

# ARENA'S PAGE

## STUDY GUIDE

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### THE PLAY

What relationships do people have with their bodies? What happens when a body breaks down? What kind of healthcare do people receive? What keeps people alive? How much control do people have over their health? How do people face the realities of disease and dying? What happens when people die?

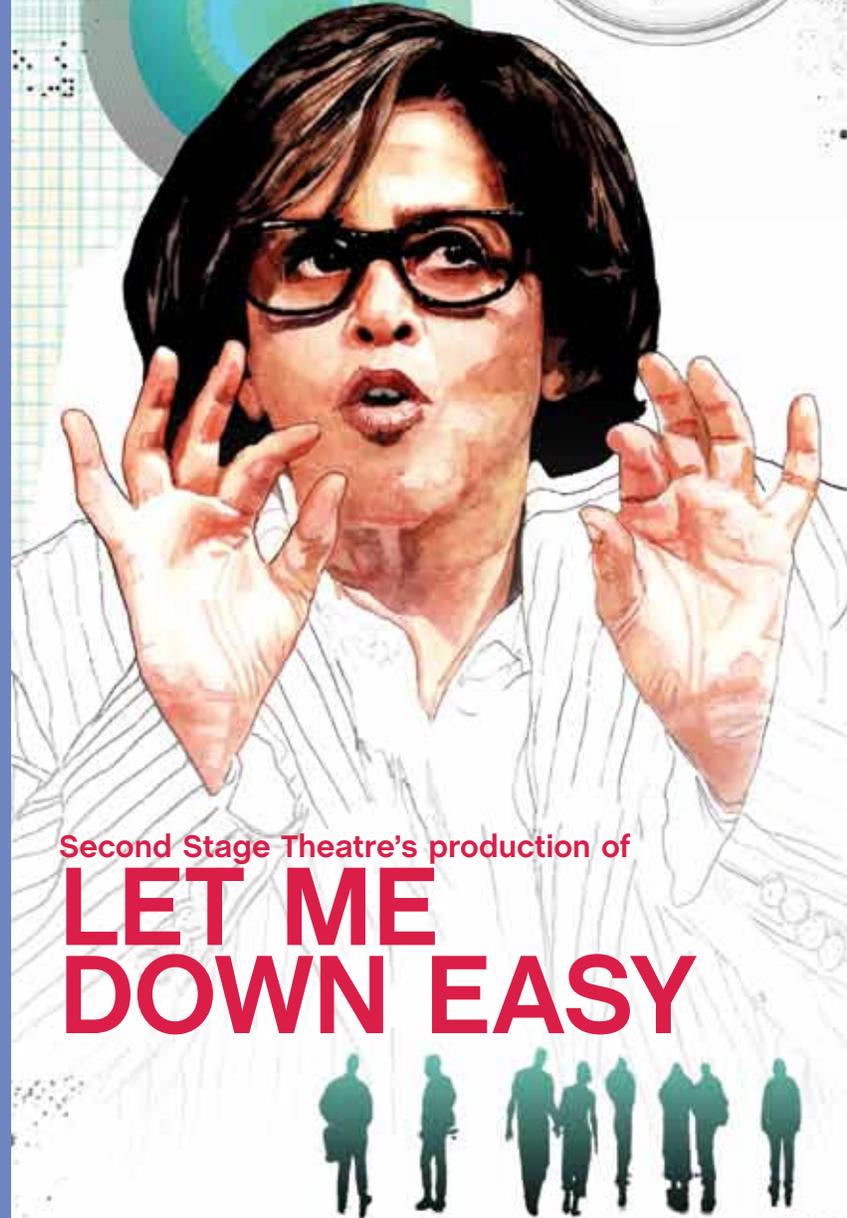
There are as many answers to these questions as there are people in the world. Anna Deavere Smith uses the exact words of 20 different people as they speak to these hard questions. In this one-woman show, she transforms herself into each person to share his or her story. Professional athletes, a New Orleans doctor during Hurricane Katrina, a former supermodel, the mother of a young woman with AIDS, a minister and others: each person has a different perspective, different experiences, different feelings.

Combined, they create a portrait of human struggle and how the human spirit faces some of life's most difficult questions and moments.

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*"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."*

— James H. Cone, *Let Me Down Easy*



Second Stage Theatre's production of

## LET ME DOWN EASY

Now playing in the Kreeger

Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater  
December 16, 2010-January 23, 2011  
Conceived, written and performed by Anna Deavere Smith  
Directed by Leonard Foglia

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT & PERFORMER



*“My search was specifically to find America in its language. I interview people and communities about the events of our time, in the hope that I will be able to absorb America.”*

— Anna Deavere Smith

Anna Deavere Smith was born in a highly segregated part of Baltimore. She attended Beaver College in Pennsylvania and studied acting. With only \$80 and a suitcase, Smith headed off to pursue a graduate degree in California.

Today, Smith is an actor, director and critically acclaimed playwright. Along with *Let Me Down Easy*, Smith’s other one-woman shows include *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*. She is currently developing a show that documents change in Washington, D.C., entitled *The Americans*. Smith has appeared in TV shows such as *The West Wing* and movies such as *Rachel Getting Married* and *The American President*.

She is the recipient of many honorary awards and is currently a professor at New York University. ●

## WHO SPEAKS

**L**et Me Down Easy features interviews with some famous as well as everyday people. Get to know a few of the more well-known interviewees.



**Lance Armstrong** is an American professional cyclist best known for winning the Tour de France (the most prestigious bicycle race in the world) seven times in a row.



**Eve Ensler** is an American playwright, performer, feminist and activist best known for her play *The Vagina Monologues*, which explores female sexuality.



**Lauren Hutton** is an American actress and one of the first supermodels in the world. She is best known for being the first model to sign a large contract with a cosmetic company (Revlon).

