



Power, Performance and Presidency: The *House Arrest* Theater Project

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Abstract

Renowned African American solo performer Anna Deavere Smith's take on American presidency caught the attention of mass media in the wake of complex bondages between power, media and sexuality, a debate ignited in the wake of Clinton-Lewinsky allegations. Smith has conducted detailed research on the topic which finally reached at Thomas Jefferson's controversial affair with his slave Sally Hemings and the pamphlet written by Jefferson on Africans. Smith has interviewed many individuals in connection with this and finally presented them on stage with subtle costume changes and make up. Theatrically House Arrest was a phenomenal success which brought in a novel performance style incorporating research, interviews and characterization. This article attempts to explore the issues of power, media and sexuality in contemporary politics in the light of the information gathered and its representation on stage.

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1. Introduction

Renowned African American solo performer Anna Deavere Smith's take on American presidency caught the attention of mass media in the wake of complex bondages between power, media and sexuality, a debate ignited in the wake of Clinton-Lewinsky allegations. Smith has conducted detailed research on the topic which finally reached at Thomas Jefferson's controversial affair with his slave Sally Hemings and the pamphlet written by Jefferson on Africans. Smith has interviewed many individuals in connection with this and finally presented them on stage with subtle costume changes and make up. Theatrically *House Arrest* was a phenomenal success which brought in a novel performance style incorporating research, interviews and characterization. This article attempts to explore the issues of power, media and sexuality in contemporary politics in the light of the information gathered and its representation on stage. Echoing Chairman Mao and Comrade Stalin, former president Donald Trump called the media "the enemy of the people" and rarely did a day go by without a barrage of attacks and rants on his Twitter account."

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D. Kellner explicated the character of American presidency in the era of Donald Trump in an ubiquitous manner in his analysis of the politics of lying. This undoubtedly leads the readers to the problematic of power, media and presidency in American politics. The Trump days problematized American presidency, power and media once again. There is a remarkable solo performance by renowned African American performance artist Anna Deavere Smith entitled *House Arrest* which launched a debate over multiple versions of presidency, media and power disrobing the history of presidency.

In the fall of 1993, while Anna Deavere Smith was performing *Fires in the Mirror* in Arena Theatre, Washington D.C., she expressed her desire to "do something on the President." Smith's desire was prompted specifically because of her conviction that "If I'm really doing a search for American character, sooner or later I should look at the President"(Smith

2000a, 100). When the Arena Stage commissioned her to accomplish the project on American Presidency in 1996, she became convinced of the major elements that regulate the discourse of political power in the United States. Mass media came through as a historical factor in perpetuating the image of the President to the public. As Smith observed, “I know nothing about the President that the press doesn’t tell me. I can’t really look at the president without looking at the press” (2000a, 100). The resultant work *House Arrest* envisions the President and all subjects in the political apparatus as prisoners in a great prison house.

House Arrest signals a remarkable transition in Smith’s career by subverting the nature and structure of the work into an investigation into the ethical and political challenges that a nation encounters rather than the inward crises of a particular community or a region. This sea-change in the project is mainly due to the absence of a ‘community’ in which various opinions, truths, rituals, religions and lies clash together to form a debating ground. Though Washington D.C is a geographic reality, it lacks the kind of social tensions and cacophony present in Crown Heights and South Central Los Angeles.

When the performance project centred around American Presidency took shape, Smith was forced to integrate many aspects of contemporary mass culture and American history into that effort. *House Arrest* consequently has become a crucial investigation into the political culture and cultural politics of America, with a profound understanding of the discourse of power and the multiplicity of ways it operates microscopically. As a part of this performative exploration, Smith re-visioned American history, which is inexplicably blended with the problematic of race, sexuality and power, with an emphatic reference to the various facets of communication technology. The three faces of American Presidency represented by

Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton are brought to the epicentre of the performance with the assistance of a number of historical documents including Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* and an array of audio, video materials. Smith incorporated excerpts from her interviews with Bill Clinton, press reporters, media professionals, prisoners, academics, politicians, and many others.

The *House Arrest* project signals seminal differences in the adaptation of the context, performance strategy and especially in the intertwining of the complex realms of power, race, sexuality and media, as far as the other works in the *On the Road* project are concerned. As Dorinne Kondo, one of the four dramaturges of Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, observed: “the scope of the play expanded far beyond the deconstruction of a single urban crisis to encompass centuries of U.S. history told via non-linear juxtaposition, from Jefferson to Lincoln to the present” (2000, 87). The encroachment and intertwining of various histories associated with the power-sexuality mass media relationship in the complex community-scape of Washington D.C make *House Arrest* an extremely problematic project.

