



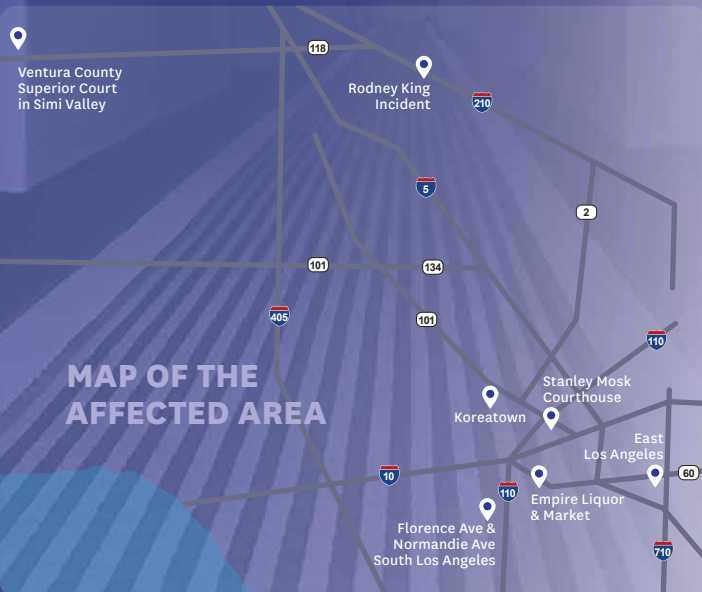
# THE HOTEL PLAY

Saturday, April 15, 2017

Performances at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.

Radisson Hotel at USC

3540 S. Figueroa Street, Los Angeles 90007



## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

- *The Hotel Play* was conceived by **JON LAWRENCE RIVERA**, the founder and artistic director of Playwrights' Arena. The first play he mounted with Playwrights' Arena opened right when the 1992 civil unrest erupted.

- *The Hotel Play* was written by seven L.A. playwrights:

**PAULA CIZMAR**, the award-winning playwright of *The Death of a Miner* and other plays, whose work often combines poetry and politics. She teaches dramatic writing at USC.

**VELINA HASU HOUSTON**, whose work focuses on the shifting boundaries of identity. She is best known for her play *Tea*, about Japanese war brides who move to the United States with their American husbands. Houston is the director of the MFA program in dramatic writing at USC.

**JENNIFER MAISEL**, an award-winning writer for television, film, and the stage, who also teaches at USC. Her off-Broadway play *The Last Seder* starred Gaby Hoffmann and toured the United States.

**NAHAL NAVIDAR**, a playwright, poet, and screenwriter whose work explores social issues while incorporating elements of the magical. She attended the MFA program at the USC School of Dramatic Arts.

**JULIE TAIWO ONI**, a twin whose father is Nigerian and mother is German-American. Her work often explores these aspects of her identity. She received an MFA from the USC School of Dramatic Arts.

**JANINE SALINAS SCHOENBERG**, who writes about women, immigrants, and others who are often in the margins of mainstream narratives. She has an MFA from the USC School of Dramatic Arts.

**LAURIE WOOLERY**, a director, playwright, educator, and community organizer who creates works that are site-specific and rooted in diverse communities.

- Rivera and the seven playwrights worked collaboratively over two years to develop *The Hotel Play*.

## THE 1992 CIVIL UNREST IN LOS ANGELES

In March 1991, a group of Los Angeles police officers were recorded on video brutally beating a Black man named Rodney King, whom CHP officers had pulled over for a traffic violation after a high-speed chase. The video showed the officers severely clubbing King dozens of times. When it was broadcast nationwide, the video provoked an outpouring of outrage and protest. The officers faced charges including assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force. On April 29, 1992, the officers were acquitted by a majority-white jury in Simi Valley, a suburb far from where the beating had taken place.

Protests erupted almost immediately after the officers were acquitted. L.A.'s Black mayor, Tom Bradley, declared, "Today that jury asked us to accept the senseless and brutal beating of a helpless man." Hundreds chanted "no justice, no peace" outside LAPD headquarters in downtown L.A., and in predominantly Black South L.A., people took to the streets to express their rage.

At the corner of Florence and Normandie, a TV news crew filmed live as a white truck driver named Reginald Denny was pulled

from his vehicle and beaten by a crowd. This video became nearly as embedded in popular memory as the video of Rodney King being beaten by police.

