





I'm delighted to welcome you to the Chicago premiere of Notes from the Field by Anna Deavere Smith, the latest work from her extraordinary series "On the Road: A Search for American Character."

Begun in the late 1970s, "On the Road" has included such landmark plays as *Fires in the Mirror* (in response to the 1991 riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn) and Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 (in the aftermath of the beating of Rodney King).

Widely praised for creating a new form of performance that blends journalistic interviews with theatrical creation, Smith's plays feature verbatim excerpts, vividly capturing the thoughts, words, and emotions of her subjects through interwoven, searing monologues.

Smith says about her process that "it all starts with listening."

Notes from the Field is approximately her 19th play documenting pivotal moments for our nation. Originally performed in 2016, it was hailed by The New York Times and Time magazine as among the best plays of that year, and it was later adapted into a film version for HBO.

To create it, she conducted more than 250 interviews with students, parents, counselors, administrators, prisoners, preachers, and politicians. Some of them had intended to be public figures, and others were thrust unexpectedly into the spotlight by circumstanceparticipants in moments of history.

Collectively, this play features 19 distinct voices discussing such critical matters as the ongoing fight for civil rights, America's justice system, police brutality, and, as Smith attests, "what has come to be known among social scientists, educators, jurists, politicians, and activists as the school-toprison pipeline,"

Though her plays traditionally begin as one-person shows during which Smith astonishingly performs all roles herself, subsequent productions have often featured multiple actors. We're proud to feature three remarkable actresses—TimeLine Company Member Mildred Marie Langford alongside Adhana Reid and Shariba Rivers-led by acclaimed Chicago director Mikael Burke making his TimeLine debut.

This play, at its core, is about disrupting complacency, specifically with regard to America's propensity for incarceration over education, and Smith has said that the goal in all her work is "to inspire action."

It starts with listening.

Here, in the intimate space that TimeLine has called home for 25 years, we're glad to welcome you in to listen. And contemplate.

"Who are we? What do we believe in? What kind of country do we want to be?"

Those are questions that Anna Deavere Smith hopes to provoke-whether we're in an election year or not, because there are no years in which complacency is appropriate.

I don't think it's a spoiler to reveal that the late Congressman John Lewis is featured at the end of the play, and Smith has said that it's because "he personifies both a violent moment in American history-the Civil Rights Movement-and the promise of what American character is all about." It all starts with listening.

Thank you for joining us.



# PLAYWRIGHT Ш WORDS OF AMERICA: NOTES ON ANNA DEAVERE SMITH

Anna Deavere Smith's work has captivated audiences for the last 40 years. She is widely known for pioneering her unique approach to interview-based documentary theatre, also known as verbatim theatre. Smith is a titan of the American theatre, pushing the boundaries of narrative and storytelling.

On September 18, 1950, Smith was the first of five children born to her working class family in Baltimore, Maryland. In an interview with the National Endowment for the Humanities, Smith explains that she was a natural mimic as a child. She was fascinated by the physicality, language, and emotions of others and took them on as her own.

Smith went on to pursue a bachelor's degree in English Literature at Beaver College (now Arcadia University), and received her MFA degree in Acting from the American Conservatory of Theatre. She defines her first encounter with Shakespeare as a defining moment in her training. The bard's use of language, and the way he transformed mere words into a tool to create a profound emotional impact, fascinated her.

Words are what define the very essence of American culture and politics. Anna Deavere Smith has spent

Anna Deavere Smith.



decades finding these words and cultivating our shared language through her plays. She began in the late 1970s with her project titled "On the Road: A Search for American Character."

Her breakout performance was Fires in the Mirror, which she wrote after the murder of a Black child in Crown Heights, Brooklyn in 1991. As immense tension grew between the Hasidic Jewish community of Crown Heights and their Black neighbors, Smith arrived on site to document the response. She conducted extensive interviews with several individuals connected to significant events, transforming their words into powerful monologues that she performed herself at The Public Theatre in New York City as part of their New Voices of Color Festival.

Smith's work continued with her next groundbreaking play, Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992. It chronicled the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, which were in response to a jury's acquittal of the four police officers caught on camera brutally beating Rodney King.

