

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:13	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:22	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My first guest this week is the incredible Anna Deavere Smith. She is an actor, playwright, educator, scholar. Basically, one of the most accomplished human beings in all of American theatre. In fact, she sort of created a form of theatre. Her plays are a bit like documentaries. She conducts interviews, collects stories, and presents her findings onstage, usually in the form of a solo act. 30 years ago, she premiered her play <i>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</i> . To prepare, Anna interviewed over 300 people about the Rodney King beating and its aftermath: police, bystanders, jurors, Angelinos from all different backgrounds. And then, she turned their words—their actual, verbatim words—into a show. In the original production, Anna played every part, representing each person as closely as she could. And I honestly don’t think that it is a stretch to say that <i>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</i> was one of the most important stage productions of the 20 th century. Now, 30 years later, that show has made its return to Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum where it first premiered in 1993. This time around, <i>Twilight</i> isn’t a solo act. There’s a cast of five—different ages, genders, and races. Each one plays some of the characters that Anna played 30 years ago. Let’s start things off with a clip from a filmed production of <i>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</i> . It was shot for PBS back in 2001. In this scene, Anna Deavere Smith recreates a speech given by Congresswoman Maxine Waters. It’s a message to President George H. W. Bush about the persistent discrimination that Black men face in the United States.
00:02:21	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:22	Clip	Clip	<i>[Applause and cheers of agreement from the audience punctuate the speech.]</i> Maxine Waters (<i>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</i>): Mr. President, we want our Black men back on America’s agenda. They’ve been dropped off of everybody’s statistics and data. They’re not in school. They’re not employed. They don’t live anywhere. They go from Grandmama to Mama to mama to girlfriend. And Mr. President, not everybody in the street is a thug or a hood. Not everybody is a criminal. And if they are, Mr. President, then what about your violence? <i>[Upbeat music fades in.]</i> Oh, yes, I’m angry! We are angry. The fact of the matter is, whether we like it or not, riot was the voice of the unheard.

00:03:05	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:03:07	Jesse	Host	Anna Deavere Smith, I'm so happy to have you on <i>Bullseye</i> . Thank you for coming on the show.
00:03:10	Anna Deavere Smith	Guest	Oh, thanks for having me.
00:03:12	Jesse	Host	So, um, when you started preparing to create this new version of your show, did you watch tape of the old one?
00:03:24	Anna	Guest	Well, first of all, the show that I did 30 years ago at the Mark Taper Forum, <i>Twilight</i> , was not recorded as far as I know. It could've been, but I don't remember that. I made a movie that was aired in 2020, but no. I did not look at that when I did the revision of the text for five people.
00:03:50	Jesse	Host	Was it a choice not to record it at the time?
00:03:53	Anna	Guest	You know, they may have recorded it. I don't—I just don't remember if they did or not. And I didn't call the Taper, at any rate, when I was revising the show. Because I—the show was revised for the Signature Theater in New York. And then, as a result of that revision, the Taper invited me to do it in Los Angeles, this revision.
00:04:18	Jesse	Host	Were you worried to revise it?
00:04:20	Anna	Guest	No. It was my choice.
00:04:23	Jesse	Host	Why did you choose that?
00:04:24	Anna	Guest	Um, Signature Theater in New York City invited me to be one of their resident artists. And Paige Evans, who is the artistic director—and we had a conversation. You know, everything pre-covid is hard to track. But well before covid, she and I had a conversation about which of my works would be done at the Signature Theater. The Signature Theater does works of playwrights, works that have—among other things, they invite playwrights to be resident artists—established playwrights—and do some of their previous work and then invite them to write a new play. So, as part of my residency, we produced or Paige produced <i>Fires in the Mirror</i> , a play which I did in 1991 in New York at the Public Theater, and then recently and in London.
			And that play was redone, revised for part of my residency. And then, I decided with Paige to do <i>Twilight</i> . And I was going to revise it for several actors. And that's—so, that's a conversation that happened in, oh, 2017/2018, something like that. And that production would have been in 2020, but because of covid it was postponed and not done until 2021. So, in other words—so, this was something that was in the works for some time, which was to revise the play for five actors. Now, the play had already been intended to be done other than as one-person shows, but I think people tended to think of my work in that one way, as a one-person show. So, this opportunity—therefore—for me to be involved in a production which would make it clear that the work is meant to be done in any size cast was an opportunity that I was really excited about.
00:06:27	Jesse	Host	What do you think is different when it's performed by a group of people rather than performed by a single person? And when that single person is you?
00:06:39	Anna	Guest	Well, I guess the—well, it's different. It's different 'cause it's more than one person. It's different because every actor brings their own humanity to what they're doing. I recall meeting—years ago—very,

