



**CULTURETALK WITH ANNA DEAVERE SMITH AND JULIA WOLFE:
THE ARTIST'S VOICE IN TIMES OF CRISIS**

LISA GAYE DIXON, MODERATOR

Wednesday, February 19, 2020, at 7:30pm

Colwell Playhouse

PROGRAM

CULTURETALK WITH ANNA DEAVERE SMITH AND JULIA WOLFE: THE ARTIST'S VOICE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Lisa Gaye Dixon, moderator

CultureTalk is a collaborative initiative of the Office of the Dean of the College of Fine + Applied Arts, the Center for Advanced Study, the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, and Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. CultureTalk events aim to foster awareness, discourse, and understanding of the relationships between the arts, culture, and contemporary society. This evening, playwright/actor/educator Anna Deavere Smith is joined by composer/educator Julia Wolfe and moderator Lisa Gaye Dixon, Illinois Theatre Producer and Chair of the Acting Program.

Smith is the founding director of the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue at New York University (NYU) where she is also university professor at Tisch School of the Arts. This facilitated conversation will provide a special opportunity to hear perspectives from “the American theater’s most dynamic and sophisticated oral historian” in the context of the complexities and challenges of our own time (*The New York Times*).

Winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in Music, a MacArthur Fellow, and Musical America’s 2019 Composer of the Year, Julia Wolfe is the co-founder/co-artistic director of New York’s legendary music collective Bang on a Can and the Artistic Director of Music Composition at NYU Steinhardt. Wolfe’s 2019 large-scale work for orchestra and women’s chorus, *Fire in my mouth*, was described as “a monumental achievement in high musical drama, among the most commandingly imaginative and emotively potent works of any kind that I’ve ever experienced” (*The Nation*).



Anna Deavere Smith appears by arrangement with:

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PROFILES

Playwright, actor, and educator **ANNA DEAVERE SMITH** uses her singular brand of theatre to explore issues of community, character, and diversity in America. The MacArthur Foundation honored Smith with the “Genius” Fellowship for creating “a new form of theatre—a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism, and intimate reverie.”

Best known for crafting more than 15 one-woman shows drawn from hundreds of interviews, Smith turns these conversations into scripts and transforms herself onstage into an astonishing number of characters. In her speaking events, Smith discusses the many “complex identities of America” and interweaves her discussions with portrayals of people she has interviewed to illustrate the diversity of emotions and points of view on controversial issues.

Her most recent play, *Notes from the Field*, looks at the School-to-Prison Pipeline and injustice and inequality in low-income communities. Winner of an Obie Award and the 2017 Lortel Award for Outstanding Solo Show, *Notes from the Field* was named one of the Top 10 plays of the year by *Time* magazine. The film adaptation of *Notes from the Field* is available through HBO, while the paperback adaptation is a collection of students and teachers, counselors and congressmen, preachers and prisoners discussing their direct and indirect experiences with the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

In 2012, Smith was awarded the National Humanities Medal, presented by President Obama, and in 2015, she was named the Jefferson Lecturer, the nation’s highest honor in the humanities. She also is the recipient of the prestigious Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, a

Guggenheim Fellowship, and most recently, the 2017 Ridenhour Courage Prize and the George Polk Career Award for authentic journalism.

Smith’s breakthrough plays, *Fires in the Mirror*, a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize, and the Tony-nominated *Twilight: Los Angeles*, tackle issues of race and social inequality that have become touchstones of her work. Her portrayals of patients and medical professionals in *Let Me Down Easy* delivered a vivid look at healthcare in the United States. The show aired on PBS’ *Great Performances*.

Currently, Smith appears on ABC’s hit series *Black-ish* and the ABC legal drama *For the People*. She is probably most recognizable as the hospital administrator on Showtime’s *Nurse Jackie* and the National Security Advisor on NBC’s *The West Wing*. Her films include *The American President*, *Rachel Getting Married*, and *Philadelphia*.

Smith is the founding director of the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, which was launched at Harvard University and is now housed at New York University where she is a professor at Tisch School of the Arts. Her books include *Letters to a Young Artist* and *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines*.

She has been an Artist-in-Residence at MTV Networks, the Ford Foundation, and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Smith was appointed to Bloomberg Philanthropies’ 2017 United States Mayors Challenge Committee, a nationwide competition urging innovative solutions for the toughest issues confronting US cities. She holds honorary degrees from Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, and Julliard, among others.

JULIA WOLFE's music is distinguished by an intense physicality and a relentless power that pushes performers to extremes and demands attention from the audience. She draws inspiration from folk, classical, and rock genres, bringing a modern sensibility to each while simultaneously tearing down the walls between them.