In both plays, Smith meticulously recreated her interviewees' exact words, vocal cadences, and physical nuances. This dedication to authenticity created a one-of-a-kind theatrical experience, blurring the lines between reality and performance. This production garnered her a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship also known as a "genius grant."

Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education is her most recent play. It premiered in Cambridge, Mass., in 2016, and then toured around the country. Smith once again received critical acclaim for her remarkable exploration of race and class through theatrical storytelling. In 2019 the play was adapted into an HBO film, featuring Smith herself.

Anna Deavere Smith's legacy is etched in the annals of not only American theatre, but American history. She will forever be recognized for her innovative approach to documentary theatre, her ability to inhabit a multitude of characters, and her unwavering commitment to social justice. Smith's influence transcends the stage. She channels the transformative power of storytelling, reminding us of the enduring relevance of theatre as a reflection of our shared humanity.

In recent decades, the United States has witnessed a disturbing trend that has come to be known as the school-to-prison pipeline. This phenomenon encapsulates a series of policies and practices within the educational structure that, in many ways, systematically funnel students, especially those from marginalized communities, into the criminal justice system.

Extending beyond the confines of individual schools, the framework of the school-to-prison pipeline is rooted in systemic issues that intertwine education, poverty, and race to exacerbate existing disparities across communities of color. These communities bear the brunt of an unjust system wherein African American and Latino students are statistically more likely to face harsher disciplinary measures, including suspension and expulsion, compared to their white counterparts. The consequences of these punitive measures can be directly linked to implementing zero-tolerance policies-which extend beyond school walls-as they often set the stage for involvement in the criminal justice

Zero-tolerance policies have become a prominent aspect of contemporary disciplinary measures, spanning various sectors such as schools, workplaces, and public spaces. Originating in the 1980s as a response to rising concerns about crime rates, drug abuse, and violence in society, these policies were initially introduced to create a strict and unforgiving approach to specific behaviors. The term suggests an approach that allows no exceptions for particular

system later in life.



Illustration depicting an economy that encourages incarceration over education in the United States. (Youth Justice Coalition)

actions, and mandates severe consequences for any infractions, regardless of the circumstances.

Initially implemented in the criminal justice system—particularly in drug-related cases—these policies were later adopted by governmental institutions, company workplaces, and schools. They became the foundation for the construction of the school-to-prison pipeline, establishing wider consequences that would deeply impact marginalized individuals and communities of color.

Within Chicago's sprawling metropolis, the schoolto-prison pipeline's effects are acutely felt, as stark disparities in resource allocation, teacher quality, and extracurricular opportunities mark the city's educational landscape. As in many other urban areas, the intricate web of poverty, racial segregation, and inadequate educational resources contributes to the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline, resulting in a system that disproportionately pushes students of color, especially those residing in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, toward the criminal justice system.

To comprehend the full scope of this issue, it is crucial to examine the inequity in financial investments made in the Chicago school system. Unfortunately, the numbers paint a disheartening picture, as a disproportionate number of resources are allocated to predominantly white areas. In Chicago, a city grappling with high rates of poverty and violence, the investment into other school systems, affluent communities, and even jails and prisons, often eclipses the dire needs in those underfunded schools, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage for the very communities that need educational support the most. A paradigm shift is crucial for the well-being of individual students and for building a society that values education, equity, and the potential for every student to succeed.

According to *Student Based Budgeting Concentrates Low Budget Schools in Chicago's Black Neighborhoods*, a 2019 study by Stephanie Farmer and Ashley Baber, "low budget schools are concentrated on the South and West Sides of the city while high budget schools are clustered on the North and Southwest Sides." This skewed financial distribution is evident in overcrowded classrooms, outdated educational materials, and a lack of essential support services in Chicago's schools, resulting in an environment that leaves students ill-equipped to overcome the challenges they face, pushing them further down the pipeline toward incarceration.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a persistent problem that necessitates immediate attention and systemic reform. It lies at the center of an intricate interplay of socioeconomic factors, racial disparities, and inadequate resource allocation. Dismantling it requires a shift in perspective—moving from punitive measures to a holistic understanding of the challenges students face, and acknowledging and addressing underlying issues such as food insecurity, mental health challenges, homelessness, and systemic inequalities. This paradigm shift is crucial for the well-being of individual students and for building a society that values education, equity, and the potential for every student to succeed.

