscures the nature of dreams and reality in his adaptation of "Life is a Dream," playing at California Shakespeare Theatre through Aug. 2 at Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater.

Written by Pedro Calderon de la Barca, the story follows a prince, locked up since birth by his father, who received a prophecy that the prince would destroy the kingdom. The king, however, decides to let the now-grown prince out for a day to see if he is as evil as the prophesy foretold. The king has the prince drugged and brought to the castle with the caveat that if things go wrong, they will take him back to his cell and tell him the day of freedom was just a dream.

That's a very simplified version of Calderon's complex story, which Cruz has cut significantly.

He also transformed the original ornate period verse into a more rhythmic, compact account of this sweeping drama. While Calderon's philosophical diatribes bog down the action at times, Cruz's adaptation and Loretta Greco's direction make this a fascinating piece of theater. Sean San Jose handles the difficult role of the prince nicely as he goes from childish outbursts to violence to a more controlled, at times, touching demeanor. Julian Lopez-Morillas portrays the prince's jailer and tutor -- such a nice treat to have him back at Cal Shakes.

Scenic designer Andrew Boyce creates an enormous parabolic staircase that sweeps across the stage and receives added dimension from Christopher Akerlind's lighting. For tickets, call 510-548-9666 or go to [www.calshakes.org](http://www.calshakes.org).

Advertisement

- n n

Madness is in the air as the Orinda Starlight Village Players open "Madness on Madrona Drive" this week. Opening July 24 and running through Aug. 15, the fast-moving farce revolves around an eccentric woman who loves the idea of her neighbor being a racketeer. Her enthusiasm wanes, however, when she finds herself held hostage by unscrupulous characters who plan to kill the racketeer.

What better way to spend a summer's evening than with plenty of murder, mayhem and laughter? Jill Gelster directs, with Maureen Williams as the eccentric housewife. For tickets, call 925-528-9225 or go to [www.orsvp.org](http://www.orsvp.org).

• n n

Shotgun Players also tackles powerful ideas in its current production of Caryl Churchill's "Top Girls." Examining what it means to be a successful woman and the sacrifices involved, Churchill's drama opens with a dinner party celebrating Marlene's promotion at work. Her attendees include famous real and fictional woman from history: Pope Joan (Leontyne Mbele-Mbong), the adventurer Isabella Bird (Danielle Cain), a Japanese concubine/Buddhist nun (Karen Offerins), Griselda (Jessma Evans), a character in Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales," and, my personal favorite, Dull Gret (wonderfully done by Rosie Hallett), a warrior from a 1562 painting by Pieter Bruegel.

Well directed by Delia MacDougall, the show features Kendra Lee Oberhauser as Marlene. Often seen at Walnut Creek's Center Repertory, Oberhauser captures her character's ambition and sense of loss as she leaves behind a child in order to make her way in a man's world.

Part of Shotgun's season celebrating women playwrights, "Top Girls" continues through Aug. 2. Call 510-841-6500 or go to [www.shotgunplayers.org](http://www.shotgunplayers.org).

• n n

Actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith doesn't pull any punches with her current one-woman show "Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education." Playing at Berkeley Rep through Aug. 2, the interactive piece looks at the state of education through the eyes of a number of leading educators, students and criminals -- all brilliantly played by Smith. Based on interviews Smith did throughout 2013, the people depicted epitomize how our educational system can be a pipeline to prison for those living in poverty.

The actress, known for her role on television's "Nurse Jackie," believes Americans have an urgent economic, moral and security problem in front of them, and hopes this play (and its audience discussion) will reinvigorate the public. To that end, "Act 2" takes place throughout the theater and courtyard area with the audience scattered about in small groups led by a facilitator. Following a 20-minute discussion of the problems and possible solutions, everyone returns to the theater for the "Coda" with Smith. Enhancing the theatricality of the evening is bass player Marcus Shelby, whose blues improvisation adds a soulful addition to Smith's words.

While the topic and nontraditional night of theater isn't for everyone, this piece starts a much-needed discussion. For more information and reservations, call 510-647-2949 or go to [www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org).

Contact Sally Hogarty at [sallyhogarty@gmail.com](mailto:sallyhogarty@gmail.com)

---

Smith is not one to shy away from politically charged topics in her solo works. In *Let Me Down Easy*, which played a critically acclaimed run Off-Broadway in 2009, she examined the U.S. healthcare system. In [\*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992\*](#), she looked at the racial tensions behind the riots prompted by Rodney King's 1992 trial.

