



CULTURE CLUB

# RADICAL EMPATHY

Next Act's "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" puts us in the midst of a complex world.



PAUL KOSIDOWSKI — FEBRUARY 1, 2016

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 Marti Gobel. Photo by Ross Zentner.

We read people. Accents and inflections, fashion and posture. We make guesses at heritage, ethnicity. Rich or poor, suburban or urban. Southern or New England. California or Minnesota. We're curious. And guarded. Are they part of our tribe? Do I have a history with this stranger? Can I trust him or her? What do we share?

These questions are at the core of Anna Deveare Smith's brilliant works of documentary theater, *Fires in the Mirror*, *Let Me Down Easy* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which is being powerfully revived at Next Act Theatre. Deveare Smith constructs tapestries of experience surrounding landmark events through extensive interviews with the people involved. In the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots—which erupted after the L.A. police officers were acquitted of beating Rodney King—she talked to more than 400 people, recorded them, and assembled excerpts into a piece of theater in which she recreates the “characters” with meticulous detail. We hear about the events through a cornucopia of voices: those directly involved in the riots and those who have something interesting to say about the American experiment in general. Here, Police Chief Daryl Gates shares the stage with Mrs. Young Soon Han, a Korean woman who was shot during the riots; chef Alice Waters coexists with Rudy Salas, a Mexican father and former Brown Beret; former Black Panther leader Elaine Brown speaks in the same space as Beverly Hills real estate agent Elaine Young.



Angela Iannone. Photo by Ross Zentner.

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In the original version, which premiered in 1994 when the riots were still fresh in the national memory, Deveare Smith performed all these parts herself. In the performance version released to theater companies, the characters are divided up among six actors—who play roles deliberately cast against gender and racial categories. The superb cast here is Rammel Chan, Marti Gobel, Angela Iannone, Andrew Muwonge, Andrew Perez and Ryan Schabach. Even though two decades separate us from the original events, *Twilight* still speaks to the challenges of our times.

Call it an exercise in radical empathy, and the cast assembled by co-directors David Ceccarini and Jonathan Smoots draws us in to close relationships with the population of this world. At times, they are alone on stage. But sometimes, they implicitly relate to each other, as with the exchange between Elaine Brown and Paul Parker, leader of the “Free the LA Four” group that rose up to defend the black men accused of beating white truck driver Reginald Denny. Characters will sometime subtly gesture to each other as they move on and off stage, and other times they remain in cool isolation.

The variety of voices is inspiring. It is an American story, after all. And for all the distinctions and differences, there is a through-line of bewilderment, an ever-present thrum of “Why?” But a faint overtone of hope.



*Andrew Perez. Photo by Ross Zentner.*

It's most directly put by Cornel West (played by Perez), in a speech that opens the second act. He speaks of melancholy—of Chekhov's plays and of Coltrane's saxophone solos—that is transfigured by its very expression. And he speaks of the difference between optimism and hope. “I'm a prisoner of hope,” he says. “I'm going to die a prisoner of hope. I will never believe that misery and despair have the last word.”

## Comments

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