



# IN THE MIRROR

CONCEIVED, WRITTEN, AND ORIGINALLY PERFORMED BY

**Anna Deavere Smith**

DIRECTED BY

**Saheem Ali**

**SignatureTheatre** **STUDY GUIDE**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Synopsis and Character Biographies .....	3
<b>A CLOSER LOOK:</b>	
Note from Playwright Anna Deavere Smith .....	5
Interview with Director Saheem Ali .....	6
<b>UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY:</b>	
What is Verbatim Theatre? .....	8
Crown Heights, Brooklyn .....	9
<b>BEHIND THE SCENES:</b>	
Interview with Dialect Coach Dawn-Elin Fraser .....	11
<b>ADDITIONAL RESOURCES</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>ABOUT SIGNATURE THEATRE</b> .....	<b>14</b>



Photo by Joan Marcus

# INTRODUCTION

## SYNOPSIS

There are three sides to every story: yours, mine and the truth. Following the deaths of a Black American boy and a young Orthodox Jewish scholar in the summer of 1991, underlying racial tensions in the nestled community of Crown Heights, Brooklyn erupted into civil outbreak. *Fires in the Mirror* was Anna Deavere Smith's groundbreaking response. Birthed from a series of interviews with over fifty members of the Jewish and Black communities, the Drama Desk award-winning work translated their voices verbatim, and in the process revolutionized the genre of documentary theatre.



Photo by Jean Marcus

## CHARACTERS



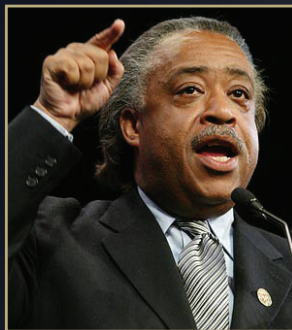
ALL CHARACTERS  
PLAYED BY

**Michael Benjamin  
Washington**

**Anonymous  
Lubavitcher Woman**  
Preschool teacher

**Aron M. Bernstein**  
Physicist at Massachusetts  
Institute of Technology.

**Anonymous Girl**  
Junior high school black girl  
of Haitian descent. Lives in  
Brooklyn near Crown Heights.



**The Reverend Al Sharpton**  
Well-known New York activist,  
minister.



**Angela Davis**  
Author, orator, activist, scholar.  
Professor in the History of  
Consciousness Department at the  
University of California, Santa Cruz.

**Rivkah Siegal**  
Lubavitcher woman, graphic designer.

**Norman Rosenbaum**  
Brother of Yankel Rosenbaum

**Monique "Big Mo" Matthews**  
Los Angeles rapper.

**Henry Rice**  
Crown Heights resident.



**George C. Wolfe**

Playwright, director, producing director of the New York Shakespeare Festival

**Minister Conrad Mohammed**

New York minister for the Honorable Louis Farrakhan.

**Robert Sherman**

Director, Mayor of the City of New York's Increase the Peace Corps.

**Rabbi Joseph Spielman**

Spokesperson in the Lubavitch community.

**The Reverend Canon Doctor Heron Sam**

Pastor, St. Mark's, Crown Heights Church.

**Anonymous Young Man #1**

Crown Heights resident.

**Michael S. Miller**

Executive Director at the Jewish Community Relations Council.

**Anonymous Young Man #2**

African-American young man, late teens, early twenties. Resident of Crown Heights.

**Rabbi Shea Hecht**

Lubavitcher rabbi, spokesperson.

**Richard Green**

Director, Crown Heights Youth Collective. Co-director Project CURE, a Black-Hasidic basketball team that developed after the riots.



**Letty Cottin Pogrebin**

Author *Deborah, Golda, and Me*, *Being Female and Jewish in America*. One of the founding editors of *Ms. Magazine*.



**Ntozake Shange**

Playwright, poet, novelist

**Carmel Cato**

Father of Gavin Cato Crown Heights resident, originally from Guyana.