very quickly, like backstage, the—Hélène Cixous, the French intellectual Hélène Cixous —and talking about actors. And she said, “Well, first of all, an actor has to have a soul.” And so, any actor is gonna bring a different soul, a different humanity, a different kind of interpretation to the work. So, that’s number one. And then, number two, I haven’t directed it, but I think that probably directing-wise, it might be more interesting to have five people up there than just one.

00:07:32 Jesse Host

[*Chuckles.*] I mean, I think there—I haven’t seen the new production, which is gonna be here in LA soon, as we talk. But one of the things that I imagine must be different is that part of seeing you do the show solo is that the entire thing is colored by a certain kind of virtuosity, right? And that could be—I mean, it’s amazing to see, but I could also see it, you know—I could also see it changing things in ways that you might not prefer. You know what I mean?

00:08:08 Anna Guest

Well, there’s an element of virtuosity as well for the cast of five. I don’t—I haven’t done the math of how many characters they’re each playing, but they’re each playing several different individuals. And those individuals are all very different. And I’m sure if you were to ask them, they would agree that they’re getting a workout. [*Laughs.*] Even though—even though there’s five of them. I will say—and Paige knows I say this all the time ‘cause I think it’s hilarious. With any nonprofit theater, you have to kind of a—you have to have an argument for anything you want because of the economy.

And you know, when we talked about *Fires in the Mirror*, I wanted her to hire two actors. And she said, “No, no, no. We can’t afford that.” And she said—about *Twilight*, she says, “Well, of course, we have to have more than one for that, because who would be able to learn all those lines?”

[*They laugh.*]

Which was very funny to me, having that been the case of my work for so long. Yeah, so I think that there is—I don’t know the virtuosity disappears. Right? Because there still is this challenge of being able to make feasible if not realistic people who are obviously very different from the actors and the persona of the actors to try to make a different persona.

00:09:43 Jesse Host

I mean, I think part of what’s interesting to me about it is you have a cast of people of different genders and races. It’s a show that’s substantially about race, but you can’t represent everyone that you’re representing in the show one-to-one, still. So, it’s sort of like a very different kind of equation of how you are representing each of these individual people.

00:10:11 Anna Guest

Yes. And I don’t think it would be interesting as an art form if it were one-to-one. I mean, I could imagine that there’s a director—maybe from opera, actually—who could think of a way to make that interesting. I think what part of the dramaturgy of it is transitions.

00:10:31 Jesse Host

What do you mean by that?

00:10:32 Anna Guest

Well, part of the dramaturgy is the idea that identity will change. I mean, that’s a given in any—in what drama is, right? An actor plays whatever character, even probably if they were to play themselves in a different time in their lives, it’s not themselves right now in this moment. So—but part of the dramaturgy of this is that people are

playing more than one role. Now, having said that, the first show that I made this way, based on interviews and verbatim interviews, I did in New York in the early '80s. and I had 20 actors to play 20 real people. And nobody had anything in common. I just walked up to people on the streets of New York, basically, and said, "If you give me an hour of your time, I'll invite you to see yourself performed."