"Because I'm a dramatist, I like moments when there's something unsettled," Smith told the L.A. Times in a recent interview. "I'm in this business of looking at conflict. Conflict is never absent. It's just that when it gets exposed, more people are concerned about it."

For more information and to purchase tickets to *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education The California Chapter*, visit [BerkeleyRep](#).

# EAST BAY EXPRESS

## Anna Deavere Smith's *Notes From The Field* at Berkeley Rep!

Saturday, Jul 11 - Sunday, Aug 2  
510-647-2949

- [Best Of Winner](#)  
[Berkeley Repertory Theatre](#)

- 2025 Addison St.
- 

**BERKELEY-DOWNTOWN**

-  (based on 2 user reviews)

Anna Deavere Smith garnered a 2012 National Humanities Medal from President Obama and a MacArthur Award for her incisive and astounding theatrical investigations – from racial tension with law enforcement (*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*) to the deficiencies in our health care system in *Let Me Down Easy*. In [Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education, The California Chapter](#) Anna exposes “the school-to-prison pipeline,” which, by pushing children out of the classroom into the criminal justice system, has created a lost generation of youth from poor communities. This special presentation begins a limited three-week run at Berkeley Rep on July 11!

Berkeley Rep is offering a limited number of discounted tickets for groups and individuals to *Notes From The Field*.

**For the latest ticket information, please visit:**

[www.berkeleyrep.org/notesfromthefield](http://www.berkeleyrep.org/notesfromthefield)



# The Washington Post

Anna Deavere Smith returns to Baltimore hoping to close the school-to-prison pipeline



Anna Deavere Smith, left, interviews former Baltimore mayor Shelia Dixon, one of more 60 people she talked to in her hometown for a project aimed at closing the "school-to-prison pipeline." (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

By Marcia Davis July 25

**BALTIMORE** — Actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith is on Baltimore's West Side heading toward her childhood house, where she lived until she was



15. She's a little anxious, not sure of what she'll find after all this time, all this trouble.

She has spent days riding past boarded-up buildings and crumbling people. So much, she says, is broken. Some of those shards eventually will end up in the latest play she's researching.

The red SUV she's in whizzes along West North Avenue, once a nerve center of a vibrant working-class community filled with black-owned businesses and families forging their way in an unwelcoming world.

She points out where she took the bus to junior high. The hairdresser was on this strip, along with her brothers' barber. Her mother had a friend with a swanky boutique just off the avenue.

"I have good memories of that," she is saying about the close community where she could walk to piano lessons and church, where neighbors knew one another and one another's kids.

"All of these people hanging around in an idle way," she says as much to herself as to anyone.

It's early June, and Smith, 64, and her team, has been in town since mid-May interviewing people for a one-woman play on what she and others call the school-to-prison pipeline. Critics say zero-tolerance policies can suspend kids, disproportionately black and brown ones, over the most minor of infractions, starting as early as kindergarten. It sets them up for troubled futures. And too often, it means they go right from the classroom to the criminal justice system.

Baltimore's schools have made some progress in recent years, officials say, though there's plenty of work to be done. The four-year high school

graduation rate was nearly 70 percent last year — but the state’s average is 86 percent. It’s [overall suspensions](#) have also showed some decline in recent years.

Smith has been traveling the country collecting stories for her project, “Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education.” She’s home in a city that has become in part synonymous with murder, drugs, poverty, abject neglect and, more recently, riots over [the death of Freddie Gray](#).

Her own youth in the ’50s was defined by legal and de facto segregation. And, yes, the city had poverty and crime. In her own community there was classism and color-struck politics. It was not perfect, but it sustained her and other children, and it was not the world that she sees now in parts of Baltimore and other cities.

So she’s been listening to stories of the trapped, and the triumphant, and those battling tirelessly — if too often obscurely — to make meaningful change. People like [the Rev. Jamal Bryant](#) of Empowerment Temple AME Church, who preached Gray’s eulogy. Bryant will tell her: “Our children have been so reduced to the color of criminality that they can’t even be seen as children.”

Historically, Smith’s work has been built on her journalistic-style interviews, an uncanny gift at mimicry and a willingness to look at all sides of an issue. Smith disappears into each character, absorbing their words, their mannerisms and intonations. What audiences end up seeing is a community in conversation and conflict.

“It’s been said that I invented a kind of theater,” Smith has noted modestly on occasion.

