

LET ME DOWN EASY

BY ANNA DEAVERE SMITH



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
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LET ME DOWN EASY
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*This play is dedicated to the memories of
Governor Ann Richards,
Reverend Peter Gomes,
Joel Siegel, and
Anna Young Smith*

NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

To enhance the reader's frame of reference, sometimes physical descriptions are given — including age, body size, and race. These are not meant to suggest casting. I perform the play as a one-person show. Audiences may or may not have thought about these details while observing my performance. It is my intention that, eventually, casts of any size, age group, or ethnicity will be able to perform the play. The director may choose to cast people according to actual age, race, or physical type. That could, of course, make for an interesting production. However, there is also the option to cast roles against expected type. Details of physique, age, and race are provided to give information and clues about the person's world view. These are real people who live or did live in the real world. I have also sometimes included the date of the interview, in order to suggest the cultural, political, and social environment in which the interview took place.

The notes are sometimes less actual stage directions and more an attempt to give the performers the "actual scene" of the originating interview. Therefore, there may be props or actions denoted that were in the real scene but not in Mr. Foglia's stage production. All utterances, including non-words such as "um"s and "uh"s should be spoken, as they create the scansion of the text. The text is as much an observation of identity through utterance as it is a descant on the human body, its vulnerability, and its resilience.

LET ME DOWN EASY was originally presented Off-Broadway at Second Stage Theatre (Carole Rothman, Artistic Director), opening on October 8, 2009. It was directed by Leonard Foglia; the set design was by Riccardo Hernandez; the costume design was by Ann Hould-Ward; the lighting design was by Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer; the original music was composed by Joshua Redman; the sound design was by Ryan Rumery; the dialect coach was Amy Stoller; the movement coach was Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish; and the projection design was by Zak Borovay. The show was conceived, written, and performed by Anna Deavere Smith.

The following portraits are based on verbatim excerpts from interviews conducted by Anna Deavere Smith.

LET ME DOWN EASY

JAMES H. CONE
Author, Reverend, & Professor,
Union Theological Seminary, NYC

“Let Me Down Easy”

*African American man, 70 years old, great shape, a runner,
in a colorful shirt with no tie, jeans.*

Let me down easy. You know that’s, that’s, those are words; those are words [of a] broken heart. They *can* be interpreted as broken love. And I certainly heard it within that context.

Let me down easy. That’s about love broken. Don’t do it so harshly. Don’t do it too mean. Let it be easy. And, but as most people realize, most of that: black love songs and blues and jazz is a transmutation of, about injustice too. But it’s, but it’s covert. Not overt. And it’s a combination of, of, of, of talking about love. And at the same time talking about hurt *from* broken love. Broken heartedness. And at the same time, hurt from what’s happening to you in society. So it’s a. But it certainly is about love. When I think about it. People-need-something-to-sustain-them-in-times-of-difficulty.

Whether that’s personal, whether that’s social, they need that something *within* that you can’t always explain. That something within you, that is a kind of affirmation *of* you. And it enables you to know who you are, and be at peace with who you are, at ease with who you are, no matter what’s happening around you and no matter what you’re going to face! You know, that keep on gittin’ on!

Hmm, it could be related to [*death*] too. Could be about dying.

“Let me die easy, when I die.” Yeah, it could mean that. Yeah, it could mean that. That’s the thing about language in the black community. It has many meanings and uh, yeah it could, it could definitely mean that. “Swing low sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home”? Yeah, yeah, that’s right. It could mean that.

ELIZABETH STREB
Choreographer, STREB Dance Company, NYC

“Fire Dance”

At her action studio, white woman in her 50s, very physically fit, wearing an oversized, extravagant-looking man's suit, Mohawk hairstyle, lots of gel, heavy motorcycle boots, wearing a large peace sign and intense designer black-framed glasses.

About death? First thing I think about is I have *ways* I'd like to die? Like I'd like to — I mean one time I was on fire. Because I did a fire dance for my girlfriend? And I caught on fire accidentally. And I thought, “I don't think I would want to burn to death.” I accidentally caught on fire. I used Sterno, I used Sterno, I'm crazy. This was a couple years ago.

This was a couple years ago and I wanted to make something for her fortieth birthday that was *really* special. For Laura, yeah. And so I thought of “Blaze Away”? Where basically I'd start a fire and then I'd fall on it and put it out? And so I used the Melissa Etheridge song? (*She sings one line.*) “*Cause I'm the only one who'd walk across the fire for you-hoo.*”

So I made Laura stand at that end and I stood here. And my dancers were lighting the fire. And I made her walk *towards* me and.