So, I talked to the lifeguard at the 63rd Street Y. I talked to Meredith Monk, the great composer. A lot—20 people for 20 people who resembled them. But back then, I was really looking at specifically things having to do with language and identity. It eventually became this other form. So, you could have a show like that, but because I eventually made shows that were on one body, then this aspect that you call virtuosity does become relevant.

00:12:05 Jesse Host

How did you learn how to ask people to go along with this? Not actors. I'm sure actors, you were offering jobs to, and they were grateful. But when you go up and talk to somebody and say—whether it's on the street or in an email, what do you say to somebody that convinces them to be part of one of these projects?

00:12:27 Anna Guest

Well, the beginning was a different era. You know, the 1980s. You know. Different era, different technology. So, you have to imagine a world with no email, certainly no social media. However, it was a world in which something like *Interview Magazine* had been out for a couple of years and people had the opportunity to see how interesting real people were. The talk show had taken off in a different way, where you maybe not always saw famous people. So, I think people were curious about it and said, "Sure," and sat down. And in that way, I don't think I'm any different than folks like, say, Studs Terkel who had a big effect on me—Chicago journalist, the late Studs Terkel. The musicologist, Alan Lomax.

So, I think people were willing to sit down, because they saw it as getting your picture taken kind of thing, like a photographer coming up and saying, "Can I take your picture?" What has changed is that after *Fires in the Mirror* in particular, I pretty much limit the work that I do to real events around which communities have concerns and a lot to say. [Chuckles.] So, they want to be heard because they wanna make—they wanna—they wanna set the record straight for what they saw. Or they want to try to make sense of something like the Los Angeles riots, which was just stunning to some people. And they—most people said yes, 'cause they wanted to talk about it. I talked to 320 people to write *Twilight*.

00:14:13 Jesse Host

Even more with Anna Deavere Smith after a quick break. Stick around. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:14:21 Music Transition

Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

00:14:25 Jesse Host

I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guest, Anna Deavere Smith, created and starred in the one-person show *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. A new production of *Twilight* with a five-person cast is currently running at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

Now, like I've read *Working*, Studs Terkel's famous book and used to listen to him on public radio, back in his later years. And if I imagine myself being a bookkeeper or whatever, being interviewed for Studs Terkel's *Working*, and then seeing my descriptions of what I do in my work down on a piece of paper—I'm aware that

they're being edited and Studs Terkel was very gifted at that, obviously. But it is a pretty literally—it would feel, I think, to me relatively literal even though, taken as read, it's not actually. When I think of someone performing as me, that feels pretty different to me even if my words are exactly the same, just as they are in Studs Terkel's book. So, what do you tell people about that part of it? Or do they ask?

00:15:53	Anna	Guest	I don't usually have to go that far, honestly. You know. Listen, for in the case of, you know—what's also very important is, you know, what are the conditions that you're doing this? By the way, you know of course that <i>Working</i> became a Broadway show, right? Okay.
00:16:12	Jesse	Host	Yeah, I do. That's true. [Chuckles.]
00:16:15	Anna	Guest	Okay, so—and you know, of course, that—
00:16:17	Jesse	Host	I'm ready to produce—I'm ready to produce the Broadway show of <i>The Glory of Their Times</i> , that book about old timey baseball players. That's my favorite one.
00:16:24	Anna	Guest	And you know that Studs was a—you know, a persona and a character in Chicago. I got to know him. And you know, I'd go out to dinner with Studs. I mean, you could not walk down the street without people coming up to him and talking to him and stuff like that. So, I don't know how relevant that was. But in the case of Los Angeles and in the case also of <i>Fires in the Mirror</i> —before anybody knew what I did at all—the driving force is people want to talk about what happened. And then, there's a release that shows—you know—defines what—you know, explains what I'm gonna do. I would say by the time we get to maybe my play about presidents, some people knew what I do.

