Fires in the Mirror is a play created and performed by Anna Deavere Smith based on the outbreak of racial violence in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York in 1991. A seven-year-old African American child was killed by a car in the entourage of the local Hasidic religious leader and, in apparent retribution, a young rabbinical scholar was stabbed to death while surrounded by a group of Black men. In an interwoven series of brief monologues, Ms. Smith presents 26 characters based on verbatim excerpts from interviews conducted with her subjects. The play seeks to facilitate intercultural exchange and public discussion about sexual and racial politics, ethnic identity, and multiculturalism. The piece premiered at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York.

In an introduction to her play Anna Deavere Smith says, “To me, the search for character is constantly in motion. It is a quest that moves back and forth between the self and the other... There is a gap between the perception of a place and the individuals who are responsible for keeping that perception alive. The individuals inside are frequently fighting that their individual voice be heard, while the walls of the place, which are the mask, wear tradition.”

Deavere continues, saying, “I have been going to the places where this tension is evident to find American character. Can this tension be productive, or will it explode and in the process kill and maim those who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? How can some of us intervene? My answer to the first question is yes, this tension can be productive, in so far as it causes motion, and that we watch and document the motion. To do that, we have to interest those people around us in motion, in moving from one side to the other, in experiencing one hand and the other hand, and to building bridges between places. My answer to the second question is that one kind of intervention is the intervention of listening. We can listen for what is inconsistent. We can listen to what the dominant pattern of speech is, and we can listen for the break from that pattern of speech. This applies to individuals, and this applies to groups. The break from the pattern is where character lives, and where dialogue, ironically begins, in the fighting that their individual voice be heard, while the walls of the place, which are the mask, while surrounded by a group of Black men. In an interwoven series of brief monologue, Ms. Smith presents 26 characters based on verbatim excerpts from interviews conducted with her subjects. The play seeks to facilitate intercultural exchange and public discussion about sexual and racial politics, ethnic identity, and multiculturalism. The piece premiered at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York.
In the meanwhile it was two. Angela was on the ground but she was trying to move. Gavin was still. They was trying to pound him. I was the father. I was 'it, chucked, and pushed, and a lot of sarcastic words were passed towards me while I was trying to explain: It was my kid! These are my children. The child was hit you know. I saw everything, everything, the guy radiator burst all the hoses, the steam, all the garbage buckets going along the building. And it was very loud, everything burst. It’s like an atomic bomb. That’s why all these people coming round wanna know what’s happening. Oh it was very outrageous. Numerous numbers. All the time the police saying you can’t get in, you can’t pass, and the children laying on the ground. He was hit at exactly eight-thirty. Why? Why?

My child, these are the things I never dream about. I take care of my children. You know it’s a funny thing, if a child get sick and he dies it won’t hurt so bad, or if a child run out into the street and get hit down, it wouldn’t hurt me. That’s what’s hurtin’ me.

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Why?
They say that we beat up on that man that he had to have stitches because of us. You don't come out of an accident like that unmarked, without a scratch. The most he got from us was slapped by a little kid. And here come the ambulance, not like this I was upset right and I was like, Everybody started comin' around, right. 'Cause I was talkin' about these kids is dyin' man! I'm talkin' about the man! and he's walkin! I was like, "Don't let him get into that ambulance!"

And the Jews, the Jews was like private, private ambulance. I was like, "Grab him," but my buddies was like, "We can't touch them." Nobody wanted to grab him, An' I was breakin' fool, man, I was goin' mad, I couldn't believe it. Everybody just stood there, I was cryin' so I left, I went home and watched the rest of it on TV, it was too lackadaisical so it was like me, man, instigator the whole thing.

I got arrested for it long after in Queens. Can't tell you no more about that, you know.

They got eyes and ears everywhere. What color is the Israeli flag? And what color are the police cars? The man was drunk, I open up his car door, I was like, "He's been drinkin'!" I know our words don't have no meanin', as Black people in Crown Heights.

YOU REALIZE, MAN, AIN'T NO JUSTICE, AIN'T NEVER BEEN NO JUSTICE, AIN'T NEVER GONNA BE.

HEY, WAIT A MINUTE.

Yo, the man is drunk! He ran a red light! Y'ALL AIN'T GONNA DO NOTHIN'? And that made me cry.

When my brother was stabbed four times, each and every American was stabbed four time and as my brother bled to death in this city, while the medicos stood by and let him bleed to death, it was the gravest of indictments against this country.