Addressing systemic inequalities, fostering a nurturing educational environment, and redirecting resources toward empowering students rather than perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage will construct a more comprehensive and equitable approach to education and facilitate criminal justice reform, which is imperative to break the chains of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Graphic depicting the school-to-prison pipeline. (Rethinking Schools)



#### THE TIMELINE: CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS POLICY

**1954** The U.S. Supreme Court rules in the milestone Brown v. Board of Education case that separating public school students on the basis of race is unconstitutional, ending "separate but equal" policies.



*Woman holds up newspaper headline documenting Brown v. Board decision.* 

1963–1965 A series of walkouts and boycotts occurs in Chicago schools, organized by the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations. Black students and their parents are angered by the lack of both educational and financial resources available to schools with a predominantly Black population. These schools are critically underfunded, and students are not engaged by the curriculum being offered. The walkouts are a step toward securing more funds, more Black teachers, and better coverage of Black history; however, not every student will see progress. Students who walk out of school are met with harsh disciplinary action and most often, expulsion.

**1966** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. comes to Chicago and speaks in support of the school walkouts and the next generation of leaders. At the same time, the first police officers show up in public schools: Off-duty police officers act as security guards. A compelling genre within the realm of dramatic arts, documentary theatre, also known as verbatim theatre, is rooted in the authentic voices of real people and their lived experiences. Through a meticulous process of research, interviews, and the careful selection of verbatim text. playwrights engage in a unique form of storytelling that not only captures the nuances of human existence, but also invites audiences to reflect upon the complex composition of the world around them. It transcends traditional narrative structures to present a vivid tapestry of reality on stage.

Unlike conventional drama that relies on fictional narratives, this genre draws its strength from the raw, unfiltered voices of individuals who have experienced the portrayed events. At its core, documentary theatre is a testament to the dynamic relationship between art and reality, crafting a mosaic of perspectives and weaving together diverse stories to construct a narrative that mirrors the multifaceted nature of truth.

One of the defining characteristics of documentary theatre is its commitment to authenticity, becoming a vessel for the voices that may otherwise go unheard, providing a platform for marginalized communities, and shedding light on stories often relegated to the shadows. Playwrights immerse themselves in the subject matter, conducting extensive interviews with real people who have lived through the events under examination.



*Members of the original cast of* The Laramie Project, *which premiered in February 2000. (Tectonic Theater Project)* 

The transformative power of documentary theatre lies in its ability to bridge the gap between the personal and the universal. For instance, Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's collaboratively created work, The Exonerated, delves into the real-life stories of six individuals who spent years on death row before being declared innocent and released, while humanizing the statistics and headlines surrounding wrongful convictions. The play becomes a powerful tool for raising awareness about the flaws in the legal system and the devastating impact of such injustices on the lives of the wrongfully convicted, allowing the audience to connect with the pure, unvarnished narratives of those who lived through the nightmare of being wrongly accused and imprisoned.

Documentary theatre serves as a mirror that reflects the diverse narratives woven into the fabric of society, exploring themes of social justice, political upheaval, personal triumph, and even tragedies. For example, *The Laramie Project* is an unflinching portrayal of the human experience in the aftermath of a hate crime—the murder of Matthew Shepard. The play, written by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project, delves into the collective psyche of a community grappling with the tragedy, shedding light on the complexities of their emotions, beliefs, and prejudices. Through the

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#### Documentary theatre is rooted in the authentic voices of real people and their lived experiences.

authentic voices of those interviewed, the production paints a nuanced and compassionate picture of a town torn apart by an act of violence, challenging audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about hate and intolerance.