## DOCUMENTARY THEATER

Famous or not, all characters are played by Anna Deavere Smith.

**D**ocumentary theater, or docudrama, is theater that uses nonfiction, such as interviews or newspapers, to create a script. The Greek playwright Phrynichus produced the first known docudrama about the Persian War in 492 BCE.

Docudrama is based on real events and people. All the people represented in *Let Me Down Easy* are real people. Anna Deavere Smith chose to use their exact words to tell their stories. Not all docudrama does this. ●

**a!** **ACTIVITY:** What events from today would you write about? What questions about our world would you explore? Make a list of 20 people you would interview to provide a wide range of perspectives on this event or question.



# HEALTHCARE IN THE UNITED STATES

What I fear is happening is that we are slipping into a healthcare system that looks very much like that of a developing nation.”

— Phil Pizzo, *Let Me Down Easy*

**H**ealthcare in the United States is complicated, one of the most important issues today, and it affects us all. A few sentences here cannot explain it. In *Let Me Down Easy*, Anna Deavere Smith devotes considerable attention to it, especially the availability of medical insurance.

According to the Institute of Medicine of the United States National Academies, the United States is the “only wealthy, industrialized nation that does not ensure that all citizens have [insurance] coverage.” In 2007, some 15.3 percent of the population, or 45.7 million people, lacked any form of health insurance.

In March 2010, shortly after *Let Me Down Easy* was completed, Congress approved two bills regarding healthcare: the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the Healthcare and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010. These bills are hotly contested.

Become an informed citizen. Research the current healthcare debate. What are these bills? Who has access to healthcare? How much should it cost? Who should pay for it? How viable is national health insurance coverage? What do other countries do? What is your stance on the issues? ●

## GRIEF

**G**rief is individual. Each person responds to loss differently. Timing, life experience, culture, religious beliefs, personality, relationships and many other factors contribute to how a person will grieve.

In her landmark book *On Death and Dying*, psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross outlines five stages of death and dying: denial (Not me!), anger (Why me?), bargaining (If I get better, I promise to be a better person), depression (I don't care anymore), and acceptance (This is happening to me).

These five stages are experienced by those with serious or terminal illnesses. Not everyone goes through all five, and the order may vary. The patient's loved ones may experience these same stages during their grief process, either while the patient is dying or after his or her death. ●

# CANCER AND MANAGEMENT

“Cancer is a — cancer wins! Cancer is a tough disease! Cancer's right up there! I think cancer is stronger than *Tyrannosaurus Rex!* You know.”

— Joel Siegel, *Let Me Down Easy*



**C**ancer is discussed often in *Let Me Down Easy*. Most of us have been or will be affected by a loved one having cancer or having cancer ourselves. But what is it exactly?

Cancer is a class of diseases in which a group of cells grows uncontrollably. The cells may then invade other parts of the body. Those types of cancers are the most life-threatening.

There are a few ways of managing cancer, depending on the type and location in the body. Some treatment options include surgery, chemotherapy or radiation therapy (see article).

Some cancer patients do not respond to treatment. What do people do when medical care cannot help them? Some choose to prepare for death with the help of organizations like Hospice, which provide care and support for the dying and their loved ones.

### Treatments

Some interviewees in *Let Me Down Easy* are under going treatment for different diseases.

**Chemotherapy** involves using “anticancer” drugs to kill cancer cells. These drugs also kill healthy cells. Most chemotherapy is administered through an IV. Side effects can include hair loss, nausea, damage to organs and infection.

**Radiation** targets cancer using x-rays to kill cancer cells or shrink growths.

**Dialysis** treats advanced and permanent kidney failure. Kidneys clean your blood, keeping harmful wastes and fluid from building up in your body. When kidneys fail, dialysis uses a machine to filter the blood and return it to the body. Patients go for dialysis three times a week for three to five hours a visit. ●



And then the other thing that people said to me early on was, 'They're not gonna come get us. We're gonna be stuck here.'" — Kiersta Kurtz-Burke, *Let Me Down Easy*

## HURRICANE KATRINA

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Louisiana, putting 80 percent of the city under flood water.

About 1,100 of the city's people died. The poorer, predominately African-American populations were hit the hardest because they lived on the lowest ground, which had the worst flooding.

Thousands of hurricane survivors were trapped without food and water in extreme heat. People died because rescue efforts took too long to reach them. In *Let Me Down Easy* we hear about events in Charity Hospital in New Orleans after the storm. ●

For more than 250 years, New Orleans' Charity Hospital has provided healthcare for the poor. Here, remaining emergency staff and patients are evacuated from Charity Hospital after five days of waiting without power, food or water. Other, private hospitals were helped and evacuated earlier.

### Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.  
Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



the mead center  
for american theater  
1101 Sixth Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20024  
Phone: (202) 554-9066  
Fax: (202) 488-4056

Written by Julia DePalma  
Edited by Rebecca Campana  
Illustration by Jimmy Turrell  
Production photos by Joan Marcus

Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org)  
for more information on  
Arena Stage productions  
and educational opportunities.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books

*Health Care USA: Understanding Its Organization and Delivery* by Harry A. Sultz and Kristina M. Young  
*On Death and Dying* by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross  
*Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth: A Tibetan Buddhist Guidebook* by Tulku Thondup  
*Documentary Theater in the United States* by Gary Fisher Dawson

### Web

An interview with Anna Deavere Smith: [www.pbs.org/now/transcript/232.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/232.html)  
Hospice: [www.hospicenet.org](http://www.hospicenet.org)

### DVD

*The Vagina Monologues*, HBO (2002)  
*Sicko*, Weinstein Company (2007)  
*When the Levees Broke*, HBO (2006)