**Roslyn Malamud**

Lubavitcher resident of Crown Heights.

**Reuven Ostrov**

Lubavitcher resident of Crown Heights.

**Sonny Carson**

Activist.

# A CLOSER LOOK: A NOTE FROM PLAYWRIGHT ANNA DEAVERE SMITH

Photo by Gregory Costanzo



I have been drawn to the power of words for as long as I can remember. I was an avid listener, likely from the time that I could hear – asking to hear the same stories over and over from my paternal grandfather, my maternal grandmother, and a myriad of others, like Miss Johnson who lived next door and weighed over 400 pounds.

She couldn't move very far. She would send me down the street to buy 25 cent "fatback" (now pork belly). I was sure to get a good story upon return.

The way words gyrated and extended through songs with repeated chorus in a myriad of black churches was of endless fascination. The power of a singer or speaker, whether an adult or a child, to bring the church to say "Amen" – or to collapse grown men into tears – still astounds me. The power of words coming across space to seal a love, to break a heart, to elect a president, to start a revolution or to heal someone in psychic or physical pain is part of human mystery.

My paternal grandfather said: "If you say a word often enough it becomes you." Those words, coming from a tall, lanky negro who had an eighth-grade education (turns out that was a lot for a colored lad in those days) became one important ingredient in the elixir that sent me on a long artistic journey.

The other potent ingredient, was/is Shakespeare - Shakespeare as spoken - to which I was introduced during my conservatory training. I was not so enchanted with "method" acting, which was our secular gospel at the time. The method, as most of you know, became a secular religion in the US during the 20th century, in part because of a phalanx of famous gurus and movie stars. The method's grandfather was a 19th century Russian guru, Konstantin Stanislavski. I spent part of my off hours in the library of the conservatory reading everything I could about Mr. Stanislavski - honestly because I wanted to understand why all my classmates and teachers were curtsying to Stanislavski's truth and I was looking askance. I even put the question to a test in a several month workshop populated only by Black actors. The method preached that the seed to understanding and portraying every human could be found inside of a single actor. And yet we lived in a world that worshipped difference for the sake of perpetuating the worst forms of cruelty, tribalism, and inequality. I now understand that difference is not the problem. The problem is that we cannot manage difference and justice at the

same time. Proponents of the method, to their credit, were not thinking about all that! They were just trying to turn in a good performance.

On the other hand, I was completely turned on by the language of William Shakespeare. If a 19th century Russian didn't speak to me, why did a 16th century Englishman? Tackling the language of Shakespeare as a young actress pricked a curiosity that had started in my youth about exactly what made words so potent when wielded with talent and expertise? But I was not bound to be a Shakespearean actress.

**I've learned through the thousands of people that I've interviewed, that when things fall apart, people speak in the most stunning, communicative, even musical ways, in order to make sense of the disarray around them and to restore meaning and dignity to their lives.**

I took my grandfather's supposition, "If you say a word often enough it becomes you," and started a much broader inquiry about language and identity. I became specifically interested in American identity and the distances between us. I took "If you say a word often enough it becomes you," and a tape recorder, across this country to try to become America word for word. I've now interviewed thousands of Americans and portrayed hundreds – usually in times of crisis.

I've learned through the thousands of people that I've interviewed, that when things fall apart, people speak in the most stunning, communicative, even musical ways, in order to make sense of the disarray around them and to restore meaning and dignity to their lives. That brings me to *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Both plays chronicle tragic events in this country. I visited the cities where the events took place, while citizens were still rummaging through the embers of disappointment and fear. The way they spoke was worthy of drama; their words were worthy of an actor's attention.

I am thrilled that *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight* are being remounted in New York with actors other than myself. Everyone involved in this enterprise is being asked to work not from an assumption that the seeds of human experience live inside of them, but from a proposal that the reach towards another human – knowing full well there will always that there will always be distances between us – is a potent reach. Perhaps these artistic reaches will suggest that stretching with a full heart towards that which is different from ourselves is one small antidote to the popularity of tribalism. Tribalism continues to pull us towards the dark power of destructive division and away from the possibility of greeting one another with kindness.