Crafting documentary theatre demands a delicate balance between artistic interpretation and factual integrity. It navigates the ethical terrain of representing real people and their stories and ensuring that the final product honors the truth, while embracing the creative liberties inherent in the theatrical medium. This delicate dance between reality and artistry underscores the responsibility of bringing true stories to the stage. It's a process that Notes from the Field playwright Anna Deavere Smith has mastered, ensuring the amplification of the voices of real individuals and the creation of space for dialogue, empathy, and introspection as audiences contend with the authenticity of the narratives presented and the complexities of the human condition. In doing so, artists hope for audience members to become active participants in the ongoing conversation about the world we inhabit. Documentary theatre emerges not only as a form of entertainment but as a catalyst for social awareness and change.

*JD Williams and April Yvette Thompson in Culture Project's 10th Anniversary production of* The Exonerated, *2012. (Carol Rosegg)* 





Emile G. Hirsch School, located at 7740 S. Ingleside Avenue, circa 1945. (Bill Latoza)

**1968** Hirsch High School students organize a walkout to protest unfair discipline procedures. The main target of this protest is referred to as "the snatch." In an attempt to prevent loitering in the halls, teachers pull students from hallways and put them in their own classroom, regardless of whether or not they are meant to be there. Students miss crucial lessons and are marked as cutting their actual class, leading to further punishment.

**1988** The Illinois General Assembly passes the Chicago School Reform Act, giving Mayor Richard M. Daley control of the initiative to take Chicago Public Schools (CPS) out of the economic crisis they have faced through the 1970s and the greater part of the 1980s.

**1991** Richard M. Daley puts in place a mandate to have two uniformed police officers in every Chicago public school.

**1990s** CPS adopts a Zero-Tolerance Policy. This is an exclusionary measure, meaning it results in the immediate removal of a student from the school, in either a temporary out-of-school suspension or a permanent expulsion.

Zero-tolerance policies begin as a way of preventing contraband substances like alcohol, drugs, and firearms onto school campus grounds, but develop into standard disciplinary action taken against students whose behavior is deemed as defiant or in opposition to the school's code of conduct. The measure unfairly targets students of color and students with disabilities, which will result in their disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion over the following decades.



Director Mikael Burke. During the rehearsal process for TimeLine's Chicago premiere of Notes from the Field, dramaturg DeRon S. Williams (DSW) and Assistant Dramaturg Camille Rose Pugliese (CRP) spoke with director Mikael Burke (MB) about the artistic challenges of this play, staying true to the real people, and the idea of education as an act of love. (DSW) What about this play inspired

(DSW) What about this play inspired you to direct it?

(MB) I have an answer from my head and an answer from my heart. The heady artist in me was so excited about the opportunity to work with actors on transformation and becoming and differentiating a multiplicity of characters.

And in my heart, I was really inspired by what this piece is up to in terms of pointing at the problems that are present—the school-to-prison pipeline, over-policing, incarceration versus education, all of those things, right? Not just swimming in and presenting the trauma, but actually moving us forward and putting that trauma to work, the good kind of work. The kind that gets us to the other side and begins to offer solutions. (CRP) *Notes from the Field* was originally written for a single actor. Is there any significance behind the decision to cast three actors?

(MB) Many productions of Anna Deavere Smith's plays that have happened all around the country have featured a wide variety of numbers of actors and styles of performance. We were kind of looking at a blank canvas. We landed on three because it was the best middle ground to keep the transformational aspect of the storytelling.

(DSW) In this play, Smith doesn't write characters. She pulled directly from interviews or other sources from real people. What's your process for working with the actors to help them approach their portrayals?

(MB) It's interesting, right? In our regular waking lives, right now, for instance, I'm not necessarily planning out what I'm saying. I'm just saying what's coming into my head. None of these people were thinking about what they would say at the end of the interview when they started it. So we have to start with what the words are, and just get them in our body so we don't have to think about it: just like they weren't thinking about the words.

We started with memorization. Then, we layered in the characters—this person is from El Salvador, and they have this accent, and English is their second language, and what does that mean for the word choice here? Thinking about whether this person is a professional public speaker or has never done an interview in their life.

We explore: What question do we think Ms. Smith asked that started this conversation? What pivoted us to this thought over here? Kind of unpacking that for ourselves. It's getting to the bottom of, why do you think the person tells this story and not that story?

