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THE L.A. RIOTS: 20 YEARS LATER; 'Twilight's' power has yet to dim as artists pick up its torch

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When Anna Deavere Smith first staged her one-woman docu-play "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992," a myopic journalist pointedly asked her, "Don't you think your work will have a brief shelf life?"

Two decades later, the answer is "in fact, no," Smith said by phone. And the reason her work is still relevant, she continued, is "because this problem has been around for a long time."

That problem, which "Twilight" memorably illuminated, was the smoldering ethnic and social tensions that blew up in a fireball of rage in Los Angeles on April 29, 1992.

For performing artists in the two decades since the riots there has been a parallel problem: how to wrestle with and portray events that deeply scarred Los Angeles and shook up its self-image as a bastion of multicultural tolerance, events that many Angelenos are too young to remember and others might prefer to forget.

"There was a complete shift in the way people in Los Angeles viewed themselves that day," said visual-performance artist Harry Gamboa Jr., whose 37-minute video "L.A. Familia," made in the wake of the '92 civil disturbance and completed in 1993, depicts a displaced family whose dysfunction mirrors their imploding city.

"I had grown up in the 1950s looking at B movies and various disaster movies, and L.A. had taken on mimicking its own myth," Gamboa said of his film, which he calls "an absurd narrative of loss and pseudo-redemption."

This spring, 20 years after a tsunami of arson, looting and racially targeted violence swept the city after the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King, a handful of local performing artists and actors are reengaging with L.A.'s worst-ever civic trauma and its complicated legacy. Some are creating new work. Others are revisiting Smith's Tony-nominated play in search of fresh insights.

At the 80-odd-seat Skylight Theatre in Los Feliz Village, Katselas Theatre Company is reprising "Twilight" with a multiethnic cast of 25 performing many of the characters originally all portrayed by Smith in the play's world-premiere staging at the Mark Taper Forum in June 1993, on Broadway a year later, and in a 2000 PBS film version.

Based on Smith's hundreds of hours of interviews with nearly 300 real-life subjects, the dramatis personae included former Police Chief Daryl Gates, truck driver and mob victim Reginald Denny, a female Korean storekeeper and former Black Panther leader Elaine Brown.

But full casting isn't the new production's only twist. In director Leila Vatan's staging of "Twilight," a simulation of the riot involves actors tossing furniture, bouncing off walls in anger and hauling off a TV set while glowering menacingly at the audience. At one point, a white actor playing a police officer kicks a black rioter in the head. Break-dancing and other kinetic choreography are used to

represent riot-related actions that Smith's work evoked but didn't explicitly represent.

"What [Smith] did is amazing because she embodied each character. But to create the experience of the riots and then get people's perspective, it's very moving," said John R. "J.R." Davidson, who plays Keith "Kiki" Watson, an African American ex-Marine and married father who took part in Denny's near-fatal beating but later repented of his actions.

Katselas isn't the only local company letting the riot's emotions bubble to the surface once more. Just a mile and a half away, at the Company of Angels in the Los Feliz-Silverlake area, the nonprofit theater's playwrights group is presenting "L.A. Views V: April 29, 1992," a series of eight short plays by different authors all set during the time of the disturbance.

Across town, Watts Village Theater Company has launched "Riot/Rebellion," a multi-year project exploring three episodes of L.A. civil unrest. It will develop performances and site-specific interventions based on eyewitness accounts of the 1965 Watts uprising as well as deal with the 1992 conflagration and the 1943 Zoot Suit riots, in which non-Latino white U.S. servicemen brawled with Mexican Americans and African Americans.

Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, Watts Village's artistic director, said one of the project's main goals is to help preserve the historical memory and suppressed viewpoints of L.A.'s marginalized ethnic communities. "It's all about who controls the narrative," Aviles-Rodriguez said. "The first draft [of the Watts riots] was written by the media, a media that knew about as much as the media knows now about Watts, which is not a lot."