One person out of the twenty gutless individuals who attacked my brother has been arrested.

I for one am not convinced that it is beyond the ability of the New York police to arrest others.

Let me tell you, Mayor Dinkins, let me tell you, Commissioner Brown:

I'm here, I'm not going home, until there is justice.
ANONYMOUS MAN #1:

She was pushin’ him and he kept dippin’ around like he didn’t know how to ride the bike. So she kept runnin’ and pushin’ him to the side. So she was already runnin’ when the car was comin’, So I don’t know if she was runnin’ towards him because we was watchin’ the car weavin’, and we was goin’ He broke the stop light, they never get arrested.”

At first we was laughin’, man, we was like you see they do anything, and get away with it, and then we saw that he was out of control, and den we started regrettin’ laughin’, because then we saw where he was goin’, First he hit a car, right, the tore the whole front fender off a car, and then we was like Oh my God, man look at the kids, you know, so I was already runnin’ over there by the time the accident happened. That’s how we knew he was drinkin’ because he was like Wa Wa Wa Wa and I was like “Yo man he’s drunk. Don’t let him go anywhere,” I said, “Grab him.” I didn’t want him to limp off in some apartment somewhere and come back in a different black jacket.

So I was like “Grab him,” and they was like “Is the ambulance comin’ for the kids?” Cause I been in a lot of confrontations with Jews before and I know that when they said an ambulance was comin’ it didn’t mean for them. And they was like “Oh, ambulance comin’, ambulance comin’, calm down, calm down, God will help them, God will help them if you believe.” And he was actin’ like he was dyin’. Wa Aww, I’m hurt, I’m hurt, I’m hurt. I was actin’ like he was dyin’. Wa Aww, I’m hurt, I’m hurt...
INTRODUCTION

Fires in the Mirror is a play created and performed by Anna Deavere Smith based on the outbreak of racial violence in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York in 1991. A seven-year-old African American child was killed by a car in the entourage of the local Hasidic religious leader and, in apparent retribution, a young rabbinical scholar was stabbed to death while surrounded by a group of Black men. In an interwoven series of brief monologue, Ms. Smith presents 26 characters based on verbatim excerpts from interviews conducted with her subjects. The play seeks to facilitate intercultural exchange and public discussion about sexual and racial politics, ethnic identity, and multiculturalism. The piece premiered at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York.

In an introduction to her play Anna Deavere Smith says, “To me, the search for character is constantly in motion. It is a quest that moves back and forth between the self and the other… There is a gap between the perception of a place and the individuals who are responsible for keeping that perception alive. The individuals inside are frequently fighting that their individual voice be heard, while the walls of the place, which are the mask, and the perception, are reluctant to give over to the voices of the individuals. Those in the margins are always trying to get to the center, and those at the center, frequently in the name of tradition, are trying to keep the margins at a distance. Part of the identity of a place is the tension between those in the margins, and those at the center, and they all live behind the walls which wear tradition.”

Deavere continues, saying, “I have been going to the places where this tension is evident to find American character. Can this tension be productive, or will it explode and in the process kill and maim those who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? How can some of us intervene? My answer to the first question is yes, this tension can be productive, in so far as it causes motion, and that we watch and document the motion. To do that, we have to interest those people around us in motion, in moving from one side to the other, in experiencing one hand and the other hand, and to building bridges between places. My answer to the second question is that one kind of intervention is the intervention of listening. We can listen for what is inconsistent. We can listen to what the dominant pattern of speech is, and we can listen for the break from that pattern of speech. This applies to individuals, and this applies to groups. The break from the pattern is where character lives, and where dialogue, ironically begins, in the pause, in the thought as captured for the first time in a moment of speech, rather than in the rehearsed, the proven…

I think that there is a gap between those who speak and those who are heard. Those who really speak in their own communities, to their own people, are not heard as frequently as those who speak on a regular basis with authority. The media most of the time goes to experts to learn about the difference. My sense is that American character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between the places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences. It lives not in what has been fully articulated, not in the smooth-sounding words, but in the very moment that the smooth-sounding words fail us. It is alive right now.”

The following pages give voice to three of the characters from Deavere Smith’s play. The text is drawn from a series of interviews of Crown Heights’ residents, politicians, activists, religious leaders, gangs, street dwellers, victims and perpetrators alike. The interviews distill the lives and voices of the incident’s survivors into a visionary amalgam that touches upon each of regardless of background, ethnicity, or beliefs.