But the driving—the driving energy is finding people who wanna talk. That's really the driving energy. And then, I explain what I'm gonna do. But I would say the most important thing is that they want to talk. And I do not interview people who don't wanna talk. And if I sit down to an interview and I can see that they don't want to, then I stop the interview in—you know—as gracious a way as I can. And that is because what is required to be onstage, which is different than to be in *The New York Times* or in journalism, is a really strong will to communicate. In order for someone's language, gestural behavior to end up in the—on that stage, which anticipates a drama, they have to have had—they want the world to know. I say that I'm looking for the people who have something to say; they would scream it from a mountain top, and I just happen to be walking by.

00:18:36	Jesse	Host	So, that's reeeally the driving energy about the project. Did this work—is this work stage work because you went to acting college and were an actor and that's just what you were up to, and so when you had ideas about this stuff it naturally translated into the thing you were already doing? Or do you feel like you specifically chose this over pointing a camera at somebody, for example?
00:18:57	Anna	Guest	Well, it was a process. It started out of questions that I had from going to school to train as an actress at the American Conservatory Theatre—no longer, but where I got my MFA when it existed. And I had a lot of questions about what is this magical thing of certain kinds of language actually cause someone to change in front of your eyes? And I was fascinated with that and really wanted to get

down to the nitty gritty of what that was. And the only way I could end up talking about it was: what's the relationship of language to identity? So, I would say that it came out of that question.

And originally, you know, I just started interviewing people. And as I mentioned with that first project that I did, it was an actor and a real person. I probably would've continued in that way and worked to have an acting company that would, for example—you know, go to a certain—go to a warzone or come to the Los Angeles—come to Los Angeles after the uprising and have a whole squadron of people sort of descend and make such a production. But after the first one that I made, I said to myself, "Well, I—I don't—how will I pay everybody?" And I remembered that as a kid, I'd been a mimic. And I thought, "Well, while I'm still trying to teach myself how to do this, I'll just play all the parts."

And that's really the practical reason that it became one-woman. But my cause or my intention was to try to learn more about this mystery! This magic that you could actually say something and give the illusion that you're somebody other than yourself. And I thought, "Maybe this has something in common with prayers or chants or—" *[Chuckling.]* You know—you know, witches' concoctions! I mean, that's sort of where I was originally coming from. And then, I—and then, I ultimately shaped it into what it became. But like a lot of creative processes, you know, you don't—you don't really know where you're headed. I mean, I think the main ingredient is do you have—do you have a big enough question? Do you have a strong enough question?

00:21:21 Jesse Host

And your question was the relationship between language and identity?

00:21:24 Anna Guest

That and also, because of the era in which I was trained—which was the '70s—I was, you know—I was a young, Black woman concerned about stereotypes. And one of the things that seemed to me that caused stereotypes is—well, some stereotypes are just bad will, but others a lack of specificity. So, along the same time that I was developing what then I got credited for as having created a new form of theatre—I was teaching. And I was always trying to get my students to be more interesting in terms of how they sounded. So, you know, this was like—it was a project that had at its center real questions.

00:22:12 Jesse Host

I have a question about how you sound. You're from Baltimore. Did you ever use those kind of, um—I think the right word is diphthong. I'm not a linguist, but the compound vowels that you hear Baltimoreans use sometimes? Where one vowel—what would sound like one vowel sound out of my San Francisco mouth sounds like a couple of them strung or mixed together.

00:22:39 Anna Guest

Well, this is generalization, but I think for the most part—and I left Baltimore in the '70s. I mean, I've gone back to visit my family, but for the most part I think those would be Caucasian Baltimoreans and not Black Baltimoreans. And so, for most of my youth, I grew up around Black people who did not have that accent. When I went to college, people thought I sounded southern. So, if I had an accent—which got drummed out of me *[chuckles]* in acting school; I don't think they do that anymore. They used to talk about something called standard English. Standard American—standard American. It

was affected by African American culture and not by Baltimore in general.

