

Twilight

LOS ANGELES

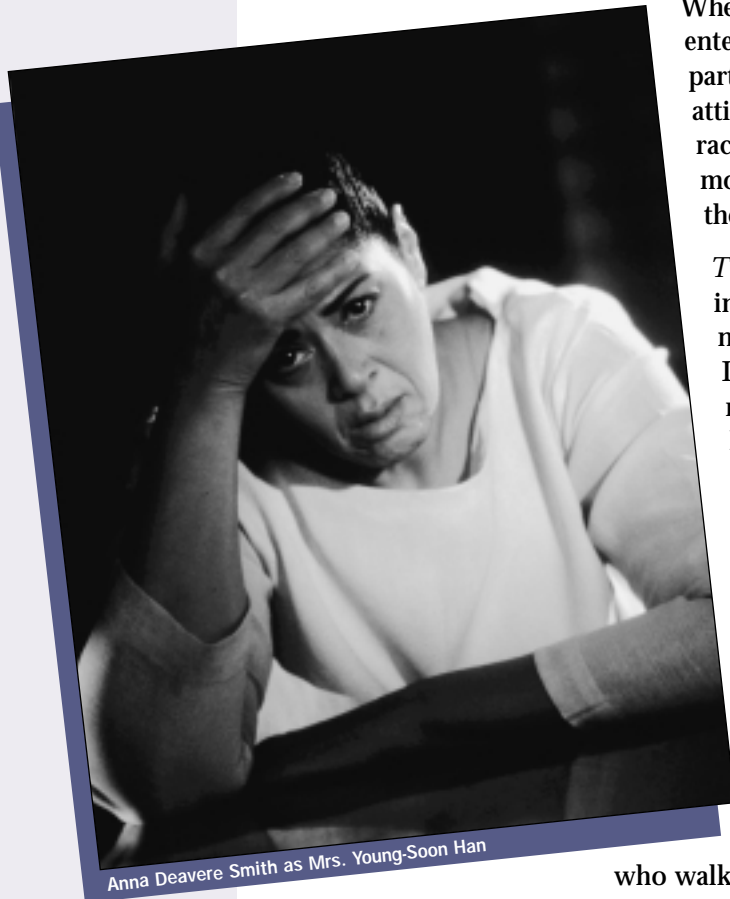
DISCUSSION GUIDE

CONCEIVED, WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY

Anna Deavere Smith

DIRECTED BY **Marc Levin**

I have been particularly interested in how the events in Los Angeles give us an opportunity to take stock of the changing racial landscape in America. Since the 1992 riots, our attitudes about race have shifted. As the character Twilight Bey indicates to us, we are in “limbo,” that time between day and night. Part of perceiving the light is seeing race as more than a black-and-white picture.



Anna Deavere Smith as Mrs. Young-Soon Han

Where do theater and film fit into this? Using the power of entertainment, spectacle, and dialogue, theater and film can participate in civic discourse and even influence national attitudes. At a time when our national conversation about race has become, to some extent, merely fragments of monologues, *Twilight* seeks to create a conversation from these fragments. It seeks to be a *part* of that conversation.

Twilight is a document of what I, as an actress, heard in Los Angeles. In creating a “social drama,” I am not proposing a specific solution to social problems. I turn that over to activists, scholars, legislators, and most importantly, to you, the audience. As an actress, I am exploring the process of *becoming something* that I am not — the process of walking in someone else’s shoes. Laws and legislation can create a context in which we can work toward better relations with one another. Yet laws are limited in their ability to teach us how to move from an individual position to a larger community.

We need to reach for the core of our humanity with all its glory and all its challenges. I am looking to illuminate something about our *humanness*. The solutions lie not in my monologues but in the collaborative humanness of audience members

who walk out of the theater with the potential to make change.

You anticipate me before the curtain goes up; I anticipate *you* as the curtain goes down. I await *your* dialogue, *your* dramatic action.

Twilight has been created specifically to encourage dialogue across lines of power and race. More importantly, it has been created to encourage you to act and to move us further along on our American journey to get to “we” the people. Here is a place to start: Use the experience of seeing this film and the thoughts it evoked to start a conversation with someone whose race and social class are different from yours.

Adapted from an essay by Anna Deavere Smith on the making of her stage piece, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which is the basis for the film.



Television Race Initiative
A Project of American Documentary, Inc.



thirteen
WNET NEW YORK



INTRODUCTION

On April 29, 1992, four white Los Angeles Police Department officers on trial for beating Rodney King, a black man, were acquitted, despite a video tape recording of their actions. Los Angeles erupted into three days of violence: 51 people died — 26 of them black, 14 Latino, eight Caucasian, two Asian, and one unknown — and property damage reached \$1 billion. Ninety percent of the Korean-owned businesses in South Central L.A. were damaged.

