

In association with Arena Stage  
presents Second Stage Theatre's production of

# LET ME DOWN EASY

ON STAGE AND OFF

# playwise

MARCH 18 through APRIL 10, 2011

## Grace Notes

Alisa Solomon, Production Dramaturg

Though *Let Me Down Easy* is performed inside a theater, there was something site-specific in the process of its creation — not so much because of geography, but because of local people. New Haven was the city where the seeds of the play were planted, about a decade ago, when Anna was invited to perform medical grand rounds at Yale/New Haven Hospital. She interviewed patients and doctors and performed her findings for an audience wearing white jackets and stethoscopes. With Anna as the medium, many of those doctors learned for the first time about the deepest fears, profound wells of strength, and day-to-day lives of the people in their care. It seemed fitting that New Haven would be the place, some years later, where *Let Me Down Easy* would germinate into the play you are seeing today.



Anna Deavere Smith photo by Joan Marcus

First in a summer workshop and then in a full developmental rehearsal process and performance run in 2007/2008 at the Long Wharf Theater, the show retained many of the characters from the hospital. But by then, ever more curious about issues of care, the body's astonishing capacities, and its alarming vulnerabilities, Anna had conducted scores of new interviews. She'd met with athletes, dancers, and models, among those who push their bodies to achieve an extraordinary beauty and power; and, among those facing the body's most extreme exposure to harm, she interviewed perpetrators and survivors of the genocide in Rwanda, healers and AIDS activists in Uganda and South Africa, and men, women, and youngsters confronting severe illnesses here in the U.S. Through the play — through Anna's own present body in performance — many of them were brought into conversation with the New Haven residents, widening the perspective and extending the reach of the work: the body and the body politic, their risks and their resilience.

When we took LMDE to the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, MA the following summer and fall, Anna was returning to the community where, from 1997 to 2000, she had built the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue (a "think and do tank," as she'd put it, where artists making work about social change interacted with scholars, activists, and a highly engaged local audience.) As Anna decided to make more explicit one of the play's underlying themes — grace — she interviewed people in Cambridge (and some elsewhere) who had long contemplated the subject: clergy, artists, music and literary scholars. In that setting and in that moment, the play both demonstrated grace and expressed a mortal yearning for it — whether as the elegance of an athlete or dancer, the capacity to forgive, a gesture of gratitude, or the Christian notion of God's infinite love and mercy.

By the summer of 2009, when Anna began preparing the play for its final version, which would premiere in New York at Second Stage, the healthcare debate was raging and the discourse growing more vituperative by the day. The charge that the President's plan called for "death panels" made clear that one of LMDE's primary concerns was the very subject that at least some of the country couldn't bear to discuss. If we didn't have a way to talk about end-of-life issues with grace, how would we be able to handle them with grace? Anna hit the road again, this time interviewing policy makers, Tea Party protesters, insurance analysts.

Few of those new characters stayed in the play — Anna wasn't interested in staging the political debate itself — and indeed, some 300 interviews conducted over 10 years on three continents, were left on the cutting room floor. But every voice brought at some point into the rehearsal room continued to echo and inform the work.

Like all plays, this one is ephemeral: a performance exists only in the present tense and when it's over, it's over forever. As Reverend Gomes would say, "This is it, folks." So all theater, in some sense, is concerned with mortality. With its own grace, *Let Me Down Easy* confronts mortality head-on, even as it underscores the theater's — and life's — urgent summons that we attend fully to the wonder of the present moment.