A Work in Progress: Three Productions

There are three major productions of *House Arrest*. The Arena Stage, Washington D.C., production in 1997 was titled as *House Arrest: The Press and the Presidency*. The Mark Taper Forum workshop production in 1999 was entitled *House Arrest: An Introgession*. Both these productions were performed with a twelve-person cast of African-American, Latino, White and Asian actors including Anna Deavere Smith, who played across the borders of race and gender. In spite of these multiracial collaborations, the Joseph Papp New York Public Theatre production of *House Arrest* in 2000 March was performed as a one woman

show.

House Arrest : An Introgression was originally scheduled as a full production as part of Mark Taper Forum's 'Theatre Sessions.' The proposed schedule was altered when it became clear that Smith could not realise the work fully in the wake of the impeachment of President Clinton. The impeachment controversy erupted after the Washington's Arena Stage version of *House Arrest*. In lieu of the critical responses hinting at the unfinished nature of the work, Smith reconsidered the whole project and re-wrote the play for the Mark-Taper Forum. Eventually, Smith and Artistic director Gordon Davidson decided to present the project as a work in progress. "The drama is being titled as a work-in-progress, a compressed version of the production that had originally been scheduled to run at the Taper this spring. Critics have been asked not to review the production until the final performance" (Braxton 1999, d-1). In these two early versions of *House Arrest*, Smith maintained the status of a work in progress. The very title of the Mark Taper Form production, *House Arrest: An Introgression*, emphasises the process of shaping the performance. The word 'introgression,' for Smith is a biological term describing "what happens when species leave their natural habitats and move on to other's turf" (1999, d-1). The title signifies many things beyond the nature of the performance as a work in progress.

In the Mark Taper Forum production, the two hour long first act attempted to draw parallels between various Presidencies and their relationship to mass media on the one hand. On the other, it elaborated a number of issues such as church burning in South, Racism, interracial sexual congress and Smith's own experience with 'policing' in Washington (Smith 2000a, 166-167). Abraham Zapruder's Film on Kennedy assassination with many other visuals was exhibited in the background of the stage. Smith

appeared mostly by herself, providing interesting details of her journey into the epicentre of power politics during the production process of *House Arrest*. She performed two characters: Historian Sturds Turkele and President Clinton during the production. The post-performance discussion was an inseparable part of this production where the spectators interacted with the performers and the major issues evinced in the discussions were race, power, gender politics and press.

In this ambitious project that explored the political psyche of America, critics and reviewers complained that they missed Smith's spectacular presence on the stage. Consequently George C. Wolfe, the producer of Joseph Papp New York Public Theatre, suggested to Smith that "if she bring the show to New York, she should do it alone" (Pogrebin 2000, 11). Hence *House Arrest* appeared as a one-woman show in which Smith performed Presidents, media professionals, historians, politicians and academics in a manner she performed *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* and *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities*.

This version of *House Arrest* has the structure of a conventional drama with two acts and an intermission of fifteen minutes between the acts. It took place with George C. Wolfe as producer, Rose Marie Tichler as Artistic Director and Mark Levin as managing director. In his invitation to theatre goers on the eve of the premiere of *House Arrest*, George C. Wolfe described the performance as follows: "As the candidates (candidates for the presidential polls 2000) debate the issue before the American public, the American public debates the issue of the Presidency – what it means to us historically, politically, culturally" (Wolfe, 2000). By creating a montage of characters from various facets of American history, Smith defines the contours of power that alleviates individuals from their socio-political settings in *House Arrest*.

Lessons of the Labyrinth: The Interviews

Smith decided to conduct interviews for *House Arrest* bearing in mind the complexities of the community she was going to encounter. In almost all performances in *On the Road* series, especially in *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*, the idea about whom to interview was clear and specific because there was the presence of members of the corresponding communities directly and actively engaged in the community life. Due to an excessive sense of community often the subjects voluntarily came forward to the interviewer or at least it was very easy to approach them. But in *House Arrest* due to problematic of community-scape and the complexity of issues, Smith experienced intense difficulties in identifying her subjects. Moreover, *House Arrest* as a work in progress, its scope and boundaries yet to be defined, the interview process became further troublesome. Smith was forced to consider the names of leading politicians, journalists, intellectuals and celebrities due to the centrality of power and media and the shrouded relationship between them in the project.

Smith could not find an imperfect sentence, a ragged tone of voice or an emotionally charged word, which evinces nuances during performance, except in the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women. “At first it seemed as though speech would never fail the people I met there. They seemed to have themselves quite well covered in speech. It was harder to find them in any type of verbal undress. It was harder to find grammatical error, which had for me always been an indication that character was victorious over speech” (Haithman 1999, 1). These observations elicit the view that the interviewees themselves excelled in the act of performing their schemes in a well-trained, pre-meditated manner. The concept of documentary theatre itself encounters severe challenges with these subjects because Smith’s search for character was accomplished

when the subject leaps into ungrammatical, disordered and broken sentences. The nature of the people Smith found out in Washington as interviewees was very much evident in a story told to Smith about a major character in *House Arrest*, the President himself. “I was told stories of journalists sitting around videos inspecting, as if under a microscope, every bit of his linguistic behaviour. And they turned that microscope towards the camera and gave the nation a chance to look in too” (1999, 1). When Smith came to be aware that everything she knew about the President was through the lens of the media, an investigation into the mass media became a prerequisite to analyse presidency.