By crafting a script directly from interviews with people who were there, writer and actor Anna Deavere Smith offers viewers a rare glimpse into an event that has become a historical touchstone in race relations. In *Twilight: Los Angeles*, Smith weaves personal testimonies — which she acts out — with documentary footage and commentary into a unique tapestry of perspectives, emotions, and reactions.

The resulting film is filled with opportunities for opening dialogues on issues that still separate communities: race, class, rage, fear. Those discussions can deepen our understanding of the events and of each other, thus laying the groundwork for change.



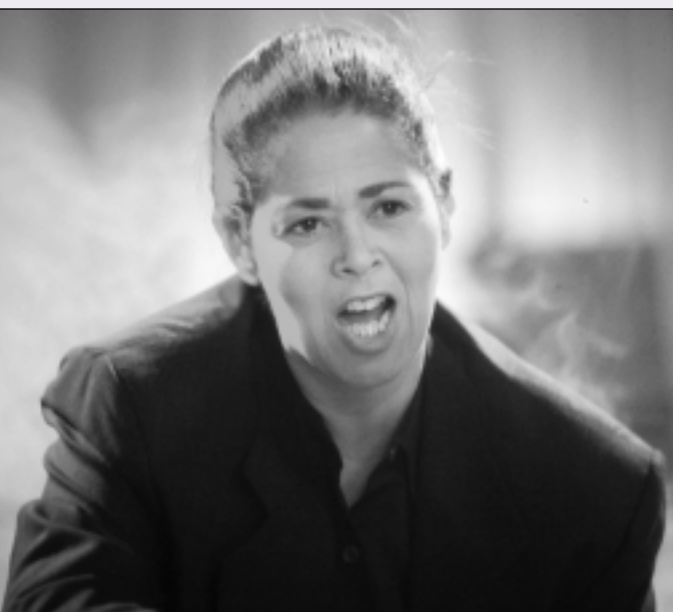
Anna Deavere Smith as Jessye Norman

LEADING THE DISCUSSION

When we discuss topics of racial conflict, we may think we've heard it all before. As a facilitator, you can stimulate people to work toward change by asking them to watch and listen to the film carefully, listen to each other just as carefully, and then take action.

In this country, we all have to do our part to create a more equitable society. As you lead the group, encourage people to start, right then, by saying what they believe hasn't been said about racial conflict and by listening to what others are saying — listening as though they were hearing those words for the first time.

With these ideas as a backdrop, your primary role as a facilitator is to keep things flowing. You can help that happen if you:



Anna Deavere Smith as Mrs. June Park

Open with general questions. If someone asked you what this film was about, what would you say? Does any pertinent quote or moment stand out? What will you remember about the film a month from now? What do you remember about the events in L.A.? Let the group's comments and concerns determine the agenda of the ensuing dialogue.

Distinguish between dialogue and debate. *Twilight: Los Angeles* illustrates a central tenet of media literacy: People interpret what they see through the lens of their own experience. That means people can view things differently. Remind the group to expect differences. The goal of the film is to look at a wound carefully, rather than to rush to "healing." A serious discussion requires "second opinions" and "third opinions" — it **REQUIRES** differing points of view.



Lead by example. As a facilitator, you sometimes may feel like a conduit for all the emotion in the room. But it's important not to get so caught up in the emotion that you take sides, which may silence those who disagree, or to let your personal issues dominate the conversation, which may suppress issues that are important to the group. To avoid being caught off guard by your own reactions, watch the film before your event so that you aren't processing raw emotion and trying to facilitate a discussion at the same time. Know your "hot button" issues. If they come up, remember that your job is to keep the discussion flowing, not to debate others in the room.

Call for action. When art, issues, and events merge as powerfully as they do in *Twilight: Los Angeles*, people may slip into compassion fatigue — that sense of helplessness that can come from hearing too many stories about injustice and people in need. The best way to combat compassion fatigue is to take action, so be sure your agenda includes time for participants to plan action steps specific to their own communities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