She's been at this for more than two decades. In the '90s she took on racial strife with "Fires in the Mirror" and "Twilight — Los Angeles," about [the L.A. riots](#), which erupted after a suburban jury acquitted four white L.A. police officers in the videotaped beating of Rodney G. King. More recently, it was health care with her play "Let Me Down Easy."

She's recognizable from TV roles on recent shows such as "Nurse Jackie" and older ones such as "The West Wing." But it's her groundbreaking theater work that has earned her Pulitzer Prize nominations, a MacArthur "genius" grant and other honors, including the National Humanities Medal from President Obama in 2012.

Smith lives in an apartment in New York, where she says people hardly speak to one another, and is spending time on the West Coast where she's been workshopping the project.

She's done this school-to-prison pipeline work in seven cities so far. Being home, she says, has felt like an archaeological dig, tracing the physical spaces of the first world she ever knew as she interviews officials, ministers, educators and young people, some of them incarcerated.

But if it is an archaeological dig, then the geography of home is internal, too, a land shaped by memory, and distance and time, but filled with the urgency of the present.

The next act

By the time she arrived in Baltimore in May, Freddie Gray, 25, was dead, his neck inexplicably broken while in police custody. Her city had become the latest example of the national problems surrounding race and policing.

Finally, it was hard for anyone to continue ignoring the vast disparities that have festered for decades.

Looking at a brutally impoverished Sandtown — where Gray lived — and other areas across the city and country where people are walled off by unemployment, poor education, problematic policing and a host of other ills, leaves Smith toggling between head-shaking despair and what she calls “hope-aholism.”

And long before the [Emanuel Nine](#) lost their lives in a hail of gunfire during a Bible study in Charleston, S.C., she’d grown impatient with calls for a national conversation on race.

The woman who made a name for herself getting audiences to talk about race is now focusing on action, how to get people to help find ways to dismantle, repair, reconfigure — call it what you want — the structural machinery that has helped to grind so many black lives to dust.

Theater, she says, can help — even in a “small” way. When the lights go up, she wants audiences to stay and connect. She wants them in small groups in a room with the tools of brainstorming sessions — pen, paper, work boards and refreshments — meant to help spark ideas and creativity, and solutions.

Finding answers is the kind of work that will be waiting even if every Confederate flag in every corner of the country suddenly disappeared.

The creative process

Listening to a young man during a visit to the New Beginnings juvenile facility in Laurel, Smith was most struck by what happened after the formal interview.

He was worried, he told her, about what's ahead for him. If released, he had nowhere to go, no resources or options. He was even considering finding a way to get back into the criminal justice system, he told her.

A day later, Smith is sharing this with former Baltimore mayor Sheila Dixon, leaning in a bit as she speaks. Members of Smith's team are nearby. So is a PBS camera crew. But the two women, sitting inches across from each other in folding chairs, may as well be the only two in the cavernous room at Center Stage, a theater downtown.

Families can be trapped in a web of problems, Dixon says, pointing to Gray's own family as an example. (His mother had been on drugs at one point, she notes.) The solutions must be as layered.

Smith is steady, methodical. She starts every interview by asking her subjects to spell their name, the way many journalists do. More than 60 people will have been interviewed before it's all done, and in September she plans to return to do two stage readings.

To say that her work is built on interviews though is like saying a Romare Bearden collage is made with pieces of paper and cloth.

The voices, the stories, our conflicts — and our bound destinies — are the thing.

The audience speaks

The next night, the Center Stage auditorium is packed. For a second time, Baltimore residents have come to a town hall with Smith to talk about the state of their city. Crisis has a way of opening people up or shutting them down.

Baltimore feels wide open.

She and NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund President Sherrilyn Ifill are talking onstage. Eventually they will take audience questions.

The aftermath of Gray's death is a critical moment, a time to focus on articulating what Baltimore needs, Ifill is saying:affordable housing, transportation, education, jobs.

She used to listen to her father talk about the civil rights era and felt as if she'd missed everything, she told the audience. But this, she said, is one of those times, too, when 20 years from now people will be asking where were you back then?

"The idea of a movement is not that you sit and wait for this movement to happen. A movement is when you move," she urges.

We are witnessing "a strangulation of childhood" for children of color, Ifill adds at one point, her words an echo of the Rev. Bryant's.

Smith tells of hearing the story of a child facing arrest for urinating in a water fountain.

"Black children go to jail, white children have mischief," she says. That's the school-to-prison pipeline right there.

At some point she asks if any of the people she's interviewed are present and to stand. About 20 people, black, white, young, old, stand up and are applauded. She points out individuals and talks about the good they're doing on behalf of young people.