It's a really different energy, because this is not poetry. It has not been filtered through a writer

#### "This piece is showing us—person by person by person—that actually, the only thing you need to change the world is already here. It's you."

who is cleaning up the messiness of the way we speak in real time. It's got all of the ums and stops and starts and pivots and circle backs and everything. It's verbatim interviews.

(CRP) We don't have typical characters, and we also don't have a typical plot. So are there any changes you've made to your process of approaching a text?

(MB) I've not worked on a piece like this before, that is really and truly non-narrative based. Here, there's 19 different stories that are pastiched, collaged, mixtaped into what is a very clear and articulate emotional arc.

There's no two-person scenes, there's no dialogue, there's no sort of scenic action and conflict. That's not what this play is up to. So it's been a bit of an adventure to sort of reinvent and reimagine what this process is. It's really about stepping back and just letting the actors do the work that they need to do to get this thing underneath them and inside of them. It's a lot of listening right now. It's a lot of listening.

(DSW) Of the many monologues this play offers, did any resonate with you or surprise you the most?

(MB) I love all of them for different reasons.

When I first read this piece, the one that made me say, "Oh, I really want to work on this play" was Denise Dodson, who we meet in act two. What I so admire and appreciate about her monologue is that there are some people in this play who are speakers, they're orators, they are people who understand and recognize the power of their words and how they string them together in order to have an impact. And then there are other people in this play who are just people. People who are speaking their truth and saying their thing.

They have an equal level of profundity and impact in what they say without necessarily being conscious of how profound what they're saying is. Denise was one of those. I was just so struck by this person who'd been through such a difficult situation, speaking about her past self with such grace and speaking about her past situation with such clarity.

She's not thinking about it in grand terms. She's just thinking about what she has experienced on this earth. And she's saying some things that are at the absolute core of what this piece is about. What it means to 2009-2011 CPS introduces the Culture of Calm (CoC) Initiative, which provides funds for nearly 47 high schools, the majority of them on the South, Southwest, and West sides of Chicago. The CoC's goal is to implement more progressive disciplinary policies, which included counseling, peer juries, and other restorative justice strategies. At the program's conclusion in 2011, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research finds that crime and disorder decreased at a faster rate in Culture of Calm schools.

**2010** CPS spends \$51.4 million on School Resource Officers (SROs)—15 times more than the \$3.5 million spent on college and career coaches.

**2012** The CPS Student Code of Conduct Suspension policy is modified to reduce the length of suspensions. Automatic 10-day suspensions are eliminated, and principals require district approval to suspend a student for more than 5 days.

**2013** The Suspensions and Expulsions Reduction Plan (SERP) is introduced. It eliminates automatic 10-day suspensions, and reduces the maximum of five-day suspensions to three days.

**2016** SB 100, a bill banning the use of zero-tolerance discipline policies, is passed through the Illinois Senate.

**2020** The murder of George Floyd reignites the call to take police out of Chicago Public Schools.



Teacher protests against police in schools. (Getty)

**2022** While the number of police officers in schools has decreased, school committees of parents and faculty vote to keep police officers in 40 schools in Chicago; almost all are located on the West and South sides.

educate someone. What it means to be educated and to be loved, and to love. Education as an act of love.

One that surprises me is also in the second act. It's a man named Steven Campos. He was the one who first revealed to me that not only is this a play about *what* people say, it's a play about *why* people say.

On the page, I found a lot of what he said to be so perplexing and wondered, "why is this in this play?" But witnessing him as he's saying these things, you start to see what's underpinning him. While what he's saying may sound like it is in conflict with what this piece is about, he is a living example of exactly why the piece is here. We need him, we need to hear his side to understand the breadth of what's happening.

(CRP) What do you imagine this play's impact is?

(MB) The impact of this play really and truly sits within the experience of witnessing the play.

We are the interviewer. We are listening. We are in direct conversation with every character that we meet from the beginning. We are spending two hours of undivided, uninterrupted attention with another human being and doing nothing but listening. There's so little of that in the world that we live in.

Everything is so mediated. All these screens are in the way. We're getting our information through this media source and that media source. We don't actually just sit and listen to one another anymore at all.

There is a real profoundness in just simply the act of being at this show. Bearing witness. It demands a different kind of attention than a typical play might.