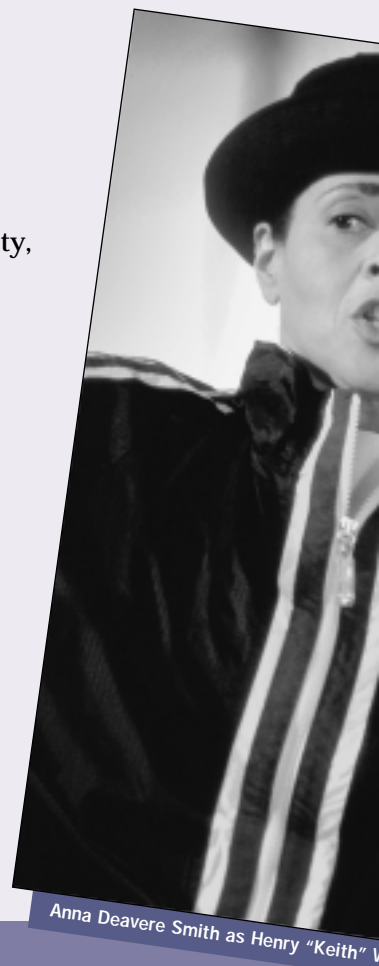
The **personal testimonies** in *Twilight: Los Angeles* show how people's past experiences, backgrounds, values, and expectations influenced their perceptions of events. How did such differences affect:

- The words people used to describe the event — "riot," "uprising," "civil unrest," "revolution"?
- Who people believed? Who they trusted?
- The things that made some people fearful and how much fear they felt?
- How much anger or rage people experienced?
- What actions people chose to take?
- Who owned guns? Who bought guns? Who used guns?

As you **look** at your own experiences and those of others in your community, consider how the following affect people's attitudes and actions:

- Experiencing police brutality directly or knowing someone who has.
- Experiencing government or judicial system corruption directly or knowing someone who has.
- Witnessing racist acts.
- Being the target of racist acts.
- How much money you have or property you own.
- Your U.S. citizenship status or your level of fluency in English.
- The way mainstream media covers an event or community.

After the **Los Angeles riots**, many public officials were quick to ask the community to "heal." In your community, what wounds exist and how would you re-examine them? Discuss what various groups in your community can do to right the kinds of wrongs illustrated by *Twilight: Los Angeles*.



Anna Deavere Smith as Henry "Keith" W.

After watching *Twilight: Los Angeles* with a group, use one or more of the following quotes to start a discussion. Or look at the quotes collectively and discuss which quotes are the most disturbing or most reflect participants' thoughts and reactions.

Alternatively, before viewing the film, see what kinds of assumptions group members make about the speaker's race, class, gender, or occupation. Ask participants to explain their answers. Then, after you view the film, check assumptions against reality.

- a "If white folks were to experience black sadness it would be too overwhelming for them. . . . They got their own kind of sadness . . . but it's a very different kind of sadness. It tends to be linked to the American dream."
- b "No justice, no peace."
- c "The Rodney King verdict had nothing to do with race."
- d "I knew there would be people unhappy with the verdict, but I didn't expect anything near what happened."
- e "We felt like we were pawns in the system and we were being tossed aside."
- f "Riot was the voice of the unheard."
- g "Do I deserve this? Me, personally, no, but me generically, maybe so."
- h "The verdict was just a spark. This was something that was set years before. . . . The system plays unevenly and the people who were the 'they' who were burning down the Beverly Center had been victims of the system."
- i "At a certain point you just have to say, 'Just let me put this out of my mind and go on.'"
- j "On that particular day justice didn't work."
- k "What could I have done anyway besides go to somebody's church to sing a few songs? . . .

a Cornel West, scholar and author; b street chant; c Daryl Gates, L.A. Police Commissioner in April 1992; d and e male juror in the Rodney King beating case; f Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA); g and h anonymous talent agent; i Elaine Young, real estate agent in Beverly Hills; j Henry "Keith" Watson, co-assailant of Reginald Denny; k Jessye Norman, opera star; l Cornel West, scholar and author; m Maria, juror in federal trial of officers accused of beating Rodney King; n Elaine Kim, author; o and p Mrs. Young-Soon Han, former liquor store owner; q Ruben Martinez, author and journalist; r Twilight Bey, community activist

Going deeper: Groups experienced in considering the issues raised in *Twilight: Los Angeles* might follow up by asking this question about the quotes above: Could anyone have made this statement, or would the person have to be privileged or disenfranchised, wealthy or poor, part of an ethnic or racial majority or minority?



Anna Deavere Smith as Cornel West

I don't think people were in the mood to listen or sing."

- l "Optimism and hope are different. Optimism tends to be based on the notion that there's enough evidence to allow us to think things are going to be better. . . . Whereas hope looks at the evidence and says it doesn't look good at all, but we're going to go beyond the evidence to create new possibilities."
- m "We saw that tape over and over again. . . . The first time I saw the tape I was crying and everything. By the end I could just watch it with a soda."
- n "Why are they protecting Beverly Hills and they're not going to protect us?"
- o "They got their rights by destroying innocent Korean merchants. . . and I wonder if that is really justice."
- p "I believe America was the best. I still do. I don't deny that because I was a victim."
- q "There's no more understanding today than there was in 1992."
- r "I know, in order for me to be a true human being, I cannot forever dwell in darkness. I cannot forever dwell in the idea of identifying with those like me and understanding only me and mine."