00:23:31 Jesse Host Was—do you think that you were particularly aware of your manner of speech? Not just because you went on to become an actor as a—you know, as a college student and graduate student, but because you had to be very aware of the racial and cultural coding of how you talked?

00:23:54 Anna Guest That's a really complex question. I think the matter of the coding probably changed—started to—or I started to be aware that how I spoke could be other than probably all the way back to junior high school. Being, you know, suddenly in an integrated environment, and a little bit in high school. And in high school, having my brother accuse me of trying to sound White—right? So, [chuckles] I mean, I think your question is all about language and identity. And you know, I was curious too about why aren't we all more original in terms of how we sound? Why do we sound just like our family?

Now, there is actually such a thing as an identical twin in sound. The late Lani Guinier had a sister who was not her twin but who sounded exactly like her. And I met her sister—you know, just like in a lobby of a performance venue. And I was—it was really eerie to actually hear two people who sound exactly alike. So, that's—you know, I wonder why that is. It's so strong, our natural mimicry. And therefore, it also—you call it coding, but it's also a form of how we show which tribe we're in. Right? It's like wearing certain colors in a way. Accents, rhythms, slang. The Brits, of course, have this different level of speaking that—I know people who can do that that reveal social class. So, what is that all about? Why do we organize ourselves that way?

00:25:42 Jesse Host What do you notice when you're talking to someone for one of your theatre pieces? What are you paying attention to?

00:25:51 Anna Guest Well, I'm listening to hear when the way they speak changes, when the rhythms of their speech change, when the—they change volume. I'm waiting for them to get excited enough about what they're saying that they may start to perform. There's a person in *Twilight* who did exactly that. When I was already onstage, someone came backstage to the—to me, at the Mark Taper Forum—and said, "You have to talk to my friend who was a juror in the second trial." People may have forgotten, and certainly people who weren't born or were quite young in the '90s may not know that there was more than one trial with regard to the police officers who had beating Rodney King.

There was the first trial, which came back with all officers not guilty, and that's why there was the uprising or the riot or the revolution, as you might wanna call it—or the events in LA, as some called it, I think to avoid giving it any specific characteristic. And then, George Bush Sr. called for a federal trial. And the juror that this particular audience member felt I should talk to had been in that—had been one of the jurors in that second trial. And so, they actually drove her up from further south in California. And she started to actually perform what had happened in the jury room. Right? So, it was like amazing! It was sort of the absolute perfect example of everything I had been trying to learn about language.

So, what happens when a person has something to say, and they're so eager to give you—really paint the picture that they actually get up out of their chair and on their feet and show you what happened, without me asking that. And that's what Maria, juror number seven I think it was—what she did. Bertolt Brecht, a German dramatist, had written an essay called *Street Scene* that I learned about much—you know, a long time after I started working the way I did. And he writes about how if a—if you go out into the street and there's a car accident and you ask someone to tell you, you know, what happened, that they will immediately create a kind of theatre to let you know what happened, because what had happened is bigger than words themselves can express.

So, my goal when I'm listening to people is when will they stop sounding like it's something that could be written on a page? When is it bigger than what could be written on a page? And that's what—you know, that's what belongs on the stage!

00:28:41	Jesse	Host	But do you mean that like the goal onstage is to capture literally the externalities—the sound of the voice, the way that someone moves in the same way that you are literally capturing the exact words that they said? Or is it about, you know—is it synecdoche? Where something [chuckles] smaller is associated with something bigger? I get my—
00:29:13	Anna	Guest	I don't know that one! [Chuckles.]
00:29:14	Jesse	Host	I think it's synecdoche.
00:29:15	Anna	Guest	You mean the city in New York?

[They chuckle.]