On top of that, it's pointing to the fact that these issues we have in this country around systemic racism and policing and the school-to-prison pipeline, these are big things that feel so much like the Goliath to all of our Davids. How on earth are we supposed to overcome something so vast and beyond the scale of me when I'm just me, right?

This piece is showing us—person by person by person—that actually, the only thing you need to change the world is already here. It's you. You just have to decide to do the difficult thing, whatever that may be.

If we are willing to sit with one another, to bear witness to ourselves and not push away, deflect, punish,



Mikael Burke at first rehearsal of Notes from the Field.

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NOTES ABOUT OUR NEW HOME

whatever, the parts of ourselves that make us uncomfortable. Then maybe, just maybe, we will be able to move past these horrible, horrible things that keep happening because we keep pretending they don't exist.

I think the play wants us all, when we leave this experience—to be a little braver, to have a little bit more raw courage, as Congressman Lewis says, to go out and continue this work in the world.

To sit with one another in difficulty, in conflict, in disagreement, and still listen and still witness and still recognize that none of us are better than any of us. We're all broken. We're all messed up. And maybe we can get better together.

#### BACKSTORY: THE CREDITS

*Dramaturgy & Research by* DeRon S. Williams *and* Camille Rose Pugliese

*Written by* DeRon S. Williams *and* Camille Rose Pugliese *with contributions by* PJ Powers *and* Lara Goetsch

*Editing and Graphic Design by* Lara Goetsch

Notes from the Field *promotional image design by* Michal Janicki

Backstory is published to accompany each production

#### **OUR MISSION**

TimeLine Theatre presents stories inspired by history that connect with today's social and political issues. Our collaborative organization produces provocative theatre and educational programs that engage, entertain and enlighten.

## THE CAMPAIGN FOR TIMELINE'S NEW HOME

It's time to put TimeLine's mission, values, and remarkable productions into a home of their own, a base for inspiring all communities to re-imagine tomorrow.
- Gary T. Johnson, President Emeritus, Chicago History Museum, and TimeLine Theatre supporter





It's been five years since TimeLine purchased the site for our new home, located at 5035 N. Broadway Avenue (near the corner of Broadway and Argyle) in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood. Four since we began the design process to envision its shape and amenities. Three since a global pandemic upended our productions and planning. Two since we returned to production with the Jeff Award-winning (and Goodman Theatre remounted) *Relentless.* And one since we began 2023 and a series of artistic, organizational, and fundraising milestones rivaling any in our history.

Through it all, you've been with us—curious, supportive, *perhaps* a little impatient (we can relate to that!), but always exhibiting a care and trust in TimeLine for which we are ever grateful.

Tops on our to do list has been raising the funds to support the exciting future we envision. Happily, there is much success to report! So far, TimeLine has raised nearly \$37.5 million in both private and public funds, and the next stages of this thrilling project are just around the corner.

There's much more to come, and we can't wait to keep you posted as this project heats up even more in 2024! In the meantime, you can explore the story of our new home and some of its major milestones—including a detailed update published in December—on our blog Behind the 'Line. Explore via the webpage below or use the QR code at left.

If you'd like to join this project or get a personal update on our progress, please reach out to Chelsea Phillips, Director of Major Gifts, at *chelsea@timelinetheatre.com* or (773) 281-8463 x116.

#### TIMELINETHEATRE.COM / ITS-TIME

## **OUR BIGGEST EVENT OF THE YEAR!**

Step Into Time:

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2024 6:00-10:30PM The Ritz-Carlton 160 East Pearson Street Chicago

> Celebrate TimeLine's unique mission by stepping back in time for an extravagant evening that raises funds vital to our work. Our biggest fundraiser of the year features a cocktail reception, silent auction and raffle, gourmet dinner, and entertainment created exclusively for the event that will celebrate the powerful mix of gospel, blues, R&B, and forms of jazz that created SOUL. Join in person—or support via our online silent auction and raffle!



timelinetheatre.com/step-into-time

ALL NET PROCEEDS BENEFIT THE MISSION AND PROGRAMS OF TIMELINE THEATRE