When the audience gets its turn to speak there seems to be more speeches than questions.

A local radio host talks about the digital divide and her neighborhood overrun with vacant houses.

A young man — who later says he's 20 and describes once having been homeless for months — tells the audience of a proposal to turn vacant housing into affordable housing.

Several other young black men are in line, too.

Someone talks about the importance of self-respect.

Someone notes his neighborhood's social isolation, gently pointing out that he's never seen black middle- and upper-class people there. Not women like Ifill — and though he doesn't say it, like Smith.

Sweet home North Bentalou

"I felt like I had to come home," Smith tells her town-hall audience.

Her father, like his father, sold coffee and tea. Her mother was an educator in Baltimore public schools. Smith has talked before about memories of her mother tutoring kids in their home.

Education was about survival and striving, a way to provide armor for black boys and girls.

She is standing on the sidewalk in front of the house on North Bentalou Street. More than a half century ago her maternal grandfather stood on the porch and shouted to the white neighbors, "We're here!"

Many white residents ultimately would leave.

The four-bedroom house where she grew up is empty these days and has a lockbox on the door, but from outside it appears to be in decent shape, like the other rowhouses on the street.

“It’s not boarded up — that’s good news,” she says.

She is the oldest of five. Her brother and other boys used to jump from the porch into the small front yard, a feat that once amazed her. When you are a child, everything is bigger, she says.

Back then the lawns were always mowed, and in the summer beautiful awnings covered the porches. On this afternoon the grass is uneven from house to house. Her family’s old yard is presentable.

Smith knows someone who still lives on the block, she says, then hesitates briefly before she heads a few doors up. She climbs the steps and knocks, a glint in her eye.

Sheila Wiggins, a retired computer science professor at Morgan State University and a childhood friend who is a few years older — and who taught Smith how to dance the twist — opens the door. She’s shocked to find Smith there.

She had seen Smith briefly at the recent funeral of Smith’s younger brother, but only to wave. Deaver Y. Smith III, 63, died in early April.

Smith and Wiggins hug, and soon they are locked in revery.



Some families are still around, says Wiggins, who can go almost house by house. A couple of folks are in their 90s. Many have died, of course, but several of the houses are owned by a descendant, a child or grandchild, or other relative.

They talk, too, about the alley behind the houses where they played and the cemetery that abuts it. Smith is eager to see it.

It's in the world on North Bentalou that she first learned the power of stories and how to listen.

"If you say a word often enough it becomes you," her paternal grandfather told her.

One Mrs. Johnson, who looked after the kids on the block, is prominent in each woman's memory. She told stories and Smith, sometimes as the other children played, would sit with her.

Later, Wiggins would recall hopscotch in the alley, the rare rides in his van that Smith's father sometimes gave the neighborhood kids, and how Mrs. Johnson, before she had trouble walking, took children to pluck berries from plants on the cemetery grounds.

Smith recalls elderberries. Wiggins, strawberries.

What is the most true is that they were there, black children, alongside the dead, harvesting the freshest of fruit.

After her family moved to another Baltimore neighborhood, Smith would ultimately go off to college, where her own passion for social justice grew. She landed in theater. And that, in the way life can be, brought her back to North

Bentalou, where she is glad to see that the houses on her block are still standing; that they have endured.



## Monday

**Berkeley Repertory Theatre** has announced that it will give away 1,000 free community tickets to its next production, *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education, the California Chapter* by acclaimed performer Anna Deavere Smith, directed by Obie Award winner Leah C. Gardiner. In *Notes from the Field*, which had a reading at Berkeley Rep last summer, Ms. Smith addresses the school-to-prison pipeline—a set of interlocking juridical policies that effectively ejects young people from the classroom and into the criminal justice system.

*Notes from the Field* has an unusual structure; in the first act, accompanied by SF-based composer and musician Marcus Shelby, Smith will employ her well-known style of documentary performance to present detailed portraits of people directly affected by these policies, using language drawn from numerous interviews. In Act Two, according to Berkeley Rep, Ms. Smith “invites the audience to engage in dynamic conversations and be active agents to help dissolve the school-to-prison pipeline and inequities in the education system.”



Anna Deavere Smith. Photo: Mary Ellen Mark

[The free community tickets will be made available on an application basis](#) to nonprofit and government organizations serving populations impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline, and others for whom cost would be a barrier. Berkeley Rep will also reduce the price on tickets for those under 30 years old to \$25. Visit [berkeleyrep.org](http://berkeleyrep.org).