00:29:18	Jesse	Host	Exactly. Are you trying to—are you trying to pick small things to make the bigger thing? Or are you trying to be as literal as possible? Are you trying to create—
00:29:28	Anna	Guest	No. That's a great question.
00:29:30	Jesse	Host	You know, are you trying to find points for an impression? Even if that is not a comic impression? Or are you trying to recreate?
00:29:40	Anna	Guest	Well, again, because of the circumstance in which I'm looking for what I'm trying to find to put onstage is I think that in certain circumstances—and this goes back to <i>Street Scene</i> of Bertolt Brecht—in certain circumstances and certain conditions, people are stage worthy. They do something that has aesthetic value even though they may not know that. But their need to communicate, their need to make sense out of something that is not sensical causes them to become extraordinarily creative. And then, to me, that's very beautiful and is something that people will marvel at. And so, I put it onstage. And it's also because many of the topics that address are topics that people may think, "Well, I heard that before." Right? Or I saw that in the news. Well, if it's already in the news, what can I bring that will be different?

And so, what I can bring is something that has aesthetic value that may cause them to be more emotional. It may cause them to pay attention in a different way. And so, I think it's sort of like the difference between saying—you know, it's like fashion. On the one hand, a lot of fashion is inspired by what a designer may see in the street, but then there's something that designer does to that that takes it to another level. Or you know—I don't know how photographers—I haven't had a chance to talk about how

photographers think about their work now since everybody can take a picture. But what's a picture? What makes an Avedon picture or a Gordon Parks picture or a Mary Ellen Mark picture? What makes those pictures pictures that are different than a drawing or a picture that you took in the old days with your kodak camera, if you see what I'm saying?

So, I don't think there's anything ultimately everyday-life about what ends up onstage. Although, I'm in everyday life to find something that I think is aesthetically beautiful.

00:31:54	Jesse	Host	Beautiful is an interesting word to use. It sounded like an advised choice. Why'd you choose beautiful?
00:32:01	Anna	Guest	Well, I do find speech when people are under duress and trying to—sometimes trying to reclaim their dignity in addition to making sense out of nonsense or out of chaos or to set the record straight. I do find that that profound wish to get across, to communicate, to make a connection, to engage—I find that very, very beautiful.
00:32:35	Jesse	Host	We've got more to get into with Anna Deavere Smith when we come back from a quick break. What's it like to play someone onstage, to use their real words verbatim then have them see themselves in you in real life? What happens if they don't like it? I asked Anna. She'll tell us in a minute. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:32:59	Promo	Clip	Music: Cheery, upbeat synth.

Speaker: With Max Fun Drive in the books, we'd like to welcome our new members and say thanks to everyone who supported us over the years. Welcome! Thanks! And now, onto the sticker sale. A lot of this year's drive gifts and livestreams focused on food. We love how food can bring communities together, but not everyone has access to the food they need. So, we'll split the proceeds from our sticker sale among five US food banks in areas disproportionately affected by poverty. The sale ends Friday, April 14th. Members at the \$10 monthly level and above can purchase any stickers they'd like.

There's also a special Max Fun sticker featuring Nutsy the squirrel that all members can purchase. For more info, head to MaximumFun.org/stickersale. And thanks again for your support.

00:33:52	Jesse	Host	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I am talking with Anna Deavere Smith. She is a playwright, actor, educator. She has created over a dozen one-person plays, each of which is based on hundreds of interviews. These works include <i>Fires in the Mirror</i> , <i>Let Me Down Easy</i> , and of course, <i>Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992</i> . For the first time in 30 years, <i>Twilight</i> has returned to the Mark Taper Forum, right here in LA. It's been updated a bit since its original run. It's no longer a one-person show. Now, it has a diverse cast of five. Let's get back into my interview with Anna Deavere Smith, who wrote the play.
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When I was in middle school, not that long before I probably saw your work for the first time, I had this music teacher—like a music appreciation teacher who played the Steve Reich piece "Different Trains" for us. And that is now 30 years ago. And in my head since

then has been, *[singing]* “From Chicago, from Chicago to New York.” It’s this piece that recreates with music the sound of speech. Right?