For various reasons, sometimes due to the likes and dislikes of such people and sometimes due to their biases and attitudes towards Smith and her work, she found difficulties in arranging the interviews. “The first thing I would need is a grant to take care of the lunches, breakfasts and dinners of my subjects. They liked to meet in fancy places” (Smith 2000a, 112). In the case of many subjects, Smith has to pay fees for the interviews. She found it “expensive to get people to talk to you in Washington” (2000a, 126). Various problems related to arranging the interviews were resolved when Smith hired a consultancy firm, Powell – Tate to arrange the interviews.

Smith encountered another problem when she approached people to co-operate with her as interviewees. Many White women, journalists and celebrities who were otherwise good collaborators refused to be interviewed by Smith. As Gloria Steinem and Barbara Johnson of Harvard University suggest, the problem is due to a kind of muteness that emerges from the fragility of whiteness in women. They are afraid of any alteration of identity in any case and hence “being a character in your play means being in a different position in the story than I’m in now. I’m

trying to maximise my position, and you want me to be in a different position in a different story? No thanks” (2000a, 128).

Smith’s crew for the central activity of the *House Arrest* project—interviews consisted of a variety of people from diverse fields united by the intuitive nature of Smith’s work. Nora, a graduate student of history at Berkley, Andrews, an expert in history and theatre from Amherst, Erine from Yale, Matthew, Smith’s former student from Stanford and Cori, the researcher of the project, constituted the crew. In spite of the four dramaturges in *Twilight: Los Angeles*, who constituted the theoretical framework to represent interracial communication, this crew formulated a schedule consisting of interviews, visits, election campaign reporting and research.

One of the major resources of the Arena stage theatre production of *House Arrest* was the presidential election campaign of 1996 of both the Republican and Democratic camps. Smith has decided to follow the election campaigns and conventions in order to see at close quarters the realm of political power as well as the press.

Panoptic Visions: *House Arrest* in Performance

The text used in this chapter for discussion is the manuscript provided by Anna Deavere Smith from her personal collection based on the New York Public Theatre version of *House Arrest*. Act 1 of the NYPT production has three sections titled ‘Seeing and Being Seen,’ ‘Cohabitation’ and ‘The Grand Death of the Race’ in that order. Forty-two characters were performed in this version from four hundred interviews conducted by Smith.

The first episode in this manuscript shows the African-American historian Studs Turkele’s observations on the “defining moment in American history.” As Turkele unveils his myriad experiences

with various Presidents, Smith asks the questions voice over: “What’s the defining moment in American history?” Turkele fails to establish a single defining moment in American history but identifies a combination of many important moments that constituted American character and experience.

It is a combination of many

I can’t think of any one moment I’d say is the defining moment.

But the gradual slippage . . . moral slippage

It’s a gradual kind of thing.

A combination of things

(Smith2000, 1).

The ‘slippage’ is a process that encompasses moments such as Hiroshima, Vietnam, Slavery, Watergate, Clinton-Lewinsky and many other. Studs Turkele’s episode functions as an introductory session for Smith’s explorations of the complex relationship of power, media and sexuality in the wake of community’s communication failure because it describes the intervention of each of these elements in American history as a process.

The second episode, ‘The Deal’ discloses the immensely publicised and mediatised private life of the President with unlimited powers. Smith performed George Stephano Poulou, former assistant to the President, with a martini glass in hand. He says: “We’re a celebrity culture and the President is the celebrity in chief” (2000, 5). Stephano Poulou describes the most publicised life of the President, transparent to the media among servants, interns, security and other staffers. The whole thing is ‘wired’ so that the security can

examine the movements of individuals inside the house. “You can do whatever you want. The prize is that everybody is going to know everything you do” (2000: 5). Similarly Bob Rainer’s film *The American President* in which Smith herself enacted the role of the press secretary to the President, shows us how an affair of the president has become a matter of concern for the whole nation.

Emphasising the fragmentary nature of the work, Smith described her visit to President Jefferson’s home at Montecello in which she found Cinder Staton, the official historian of Montecello. Staton finds a connection between the words ‘Panoptic’ and ‘Pantops’, the name given to one of Jeffersons farms to associate the concept of Panopticism to ‘Presidency.’ Panoptic means “all seeing” and “all seen.” “They are all seeing or being seen by everyone” (2000, 7). The concept of ‘Panoptic’ was theoretically developed by Michel Foucault to signify modern structures of power in his *Discipline and Punish*. The President is shown as a victim of his own privileges and powers by placing him in a panoptic position.

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