# A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR SAHEEM ALI



**When did you first encounter Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*? What does it mean to you to be creating a new production of this play right now, specifically in 2019 New York?**

I read *Fires in the Mirror* in school. I moved to this country in 1998 and took a theatre history class; that was the first time I read the play. I never got to see it, but I got to investigate and dissect it. The piece is very specific in when its set and why its set there. It's

a period piece, because it takes place in a very specific time in America's history, and this city's history. We've changed so much, but also so little has changed. We're still living side-by-side as different communities; we're still trying to make sense of this question of what it means to be an American. The piece, to me, is a microcosm of a very specific moment and a very specific interrogation of that question, which we're still grappling with today.

**The divisions in the play – racial, cultural – still exist, but they've morphed, too. We're so intensely divided politically. How do we still exist as fellow citizens even though we intensely disagree about certain things and see the world in a different way?**

I feel we go to the past to understand the present, and then hope that those questions will help us be better human beings and live side-by-side with more empathy and humanity. I was really surprised by how some of the philosophies and ideas that were being raised in the piece felt like things that people are talking about today. A lot of what Angela Davis said, I was like, people were talking about this in 1991? I feel like it's such contemporary rhetoric, but it actually isn't. It was surprising to me because I feel like if they've been saying the same things since then, why are we still there? Why are we still asking the same questions? Why are we still making the same demands of ourselves, of our citizens, of our governments, of our leaders, when people like Angela Davis were saying this in 1991?

**You've spoken about how strong Anna's vision for this piece is, and how you think it's dramaturgically perfect. What makes it so well-structured and compelling?**

The first 15 scenes have nothing to do with Crown Heights. Nothing. They're about these people, individuals reflecting on themselves, on their environment, on their communities. There's a version of this play where the beginning is that someone gives you the statistics, or tells you, "so this is what happened," and then you meet the people involved. But dramaturgically, it's all about interior reflection before you even get to what actually happened on August 19th, 1991. For me, that's such a powerful way to frontload the people and the cultures that are about to collide before the collision even occurs.

**As a Kenyan native, what is your relationship to the dynamic of American race and racism as is examined in *Fires*?**

I wasn't aware of color until I came to this country. I was 20 when I came here, and I didn't know that I was a certain race. I knew my tribe, but there was a different definition of that. In Kenya, I was the lighter one who had certain privileges because my skin was lighter. But then when I came here it was the opposite. Suddenly I wasn't the lighter one. There's a spectrum that exists and an othering that exists as a part of it.



**Part of the problem is that we don't have these conversations because we don't have the language. We're afraid of stepping on toes, we're afraid of opening up our own ignorance and revealing it because we don't know this and that about someone else's culture.**

Part of the problem is that we don't have these conversations because we don't have the language. We're afraid of stepping on toes, we're afraid of opening up our own ignorance and revealing it because we don't know this and that about someone else's culture. There's a fear. I hear it from white people especially, afraid to express or ask questions because they don't want to ask questions that are going to seem ignorant or racist as a result.

**Michael Benjamin Washington will be playing all 26 characters in *Fires*. What is the impact of having one actor perform as all the people portrayed in the play?**

I hope seeing Michael in this play portraying all these roles is going to remind us to be a bit more expansive about who we can be, who we're allowed to be and who we have permission to be. The pendulum can swing so hard in the opposite direction that we forget that we're in the art of imagination, we're in the art of empathy, we're in the art of walking in someone else's shoes.



**The needle has moved very strongly in one direction in terms of who's allowed to tell what story, who's allowed to represent a certain character.**

---

We have to be able to do that across all kinds of lines for the right reason. Now, it can be for the wrong reason, but I feel like with this kind of piece, no one is going to be like, "oh no, that's not a good reason to do it." There's absolutely a good reason.