[Anna confirms.]

And I wonder *[chuckling]* what it’s like for you to be watching tape or listening to tape of a conversation that you had with someone intent on recreating the aesthetic part of that conversation and holding onto the meaning part, the story that you’re telling and the story that they’re telling at the same time.

00:35:41 Anna Guest

Well, first I wanna just mention that the minimalist musicians—the work of the minimalist musicians had a huge effect on my work back then in—you know—1980—uh, the late ’70s, 1980, fresh out of school, trying to understand the relationship with language to identity. I happened upon this like day-long festival or two-day festival of minimalist music. Meredith Monk, Steve Reich. Steve Reich’s music for 18 musicians has had a huge effect on how I started to think about—in the process of me thinking about what language is and the music of language. John Adam’s work had a huge effect on me. So, those minimalists actually—you bring up Steve Reich.

That—the drama inside of that music and the way repetition works and the way that words work and the little plays that are sort of suggested in that music had a big effect. So, it’s interesting that you evoke Steve Reich. So, now I’ve lost the question you were asking me because I became...

00:36:54 Jesse Host

The question was how do you hold those aesthetic things at the same time as you’re holding the meaning things and the storytelling things.

00:37:03 Anna Guest

Well, because there are two different things going on. Right? There’s writing. There’s the writing. So, if someone—somebody’s talking to me and I’m listening for these beautiful architectures that I know they’re eventually going to make in the course of an hour, and I also know who I just talked to. And so, I’m already assembling in my mind how these fragments are all gonna go together to make a story. And I’m interested in a variety of points of view, so I’m looking for that. So, there’s all that stuff. And I come into the rehearsal hall always with—you know—much more than can possibly ever be onstage. Say four hours of first performance, just four hours.

And then, in the course of discussion with the director and the dramaturgs, I usually like to set up a situation where they’re gonna argue. I listen to them argue. I go home, and I come back with a completely different play. So, there’s the writing of it, and then it’s the learning of it, where I’m sitting with another person and I’m learning the words. And as I sort of learn those words and kind of therefore am squeezing out this incredible essence in the words, I’m not just learning about that person, but I’m learning a lot about the world that they live in, the world as they see it. And I suppose that’s an original thing that I thought could happen if I were to interview people in my own lifetime, that if somebody were to come across a tape that I made, say of the Los Angeles riots, that the words—even if it was just like, you know, two inches of—‘cause originally, I started on these cassette tapes—two inches of tape that

if they paid attention they would learn not just the events that happened or the meaning, but something about the essence of how this individual who spoke was in the world.

So, I think that the language that we speak is a testament not just to us trying to communicate something like—you know—give me a large coffee latte with Sweet n Low, whatever, but that sometimes those words and the way they come out are like a fossil, really. A fossil of what happened and how they lived.

00:39:37 Jesse Host

Do people come up to you and tell you what they think you got wrong?

00:39:42 Anna Guest

Sure! Yeah. Yeah, they do. Perfect example is a woman who I perform in *Let Me Down Easy*, Ruth Katz, who I didn't even know she'd seen it and came up to me a year or so later and said, "I don't have a Long Island accent."

[They laugh.]

And then, you know, I went back to work, and I worked very hard on her accent, which is from Atlantic City, and she ended up being one of the first characters who ever— So, me, I'm a playwright as well as an actor, and here's a character in my play giving me a party. [Chuckles.] Same was the case of Stanley Sheinbaum, former police commissioner gave a party—opening night party after *Twilight*, 30 years ago. And you even saw that in the film he gave a small dinner party, to which he even invited the man he'd fired, Daryl Gates. So, um, yeah! They—sometimes people tell me. And to me, that's a part of the process, to go back and—you know—listen again and to watch again and to keep working.