Yet the small number of arts initiatives related to the riots' anniversary surprises Gary Grossman, Katselas' producer-artistic director. When company members first approached him about doing "Twilight" this year, Grossman told them he didn't think he could obtain the rights because other L.A. theaters would be clamoring for them.

When he learned that he could get them, "I was shocked," Grossman said. "I think it's taken for granted. It's like, 'We did this subject already. We're into other subjects.' "

'Twilight' standard

For many, "Twilight," originally directed by Emily Mann, remains the single most influential art work to emerge from the riot's ashes and surely "the most comprehensive literary response," as Times book critic David Ulin wrote in an essay last week.

"Twilight" followed in the tradition of politically engaged theater of the 1930s and '60s. Depression-era works produced by the Federal Theatre Project and three decades later by activist ensembles such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and El Teatro Campesino had pioneered the fashioning of verbatim interviews, court transcripts and other documentary materials into the stuff of high drama.

Smith began honing similar methods in the early 1980s with the project she dubbed "On the Road: A Search for American Character." They coalesced in "Fires In the Mirror," her award-winning one-woman show about a violent fallout from rising tensions between Jews and blacks in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in August 1991, and later in "Twilight."

That approach has since been adopted by playwrights such as Moises Kaufman in "The Laramie Project," about the murder of gay Wyoming university student Matthew Shepard in 1998.

"I hear from people all over the world who are doing this type of work," Smith said, "trying to tell the story of a community by getting the most vocal and the least vocal people to talk to you."

Gordon Davidson, who as founding artistic director of the Taper oversaw the development of "Twilight," said that Smith's talent, empathy and commitment enabled her not only to summon an entire city of characters on-stage but to create a diverse community inside the theater itself.

"What's unusual with Anna's work is that both emotions and the mind were being challenged and the rules of the game were different because you were sitting next to people in the theater you might not necessarily be sitting next to," Davidson said.

Crafting work that engages with the themes Smith raised but moves them forward into a 21st-century context is one challenge facing groups like Katselas and Watts Village. Although he calls "Twilight" "a seminal piece" that "was very influential in our work," Aviles-Rodriguez said, "we can't reinvent that if we wanted to."

Instead, he said, his company is developing "Riot/Rebellion" using ensemble-based material-shaping methods similar to those of Britain's Joint Stock Theatre Company, which workshopped Caryl Churchill's "Cloud Nine," a landmark play set in London and British colonial Africa that scrambles time, theatrical genres and gender and ethnic stereotypes.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, a generation of emerging theater artists like Smith, filmmakers such as Spike Lee and John Singleton, and a posse of socially conscious hip-hoppers put ethnic and social conflicts on the front burner of U.S. popular culture. Edward Hong, a Katselas company member, said that today it may be more difficult to produce a work that can galvanize cultural awareness the way that "Twilight" and Lee's "Do the Right Thing" did in their time.

But he believes new tools are at hand for exploring current polarizing events like the February shooting of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida.

"What I've come to notice, especially with Trayvon Martin, is that there have been so many PSAs or like shorts dedicated to Trayvon Martin," Hong said.

"And they're not famous filmmakers, they're just everyday people who got really upset by this and they said, 'Hey, I want to create something to tell my world what I feel about this.' This generation, they're making their own 'Do the Right Things' by just putting it on YouTube."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: THE KATSELAS Theatre Company's take on "Twilight" features a multiethnic cast and lively choreography. **PHOTOGRAPHER:**Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times **PHOTO:** HARRY GAMBOA Jr.'s 37-minute video "L.A. Familia," made in the aftermath of the 1992 riots, interprets the city's dysfunction through the trials of one family. **PHOTOGRAPHER:**Harry Gamboa Jr. **PHOTO:** CHARACTERS come to life in Anna Deavere Smith's "Twilight." **PHOTOGRAPHER:**Jay Thompson

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