No one gets to perform this way anymore. No one gets a palate of different types of characters who come from different types of backgrounds and is asked to express them. People very rarely play outside of themselves, whether it's gender, race, or sexual orientation, even. We've become very siloed and specific, and in ways it's understandable because once upon a time people of color didn't have as many opportunities to present themselves. The needle has moved very strongly in one direction in terms of who's allowed to tell what story, who's allowed to represent a certain character.

**What would you like audiences to take away from *Fires In the Mirror*?**

That it's about us. It's really hard to escape the metaphor of the mirror in this play. Chekhov said it's as if you hold up a mirror to yourselves, that's what the theatre does. And this piece in particular, if you're sitting here in these seats in New York, most likely you're a New Yorker, you're looking at a story that's about you, that's about your community, about your people and about yourself. Where are your blind spots? What are you not seeing because you're so fixated on something else, and how can we be more expansive in the things that we see? I hope that reflective quality will be something deeply personal to each person who sees the play.



Photo by Joan Marcus

**I feel we go to the past to understand the present, and then hope that those questions will help us be better human beings and live side-by-side with more empathy and humanity.**

---

# UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

## WHAT IS VERBATIM THEATRE?

Anna Deavere Smith is a pioneer of verbatim theatre, which she utilizes in both *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.

**Verbatim theatre is a theatrical style or technique that relies on verbatim (word-for-word) performances of recorded conversations, letters or other records.**

Verbatim theatre creators work with the exact spoken (or written) text of their subject(s), although they may edit the text down to shape its form. Like in journalism, however, verbatim theatre artists never create new text for the people they portray. An author of a verbatim piece will work to arrange their various interviews and monologues in a way that honors their source material and best illuminates the multiple perspectives and truths of the story being told. Verbatim pieces often focus on the intersection of varied perspectives, using an actor or actors to recreate the source material. As a form of documentary theatre, it is often used to dramatize moments of particular social unrest and division.

### Other examples of verbatim theatre:

#### THE LARAMIE PROJECT

created by **Tectonic Theater Project**

In October 1998, a twenty-one-year-old student at the University of Wyoming was kidnapped, severely beaten, and left tied to a fence in the middle of the prairie outside Laramie, Wyoming. His bloody, bruised, and battered body was not discovered until the next day, and he died several days later in an area hospital. His name was Matthew Shepard, and he was the victim of this assault because he was gay. Moisés Kaufman and fellow members of the Tectonic Theater Project made six trips to Laramie over the course of a year and a half, in the aftermath of the beating and during the trial of the two young men accused of killing Shepard, conducting over 200 interviews that would eventually serve as the basis of *The Laramie Project*.

#### MY NAME IS RACHEL CORRIE

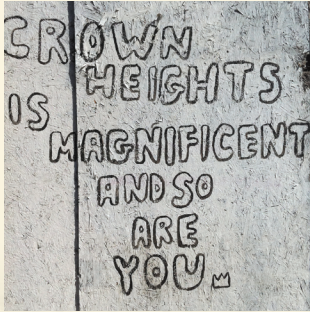
by **Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner**

On March 16, 2003, Rachel Corrie, a twenty-three-year-old American, was crushed to death by an Israeli Army bulldozer in Gaza as she was trying to prevent the demolition of a Palestinian home. *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is a one-woman play composed from Rachel's own journals, letters and emails - creating a portrait of a messy, articulate, Salvador Dali-loving chain-smoker (with a passion for the music of Pat Benatar), who left her home and school in Olympia, Washington, to work as an activist in the heart of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



# UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

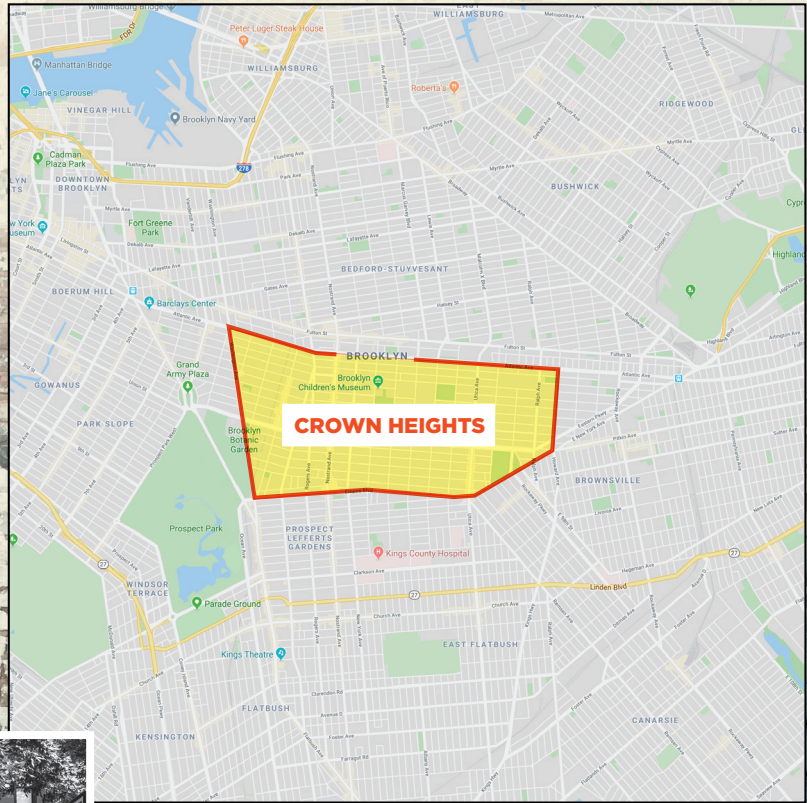
## CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN



Crown Heights is an ethnically diverse neighborhood in Brooklyn with large West Indian, African-American and Orthodox Jewish communities. It is the worldwide capital of a branch of Hasidic Judaism known as Chabad-Lubavitch. In 1991, the religious leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch community (often referred to as the Rebbe) was Rabbi Menachem Mandel Schneerson, who was considered to be the Jewish Messiah by many Lubavitcher Jews.

On August 19th, 1991, Rabbi Schneerson was being escorted in a three-car motorcade led by an unmarked police car. Rabbi Schneerson's bodyguard, Yosef Lifsh, was at the end of the motorcade and, in an effort to keep up with the group, ran a red light. Lifsh's car collided with an oncoming car and veered onto the sidewalk, where it struck 7-year-old Gavin Cato and severely injured his cousin, Angela Cato.

**August 19, 1991** Gavin Cato and his cousin, Angela Cato, also 7, are playing near Utica Avenue and President Street. A car driven by a Lubavitcher Jew in a motorcade for the sect's Grand Rebbe, Menachem M. Schneerson, swerves onto the sidewalk, striking the children. Gavin is killed instantly. His cousin is badly hurt. Three hours later, Yankel Rosenbaum, 29, a visiting rabbinical scholar from Australia, is attacked and stabbed several times at President Street and Brooklyn Avenue by 10 to 15 black youths in apparent retaliation for the death of Gavin, even though Mr. Rosenbaum was not involved in the crash. This is the first of five nights of rioting that will occur in the neighborhood.



**August 20, 1991** Mayor David N. Dinkins consoles Mr. Rosenbaum at Kings County Hospital. Doctors say Mr. Rosenbaum will recover, but hours later he bleeds to death from a wound that went undetected in the emergency room.

**August 20-23, 1991** Violence between groups of blacks and Jews continues, with many arrests and numerous injuries, as long-smoldering tensions flare. A state investigation will conclude months later that a series of miscalculations – officials underestimated the seriousness of the tensions and were slow to respond – aggravated the situation.

# UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

## CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN



**CHABAD-LUBAVITCH** Chabad is a sect of Judaism found in the late 1700s that falls under the umbrella of Hasidism, itself a branch of Orthodox spiritual revivalism. It is sometimes interchangeably referred to as Lubavitch or Chabad-Lubavitch. The use of the “Lubavitch” name comes from the town in Russia in which the now-dominant line of Chabad leaders lived in the 1910s. Chabad is the largest and best-known group of Hasidim (Hasidim being the plural form of Hasid, meaning a member of the Hasidic group), largely because of Chabad’s emphasis on outreach.

**August 27, 1991** Lemrick Nelson Jr., a 16-year-old black teenager, is charged with murder in the death of Mr. Rosenbaum. The police say they found a knife on the youth, and that Mr. Rosenbaum had identified it as the weapon used to stab him. As the indictment is announced, some 2,000 mourners attend Gavin Cato’s funeral.

**September 5, 1991** A Brooklyn grand jury concludes that there is no basis to bring criminal charges against Yosef Lifsh, 22, the driver of the car that killed Gavin Cato.

**October 29, 1992** Mr. Nelson is acquitted in a state court, prompting an outcry from the Hasidic Jewish community.

**July 20, 1993** A report by Richard H. Girgenti, the state’s Criminal Justice Director, criticizes the police as “uncoordinated and ineffective” during the August 1991 rioting. The report clears Mayor Dinkins of assertions that he held back the police, but it said he did not act quickly enough.

**January 25, 1994** The United States Attorney General, Janet Reno, says the Justice Department will investigate Yankel Rosenbaum’s killing as a civil rights case.

**August 11, 1994** Mr. Nelson is arrested again after being indicted in Federal Court on charges he violated Mr. Rosenbaum’s civil rights.



# BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW WITH DIALECT COACH DAWN-ELIN FRASER

**The work of a dialect coach is crucial to establishing the characters and world of a play. Can you give us a brief overview of the job of a dialect coach? What does your process look like on any given project?**

The job of the dialect coach is, in consultation with the director, to decide what accents are needed for the project, do the research to find samples of native speakers, and to create a breakdown for the actors of how to take on the dialects needed. The process for every project is very different, depending on the needs of the project. For *Fires in the Mirror*, for instance, since all of the characters are real people, it was important for Team Dialects (myself and research assistant Lindsey Hannah Moran) to find sound samples of all of those people for Michael so that he could fully explore the idiolect (personal dialect) of each character. I would then create concrete breakdowns about things like placement (where the sounds sit in your face), prosody (the melody), and pronunciation (the actual sound changes themselves).

**How did you become interested in dialect coaching? At what point did you discover it as a career path? Was there special training you needed to do to become a dialect coach?**

I became interested in dialect coaching while I was a graduate student at American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. Both my voice and speech teachers noticed that I had a particular gift and a good ear. I started out by helping my classmates with their homework and

then moved on to assisting my teachers on professional projects. My mentor, Deborah Sussell, recently shared with me that she had a memory of me in my first year of grad school saying, "I want to do what you do." I guess that was the moment I realized that's what I wanted to do. There are lots of ways to become a dialect coach. Most people begin as actors and then discover, as I did, that they have a good ear and they enjoy teaching others. Some people get a degree in voice and speech pedagogy, others apprentice with master teachers. Some become certified in different voice and speech techniques (I'm a certified teacher of the Knight-Thompson Speechwork). I think the most essential tools are that you have a good ear for accents and that you are fluent in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).\*

**I love it when I see an actor make a connection about the accent that illuminates something for them about the character.**

**You're also a trained actor. How has your work as a performer informed your work as a dialect coach?**

Being trained as an actor helps me to understand and have empathy for each performer's journey. I know how much hard work it takes to allow the work to seem so effortless so I have a good idea of how to give information that is both helpful and encouraging.

**What's the most exciting part of your job?**

I love it when I see an actor make a connection about the accent that illuminates something for them about the character. To have helped guide them toward a discovery in the language that enriches their work is so exciting. I also love it when audience members ask if the actor is really from the place that their character is from. That's such a victory for the actor and therefore, a victory for me.