You know, look, I can never be them. I can never be them. My—one of my colleagues, Richard Schechner, who's among those who created the discipline of performance studies, talked to me one time about how an actress is trying her best to—you know—be Medea in a show, say for example. And she's not—it's just not happening. You know? And she's not Medea. And you know, the director's telling her it's not Medea, and she's so out of sorts that she doesn't feel like herself anymore. So, she's not Medea. She's not herself. She's not-not, which is a double negative but a positive. And so, I understand that I'm only living in the reach. Right? I can—I know I can never be anybody. All I can do is reach by trying to pay as much attention as possible to reach this person who is very different. Or even when I first sit down with a tape recorder who is a stranger.

And somehow, in the course of learning about them, I feel as though I'm getting closer to what their intentions are, but they may come to the show—as was the case 30 years ago with *Twilight*—and not even have remembered that I came to their house and sat down with a tape recorder, except that—you know—a couple months later, the Taper invited them to come to the opening of the show, which was the case.

00:42:24 Jesse Host

Do you feel scared now that you're gonna get it wrong?

00:42:30 Anna Guest

Um. We can only get it wrong. I mean, how we live now—I spent the summer working with teenage girls, young women, 'cause I wanna know more about how they see the world and decided I

would expand what I do beyond the one-to-one interview to actually create labs where I could learn about them. And I kept saying over and over to the group of artists who were going with me, a diverse group of artists, “We will get it wrong. We can only get it wrong.” And so, what do you do given the fact that the likelihood is you’re gonna say the wrong thing, you’re gonna get it wrong? Well, I think the first thing you do is apologize.

But the very important thing that I’m learning about and I’m taking this from my good friend, the legal scholar Patricia Williams—given the fact that in particular right now, particular right now, we’re so suspicious of one another, then we have to proactively try to create working environments of goodwill. Because we can—I don’t know anybody who gets it right. Do you? I don’t. So, I understand. But I’ve always understood. I mean, look, I was *[laughing] [inaudible]* of a June Jordan poem—it’s “Poem About My Rights”, which is all about all the signals she got that she was wrong. You know, she had the wrong hair, the wrong nose, the wrong this, the wrong that. And she had to come to the conclusion that, you know, she wasn’t wrong. Well, there were many indications from the time I was about five years old that, you know, I got something wrong. So, I’m used to the wrongness. And the best thing you can do given that fact is to work on ways of engaging in spite of it.

00:44:38 Jesse Host

Well, here in Los Angeles, I’m getting drowned out by sirens and a police helicopter, which seems a little too on the nose.

00:44:45 Anna Guest

On the nose!

00:44:47 Jesse Host

[Chuckles.] But I’m grateful for this time you’ve taken to talk to me. It was a real honor, and your work has had such an impact on my life. So, thank you for it.

00:44:56 Anna Guest

Well, thank you and—you know, I hope I’ve said something useful.

00:45:00 Jesse Host

I’ll tell you what. I saw it way back when, and it was transformative for me and my way of thinking of the world. So, thank you for it.

The brilliant Anna Deavere Smith. A pleasure and an honor to talk with her. Someone who inspired me when I was 13 years old and has continued to ever since, just one of the great geniuses of American theatre, as you could probably tell. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* is currently showing at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

00:45:35 Music Transition

Easy synth with a steady beat.

00:45:36 Jesse Host

That’s the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Although, I did something that always makes me feel like a king. I’ve maybe done it like two or three times, which is the other day I flew to Oakland and back in the same day like some sort of important businessman. I was actually just visiting my mom, but I felt like a—I felt like a real globetrotter going through the Burbank airport twice in one day.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellows at Maximum Fun are Tabatha Myers and Bryanna Paz. We get some booking help from Mara Davis. Our music is provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. The theme song at the top of the show is “Huddle Formation” by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

00:46:44 Promo Promo

Bullseye is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook and you can find us in all those places. I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]