UC SANTA BARBARA
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Echoes of a Tragedy

An accident in 1991 that killed one child and injured another set off rioting that left one man dead and shattered a neighborhood. The violence in New York was especially tragic since it pitted Blacks against Jews and opened veins of ugly bigotry.

A year later, Anna Deavere Smith, one of America's singular talents of the theater, wrote and starred in a one-woman play, "Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn ," in which she told the stories, in their own words, of community members caught up in the tragedy.

Three decades later, the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance will present a live, virtual performance of "Fires in the Mirror" Friday, Feb. 26, at 7 p.m. Additional shows will be Saturday, Feb. 27, at 1 and 7 p.m. and Sunday, Feb. 28, at 1 p.m. All shows are free and open to the public.

In the UCSB production, seven actors — five current students, two alumni — will play 26 roles. For them and director Risa Brainin, a professor of theater and dance, the play has been deep dive into a painful moment in time.

"Working on 'Fires in the Mirror' has given us all a master class on history, politics, sociology, religion and much more," Brainin said. "With 26 historical characters, we've been immersed in learning in order to portray them with sensitivity and authenticity."

Smith, who interviewed more than 100 people for the play, said meeting with the cast and crew of 'Fires in the Mirror' was a refreshing experience.

“I was invited in to meet with Risa the director, the actors and designers for my play ‘Fires In the Mirror,’ ” she said. “It was one of the most engaging interactions I've had all year, made all the more dynamic by the fact that we were calling out across 3,000 miles on Zoom. That's what I live for, to be in the company of artists while they're digging deep, thinking broadly, and getting twinkles in their eyes as they imagine their work.”

Despite the 30-year distance from the events in Crown Heights, Rainin noted the issues that roil the play remain relevant.

“Even though it’s an historical piece, the play absolutely reflects the moment we’re in now,” she said. “We are still dealing with racism, antisemitism and a very divided country. With 26 points of view represented, ‘Fires In the Mirror’ implores us to consider the complexity of the arguments on both sides, and encourages empathy for each other going forward.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.