**What type of research do you do before and/or during the rehearsal process?**

I listen to many hours of vocal recordings, watch a ton of videos, and write a dialect breakdown for every character in a particular project. While listening to each recording, I take detailed notes about placement, melody, rhythm and the particular sound changes. All of these go into the dialect breakdown.

**In *Fires in the Mirror*, Michael Benjamin Washington plays over 20 real people, including some well-known public figures, with text taken from interviews done by Anna Deavere Smith in the 1990s. How do you work with Michael to distinguish each person?**

Michael is such a dream to work with! We have so much fun. We go character by character and talk through the four pillars of an accent: People (biographical information



Photo by SUB/URBAN Photography

## I think the most essential tools are that you have a good ear for accents and that you are fluent in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).\*

that may help inform the actor); Prosody (the melody pattern and how the sounds link together; I often use Laban Efforts to describe this. For instance, Al Sharpton moves between a PRESS—heavy, direct, sustained—and a PUNCH—heavy, direct, sudden—in terms of effort); Posture (this refers to oral posture, where the sounds sit inside the mouth and the shape of the mouth and articulators); and Pronunciation (Michael likes the use of cognates—finding a sound that sounds like the sound change—especially when they come with a strong image. He’s a visual thinker).

### How does working as a dialect coach for a piece of verbatim theatre differ from dialect coaching for a fictional play?

Working on what we call an idiolect (a person’s unique set of sounds) can be helpful in terms of specificity because sometimes within one accent, there are several options for a particular sound change. You can also get specifics about the physicality by watching video that the actor can use to

anchor themselves in the dialect. There is a bit more pressure because you want to make sure you’re being respectful to the subject but having all that specific information can make things much easier.

### Do you have any advice for students interested in learning more about dialects and their impact in shaping a piece of theatre?

I do! Dialect work is a lot of hard work, but it’s so much fun. You can start now by watching movies and TV shows with accents and see if you can embrace the sounds and placement. When you go to see a play, if you like the accents, look up the coach in the program and write them a letter or send an email for advice (if you write to me, I promise I’ll answer). There are also some great books and websites out there--Kimberly Mohne Hill has a wonderful series of books specifically for young people and the IDEA (International Dialects of English Archive) website curated by Paul Meier has accents from almost everywhere you can think of.

## The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

\*The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a system created by linguists in the 19th century to help standardize and accurately represent spoken sounds (phones or phonemes) used in spoken language. IPA notation helps assist in pronunciation of consonants and vowels across languages and dialects.

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)												© 2015 IPA	
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal		
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ			ʔ	
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ				
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ				
Tap or Flap		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ							
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ		
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ									
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ					
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ					

Symbols to the right in a cell are voiced, to the left are voiceless. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Excerpt from *Letters to a Young Artist* by Anna Deavere Smith

## *Being In It, and Out of It, at the Same Time*

Dear BZ:

Being “in it, and out of it, at the same time” is a sort of fundamental first exercise one should do as one develops as an artist.

Did you take ballet when you were younger, or do you now? You know how in the beginning of the class you go through all the positions in the warm-up, and the positions become the foundation or the basis of the ballet? It’s a basic vocabulary. Like when you bake, you need flour, butter, sugar, some kind of liquid, etc. The fundamental ingredients.

Well, I believe that fundamental to becoming an artist is understanding the position of an artist, rehearsing that position, and practicing that position. It is from that position that you will develop an eye, an ear, and a heart. These three organs are essential. Yes, as a painter you will need a hand, and as an actor I need a voice and a body – but before getting to those, we need to develop the eye, the ear, the heart.

We do that by learning how to step outside of given situations to watch, to listen, and to feel, and to feel as others as much as to feel things about others. Feeling as others is empathy. Feeling for others is sympathy. Empathy is more useful and more important. It requires more rigor. That rigor will make you stronger of heart and spirit. Empathy requires a very highly developed imagination. It is more active than sympathy. It requires more intellectual development. Sympathy, to me, is just tears. Empathy is potentially very productive.