She had no idea what I was doing. And there were like a hundred people at the party. And uh, I'd rehearsed it so ... And I flew in, you fly, you go into a crouch. And at this certain moment you go into a fly ... into a flying horizontal X? And land on ... I made the fire as big as this torso part so I would (*Smacking her hands together loudly.*) smooch it — but big enough that you see the fire but not so big that it went outside my body — because I would just *smooch* the oxygen out of it. And I landed on it. But unbeknownst to me — I'd been rehearsing? And had some Sterno on my torso? So when I went like, “woom!” Like that — and I looked under and I go “Oooh, uh — oh, I'm on fire.” And “Ooh,” I smooched it! And I go, “Oh! That's not gonna happen.”

So I stood up and I was literally on fire. And I mean I was just like — then I went like this — And, “*Oh my god, that is the fastest phenomenon I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen anything move that fast, be that fast.*” And, you know, I was like, “*Okay.*” And just the seconds were stretched? And like everyone, *everyone* in the room was looking at me: like, “Oh my god!” But nobody did *anything*. Because — Yeah! Isn’t it fucking crazy? Did nothing, they just like, and even my friend was continuing to take *pitchers [sic]*, Danita, my friend! And I was like going, “*Okay.*” And then I was sort of going like *this*. And I was saying, “Well that’s not gonna work.” This Sterno’s gonna burn — because it went through my pants — this Sterno’s gonna burn, until it’s gone, right? But the thing is, it was traveling *up* my body? And if it got to my hair, I was thinking I would, the thing I was thinking was I’d ruin Laura’s party? Because I’d be whisked away to the ambulance —

So my dancers, who do call-and-respond; we do call-and-respond. They know. They go “*Take-it-OFF!*” And Thierry Dean grabbed my ankles, my ankles of my pants, and I jumped up, and he took off the pants, and I ran out of the room, and it was over. I just had a little burn.

But it was really one of the most profound experiences ’cause, you know, I felt like, for a few days I’d see complete strangers and just, I’d think to myself, “Well, you know, I’ve been on fire. I was on fire.” So. It’s that kind of thing.

I would love to have — I’d like to know what it feels like to get shot. I would like a rough trauma kind of injury: fall — like falling a long ways and crashing. Like I think I’d like that. Or I’d like maybe to explode, do it quicker.

You know, there are just some people that really embrace the danger thing. They’re not worried about hurting themselves. I think that people tend to worry about hurting themselves ... and I think that, I think that’s a class thing? Like how much, how many feet of protection does who get, on earth? How high are their fences? Like the people who are the richest are the furthest away from any type of penetration.

The poorest people, you know, have scars on their face? Because they, they can’t keep, harm away from them. And so the whole relationship to harm, and to what you’re willing to take, that whole

thing: “Oh death, where is *[thy]* sting-a-ling-a-ling?” How *alive* do you wanna be? I’d like to die in the middle of a move basically. That’s how I’d like to die, in the middle of a move.

Well, what about you, how would you like to die? (*Pause, waiting.*) Oh come on! Don’t you want to know the lights are gonna go out in a particular way? Does it scare you, the idea of dying?

(*Pause.*)

It’s sad, right?

LET ME DOWN EASY

by Anna Deavere Smith

1W (or flexible cast)

In this solo show constructed from verbatim interview transcripts, Anna Deavere Smith examines the miracle of human resilience through the lens of the national debate on healthcare. After collecting interviews with over 300 people on three continents, Smith creates an indelible portrait gallery of 20 individuals, known and unknown — from a rodeo bull rider and a World Heavyweight boxing champion to a New Orleans doctor during Hurricane Katrina, as well as former Texas governor Ann Richards, cyclist Lance Armstrong, film critic Joel Siegel, and supermodel Lauren Hutton. A work of emotional brilliance and political substance from one of the treasures of the American theater. Originally created as a one-person show, the author encourages multi-actor productions of the play.

"[A] vivid compendium of life experienced at its extremes, drawn about equally from the suffering and the ministering sides of the story."

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"... never less than engaging, at times hypnotic, speaking on matters having largely to do with human frailty, of passing through life into something beyond."

—**LA Weekly**

Also by Anna Deavere Smith

FIRES IN THE MIRROR

HOUSE ARREST

TWILIGHT: LOS ANGELES, 1992

and others

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