Watson

TAKING ACTION

1. Follow-up activities can deepen participants' understanding of the issues, themselves, and their community.
 - In the film, Smith acts out two different people's dream of creating a room to memorialize events as they remember and interpret them. If you were to create such a room, what would you put in it? Create a mythical "room" that reflects the meaning you take away from the events in Los Angeles.
 - Near the end of the film, a diverse group of people gathers to talk about the events of 1992 with Anna Deavere Smith. Use a screening of *Twilight: Los Angeles* as an opportunity to invite a similarly diverse group to your home. Talk about your reactions to the film. Share your own stories. Discuss what you can do to foster the understanding that Twilight Bey envisions in the film's final scene.
 - Conduct and document oral history interviews with people in your community. To improve understanding of the source of people's attitudes and beliefs, share the interviews with a group from your school, workplace, family, community center, or other locales.
2. *Twilight: Los Angeles* demonstrates that the roots of racism extend beyond personal beliefs or prejudices. As your group reviews the actions it might take, look for ways that your community's institutions and structures perpetuate racism. Consider whether all neighborhoods are served equally by:
 - ◇ The allocation of government funds — grants, tax breaks, etc.
 - ◇ City or county services — road repair, garbage pickup, etc.
 - ◇ Police department policies — Who receives protection? Who is arrested or stopped most often?
 - ◇ Banks and economic institutions — Where are they located? Where do investment dollars go? Who controls those dollars?
 - ◇ Job creation — Which neighborhoods have high unemployment? What are the barriers to employment?
 - ◇ Schools — Which neighborhoods have well-equipped schools? Which ones can recruit and retain the best teachers?
 - ◇ Elected officials — Do your political representatives reflect the community's racial and ethnic makeup? Who runs for office? Who gets elected?

In areas where you find problems, brainstorm possible responses and ask people to commit to pursuing at least one idea they heard. Generate a list of groups in your community currently working to improve race relations or reduce racial injustice, and contact them. Plan ways to let the media know about the actions the group intends to take.



Los Angeles on fire, 1992

Twilight

LOS ANGELES

Funding and special thanks

Twilight: Los Angeles premieres on PBS April 29, 2001 at 9 p.m. (check local listings) as part of the Thirteen/WNET New York's STAGE ON SCREEN drama series. Major funding for *Twilight: Los Angeles* was provided by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Additional funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Levi Strauss Foundation, and the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund. Developed with the assistance of the Sundance Institute. Fiscal sponsorship by Women Make Movies. Produced in association with PBS and Thirteen/WNET.

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Program information and to obtain VHS copies of *Twilight: Los Angeles*

PBS VIDEO

1320 Braddock Place

Alexandria, VA 22314-1698

1-800-344-3337 shopPBS.com/Teachers

More information about *Twilight: Los Angeles* STAGE ON SCREEN and Thirteen/WNET New York can be found at www.thirteen.org, www.pbs.org/WNET/stageonscreen and www.twilightlosangeles.org

Television Race Initiative (TRI)

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Twilight: Los Angeles is a featured program of the Television Race Initiative (a project of American Documentary, Inc.), a multiyear effort in which diverse, character-driven, high-profile television broadcasts create a framework for sustained community dialogue and problem solving on race relations issues. TRI is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Surdna Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation. To download this discussion guide, visit our Web site: www.pbs.org/pov/tvraceinitiative

Discussion guide

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Resources

www.facinghistory.org
Facing History and Ourselves, a national nonprofit organization that works with educators to bring issues of social justice to the classroom and the community, is working with Anna Deavere Smith on a *Twilight: Los Angeles* study guide. Check the Web site or call (617) 232-1595 for more information. In late April 2001, Facing History and Ourselves will host an online discussion on the Web site of themes the film illuminates.

www.arts-civic.org
Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, founded and directed by Anna Deavere Smith, supports the creation of works of art about social change in a multidisciplinary atmosphere of artists, scholars, activists, and audience members.

www.arc.org
The Applied Research Center is a public policy, educational and research institute whose work emphasizes issues of race and social change.

www.projectchange.org
Project Change's mission is to empower communities to reduce racial prejudice and improve race relations, to serve as a national clearinghouse for anti-racism information resources and training, and to further the development of an infrastructure for social justice work.

www.studyircles.org
The Study Circles Resource Center promotes the use of study circles — small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions that give everyday people opportunities to make a difference on critical social and political issues.