

## **Artist Statement**

Anna Deavere Smith

At the center of my work as an artist is the search for American character. By that I mean: American identity. I have made several plays/performances under the umbrella *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. Educated as an artist in the mid 1970s, starting this search was an antidote to what appeared to be a country in cultural fragments in the wake of the Civil Rights, the anti-war, and the women's movements. I arrived in San Francisco in the early seventies just as the hippies were leaving, and Angela Davis's trial down the road was coming to an end.

The desire to find American identity through theater came from an unexpected place: the pages of Shakespeare. I was trained classically in a conservatory. In the exciting journey to merge myself with Shakespeare's language, as a young actress having her very first experience with the world of theater, I became fascinated with the relationship of rhythm and imagery to identity—at least in dramatic literature. I took this interest into "reality" by interviewing people and studying their speech patterns.

My grandfather once said, "If you say a word often enough it becomes you." This has been my simple acting technique. I have tried for well over four decades to become America "word for word." My goal has been to put myself in other people's words, the way one would think of putting oneself in other people's shoes.

I write plays by interviewing people and weaving segments of those interviews into texts. I then portray all the parts in one-woman performances. In a variety of works, the number of characters has ranged from four people (early work) to 52 people in a single performance. Usually, the plays represent people who have conflicting points of view about controversial and contemporary events. If not that, it is clear that each person holds only part of the story. As the late Johnnie Cochran, American defense attorney, once told me, "There are three sides to every story: yours, mine, and the truth."

In embodying many people, I hope to suggest that if one person could hold so many different points of view in the course of an evening in the theater, perhaps, when confronted with divisive issues, we could hold at least more than one point of view in mind.

I have been chasing "that which is not me" for many years while creating this form of theater. The decision to take this path as an artist came at the very moment that artists from marginalized communities were advised to write about themselves. The artists who followed that directive made a crucial contribution to American culture. They, along with many academics, helped change the canon. My decision to go the other way came out of my desire to solve a personal problem—the discomfort of settling for the notion that I did not "belong" with those different from myself and that they did not "belong" with me.

My journey has been to make the “broad jump towards the other,” seeking to close the gap between the strange and the familiar. The late Mary Ellen Mark, American photographer, once wrote that the camera gave her “the necessary distance” to get close to people. The tape recorder and my acting process—geared towards embodying the physical gestures and vocal patterns of my interviewees—give me the necessary distance to get close to strangers.

The journey I have constructed through my artistic practice has broadened my view of mankind and served as a powerful psychological antidote to the crisis of growing up in a segregated city. I do not believe that we are all the same. My search has shown me that the solution is not to search for sameness or even that which we have in common. I do not look for sameness. I embrace difference as part of our condition. The exciting work is to walk the distance between self and other. Acting as an art form is the best place to do that exploration.

I have sought to create plays in this way for one other reason. I would like others to have the experience of portraying people who are of different, race, gender, and background. The form calls for that and allows the possibility of juxtaposing difference, rather than merging difference. I see this as a powerful learning tool in communities, schools, and organizations.