Stepping outside gives you the space to watch, listen, feel. To step outside you must suspend opinions and judgments. It doesn’t mean that you are devoid of them. It means that you can control them long enough to watch, listen, and feel. You store what you have learned, and then you do what you will with what you have gathered. You may even try to

influence how others watch, listen, and feel. But first and foremost you must be able to step outside.

Read an essay by Bertolt Brecht, the mid-twentieth-century German playwright, called “Street Scene.” In it he describes an accident scene, where people come out into the street and describe an accident. They all give their version. He calls the telling – the storytelling that happens – a kind of “natural theater.” It will remind you that you have to be available to watch and listen and feel for all scenes.

To me, artists are students of the human condition, potentially. Being outside does not mean being without compassion. But it does mean that you may sometimes become clinical.

Years ago I interviewed the head of pediatric surgery at Sloan-Kettering hospital in New York. I asked him what had moved him to become a cancer surgeon for children. I thought he would tell me a moving story about having seen a child suffering, but instead he replied, “I wanted to do bigger operations.”

What was driving him was his desire to be a very good surgeon, and to discover things. I think as artists we too should want to do “bigger operations.”

Standing in and out at the same time is a structural matter. It is a way of bringing order to the otherwise chaotic situation of life. I say chaotic because as an artist you are both in life and commenting on life. That’s your position.

ADS  
New York City  
February 2000

- *Letters to a Young Artist* by Anna Deavere Smith. Random House, 2006.

### **SIGNATURE PRODUCTION VIDEOS:**

[Meet and Greet Video – Anna Deavere Smith Passes the Torch to Michael Benjamin Washington](#)

[Interview with Actor Michael Benjamin Washington and Director Saheem Ali](#)

### **FURTHER MATERIALS ON ANNA DEAVERE SMITH**

[Anna Deavere Smith National Museum of American History Interview](#)

[Anna Deavere Smith: The World Becomes You \(An Interview\)](#)

[Anna Deavere Smith TED Performance: Four Characters](#)

### **FURTHER MATERIALS ON THE PLAY’S THEMES**

[Brooklyn Historical Society Podcast: Who’s Crown Heights?](#)

[Crown Heights from the 1950s to Today](#)

[A Comprehensive Guide to the Jewish Denominations](#)

# ABOUT SIGNATURE

**Signature Theatre celebrates playwrights and gives them an artistic home.**



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto.

Signature makes an extended commitment to a playwright's body of work. By producing a series of plays by each resident writer, Signature delivers an intimate and immersive journey into the playwright's singular vision. In 2014, Signature became the first New York City company to receive the Regional Theater Tony Award®.

Signature serves its mission at The Pershing Square Signature Center, a three-theatre facility on West 42nd Street designed by Frank Gehry Architects to host Signature's playwrights' residencies and

foster a cultural community. At the Center, Signature continues its original Playwright-in-Residence model as Residency 1, a year-long intensive exploration of a single writer's body of work. Residency 5, the only program of its kind, was launched at the Center to support multiple playwrights as they build bodies of work by guaranteeing each writer three productions over a five-year period. The Legacy Program, launched during Signature's 10th Anniversary, invites writers from both residencies back for productions of premiere or earlier plays.



Free Student Matinees are made possible by lead sponsor Delta Air Lines. Delta Air Lines is the Official Airline of Signature Theatre.

**NYC Cultural Affairs** Free Student Matinees are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

A very special thank you to the New York City Department of Education.

Free Student Matinees are generously supported, in part, by the SHS Foundation. Additional support is provided by the Sequoia Foundation.

**CONNECT  
WITH US**

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



[@signaturetheatre](https://www.instagram.com/signaturetheatre)



[/signaturetheatrecompany](https://www.facebook.com/signaturetheatrecompany)