The 2019 world premiere of *Fire in my mouth*, a large-scale work for orchestra and women's chorus by the New York Philharmonic with The Crossing and the Young People's Chorus of New York City, received extensive acclaim—one reviewer called the work "a monumental achievement in high musical drama, among the most commandingly imaginative and emotively potent works of any kind that I've ever experienced." (*The Nation* magazine) The premiere recording of *Fire in my mouth* was released on Decca Gold and recorded live during the world premiere. It has received two Grammy nominations (best contemporary classical composition and best engineered classical album). The work is the third in a series of compositions about the American worker: 2009's *Steel Hammer*, which examines the folk hero John Henry, and the 2014 Pulitzer prize-winning work *Anthracite Fields*, a concert-length oratorio for chorus and instruments that draws on oral histories, interviews, speeches, and more to honor the people who persevered and endured in the Pennsylvania Anthracite coal region. Mark Swed of the *LA Times* wrote *Anthracite Fields* "captures not only the sadness of hard lives lost . . . but also of the sweetness and passion of a way of daily life now also lost. The music compels without overstatement. This is a major, profound work."

Other recent works include a new quartet for So Percussion, *Forbidden Love* (played on string instruments) commissioned by Carnegie Hall, The Los Angeles Philharmonic's *Noon to Midnight*, and the Kennedy Center; a new work for orchestra, *Fountain of Youth*, commissioned by Carnegie Hall, The New World Symphony (who gave the work's premiere), and a consortium of orchestras: Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and San Francisco Symphony.

Premieres this season include: *Flower Power*, a concerto for the Bang on a Can All-Stars co-commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Danish National Symphony; a new work for the Yale Institute of Sacred Music with mixed ensemble; a work for 12 flutes, commissioned by the National Flute Association and premiered by 12 separate ensembles (144 flutes); and a new, large-scale work for orchestra with the vocal ensemble Lorelei, which receives its premiere in the fall of 2020.

Wolfe has written a major body of work for strings, from quartets to full orchestra. Her quartets, as described by *The New Yorker*, "combine the violent forward drive of rock music with an aura of minimalist serenity [using] the four instruments as a big guitar, whipping psychedelic states of mind into frenzied and ecstatic climaxes." Wolfe's *Cruel Sister* for string orchestra, inspired by a traditional English ballad, was commissioned by the Munich Chamber Orchestra and received its United States premiere at the Spoleto Festival. *Fuel* for string orchestra is a collaboration with filmmaker Bill Morrison, and *Spinning* is a multi-media work written for

cellist Maya Beiser with visuals by Laurie Olinder. She has collaborated with theater artist Anna Deveare Smith, choreographer Susan Marshall, visual designer Jeff Sugg, and director François Girard, among others. Her music has been heard at venues throughout the world, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the Sydney Olympic Arts Festival, Muziekgebouw (Netherlands), Barbican Centre (United Kingdom), Settembre Musica (Italy), Theatre de la Ville (France), among others. Her music has been recorded on Cantaloupe Music, Teldec, Universal, Sony Classical, and Argo/Decca.

In addition to receiving the Pulitzer Prize, Wolfe was a 2016 MacArthur Fellow, she received the 2015 Herb Alpert Award in Music, and was named Musical America's 2019 Composer of the Year. She is co-founder/co-artistic director of New York's legendary music collective Bang on a Can, and she is Artistic Director of NYU Steinhardt Music Composition. Her music is published by Red Poppy, Ltd. (ASCAP) and is distributed worldwide by Ricordi/Universal Music Classical.

LISA GAYE DIXON, Associate Professor at the University Of Illinois, is a teacher, director, actor, and poet, who has worked professionally across the country and around the globe. She began her professional career with Steppenwolf Theatre in a revival of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, and has been seen on the stages of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the New Globe Theatre in London, and regionally at the Attic Theatre (Detroit, Michigan), Performance Network (Ann Arbor, Michigan), Lost Nation Theatre (Vermont), The Kitchen Theatre (Ithaca, New York), GEVA Center (Rochester, New York), the Illinois Shakespeare Festival, and Milwaukee Shakespeare. Recent projects and performances include: *A Christmas Carol* at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, a west coast premiere of her one-woman show entitled *My Case Is Altered: Tales of a 21st Century Roaring Girl*, *Aunt Ester* in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, and directing a world premiere new work *Pshitter!—A Drinking Song for the Year of Our Lord 2020*.

Dixon's film credits include *The Trouble with Men and Women* (BBC/IFC), *Leading Ladies*, *USING*, and most recently the title role in the film *Ruby*.

At the University of Illinois, Dixon has directed several productions for the Department of Theatre on a wide range of topics, all dealing with a range of social and political issues, and all addressing and revealing the common threads of humanity and the universality of experiences across racial, cultural, class, economic, gender, and sexual lines, all while revealing and reveling in the absurdities of life.

She likes chocolate.