

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

In Anna Deavere Smith's Theatre, Grace, Down Easy

Leeza Watstein Mota · Wednesday, August 31st, 2011



Like a doctor of Chinese medicine, Anna Deavere Smith takes the pulse on our ailing society in regards to matters of life and death and healthcare in *Let Me Down Easy* (playing through the weekend at the Berkeley Rep, and airing on PBS next year). “How do you want to die?,” Smith prompts us to examine. In the end, we are exhausted, all used up, “finished ... cup upside down.” In the guise of Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, Smith empties the tea leaves onto the stage littered with clothing and food and the stuff of living from the more than twenty characters she has embodied, during the nearly two hour tour-de-force performance — a cascade of language and ideas. I was privileged to see the show twice and Smith garnered a standing ovation each time, as much for courage and timeliness, as for poetry and skill.

Smith has interviewed a vast array of individuals for the portraits she creates: from Hollywood celebrities and politicians, to world renowned athletes, academics and medical professionals. She has polished with precision these interviews into jewels of monologues, meditations on mortality and immortality. The material affirms many of my deeply held convictions and triggers multiple epiphanies.

First, Smith introduces those who have looked death squarely in the eye, flirted with it and triumphed over it. Elizabeth Streb, “the Evil Kneivel of dance,” describes having accidentally set herself on fire. When asked how she would want to die, Streb responds, “in the middle of a move.” In regards to seven-time winner of the Tour de France and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong, and athletes in general, Washington Post sports columnist, Sally Jenkins remarks: “They are not happy until they are all used up ... they have two deaths, they don’t want that incarnation of themselves to die ... [they] want timeless perfection.” Which draws us into *Vagina-Monologue*-mama Eve Ensler’s observations about our culture. “Death isn’t with us,” she posits, “because it’s too messy ... culture is about getting rid of the mess, limiting the person,” and she goes on to link anorexia and capitalism. It is this kind of seamless transitioning across space and time and disciplines that is the genius and originality behind Smith’s storytelling craft.

Then come tales of triumphs, failures, and social inequities endemic to our healthcare system. Right-wing rodeo bull rider, Brent Williams decries the efficacy of a flat-rate fee structure he experienced in a military hospital; while Dr. Kiersta Kurtz-Burke, at Physician Charity Hospital in New Orleans, had always believed that there was nothing to prevent her from treating all her patients like the “Saudi Arabian Princess coming to the Mayo Clinic,” regardless of economic standing — that is, until Hurricane Katrina, when she experienced first-hand the desperation and

the abandonment routinely encountered by her economically disadvantaged clients.

Individuals facing death — with bravado in the case of former Texas governor Ann Richards, or humor in the case of former film critic Joel Siegel — form the emotional guts of the play. Dr. Eduardo Bruera of MD Anderson Cancer Center acknowledges that we are rather predictable in our repertoire of coping, the way we have confronted other stressful episodes in life — adolescence, divorce, loss, relocations — will often govern the way we confront the end of life. Smith concludes with a series of “conductors,” portraits of individuals who attend upon those facing death.

In the program notes describing her own work, Smith confides, “*Let Me Down Easy* is a great treasure hunt. I’m searching for examples of grace that I can share with the audience.” Smith defines grace as a change in one’s inherent nature that leads them to take a higher ground. It is this humanity that is apparent throughout. Smith never stands in judgment of her characters. She never villainizes those she portrays. With the precision of a surgeon, Smith cuts through the primary interviews to shape revealing portraits. In distilling and articulating pearls of heightened awareness from her subjects, she renders each individual heroic. Smith’s empathy allows us to engage across social, economic and political divides. She nudges us, by example, to infuse our encounters with kindness and receptivity — the willingness to listen.

I am struck once again by the timeliness of the topic of Smith’s exploration. Many could agree that the entire breakdown in Congress over raising the debt ceiling and balancing the budget is really a game of partisan politics in regards to the passage of healthcare reform in 2009. Smith, however, has never been one to steer shy of controversy, as evidenced by her past works: *Fires in the Mirror*, concerning the violent encounters between African-Americans and Lubavitch Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, regarding the race riots following the acquittal of LAPD officers in the Rodney King trial. This time, Smith set out to talk about mortality and the human body when Hurricane Katrina hit, and healthcare reform. How could she not enter into the fray, the eye of the tempest, as it were? “Many of us are disappointed with the health-care system and with the experiences we sometimes have with doctors; however they are incredibly educated people with a very unusual attention to detail, which is intoxicating for a person like me whose whole work is about listening,” she explains. As founding director of the Institute on Arts and Civic Dialogue at Harvard University, Smith is intent on finding “imaginative ways to convene conversations on social issues.” No question, our society and culture at large could benefit from the decorous approach embodied by Smith through her work.

In invoking us to consider how we want to die, Smith is also asking us to consider how we want to live, in sickness and in health, with compassion. *Let Me Down Easy* is a transcendent theatre experience, one that resonates personally, and with any hope, societally, long after the curtain falls, or, in the case of *Let Me Down Easy*, long after the tea is finished, and the cup turns upside down.

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