Over the next few days, violence continued throughout the L.A. area, from Pacoima to Long Beach. But it was most concentrated in South L.A., the Pico-Union area, and Koreatown, where relations between Korean shop owners and Black residents had already been fraught. Korean-owned stores became targets of arson and other destruction.

Mayor Bradley declared a state of emergency, Governor Pete Wilson mobilized a National Guard contingent, and most of L.A. was put under a curfew, with residents instructed not to be outside after dark. Schools and businesses across the city were closed, bus and rail service was suspended, and some freeways were shut down.

On May 1, Rodney King made a plea on television: “Can we all just get along?” President George H. W. Bush sent in army troops and marines as well as riot-trained federal police and declared L.A. a federal disaster area. By May 4, things had calmed—the curfew was lifted, and schools and businesses re-opened.

Fifty-five people were killed during the unrest, 2,000 were injured, and more than 11,000 were arrested. Almost 4,000 fires were set, destroying 1,100 buildings. Estimates of property damage were over \$1 billion.

In June, L.A. Police Chief Daryl Gates resigned. Rodney King later received a settlement after two of the officers who had beat him were convicted in a civil suit of violating his civil rights. L.A. entered a period of investigation, dialogue, and policy change as the events of spring 1992 reverberated across decades.

## PUTTING IT IN A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

### South L.A. in the Early '90s

While the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King was the breaking point, the rage that fueled the 1992 civil unrest was broad and had been building well before the King video surfaced. David Horne, former chair of the Pan African Studies Department at Cal State Northridge, explained to the *L.A. Sentinel*, “We had a massive and increasing amount of general disrespect for the African American community.”

One of the ways this played out was liquor licenses being given to immigrants from Korea and other Asian countries for stores in Black neighborhoods, after the very same kinds of licenses had been denied to Black people in the community. Some African Americans resented a new community earning a living as store owners in neighborhoods where residents were struggling economically, and this was exacerbated when the Black community felt disrespected by some of the new owners of liquor stores, gas stations, and other businesses in their neighborhoods. Then, shortly after the Rodney King video surfaced, a Korean liquor-store owner named Soon Ja Du shot and killed a Black teenager, Latasha Harlins, after accusing her of stealing a bottle of orange juice. Ja Du was sentenced to five years probation and a \$500 fine. Tensions between Black residents and Asian business owners mounted.

South L.A.'s Black community was also struggling under the effects of systematic disinvestment in housing, education, and social services. Levels of unemployment and poverty were high. A study produced by a special committee of the California



Rodney King makes a plea on television: “Can we all get along?”

state legislature concluded that “poverty, segregation, lack of educational and employment opportunities, police abuse and unequal consumer services created the underlying causes of the riots.” An independent investigation of the LAPD after the events of 1992 documented a culture of racism and abuse. Civil-rights lawyer Connie Rice credits the uprising with forcing this issue to be dealt with. “It was the first time the Black community’s complaints couldn’t be denied and swept under the rug,” she said.

### Watts 1965 and Other Historical Precedents

In August 1965, the South L.A. neighborhood of Watts erupted in six days of civil unrest after the arrest of an African American man for drunk driving turned into a fight and then a widespread protest against police racism and violence. Those who call the events of August 1965 a rebellion rather than a riot point to underlying issues of housing segregation and police discrimination against the community. It was the largest instance of civil unrest in L.A. until 1992. In the late 1960s, riots or rebellions (*see next page for notes on language*) broke out in cities across the United States over issues of police violence, lack of affordable housing, and economic inequality.

### On Technology and Media

While some of the same issues persist, in other ways the world of 1992 was very different from the world of today. Few people had their own video-recording equipment, let alone on hand to capture something spontaneously. And there was no Internet or social media through which an amateur video-maker could easily and quickly broadcast a video at all, and certainly not to a large national audience. The video of Rodney King being beaten was given to the press and broadcast mostly via mainstream television news. Today, when many people have video-recording equipment on a smartphone they carry with them everywhere, and access to multiple means of sharing any video they take, video documentation of police brutality goes viral on a daily basis.

### The Big Picture

Police brutality against people of color, poor people, queer people, and other marginalized groups has been a reality throughout U.S. history, and a reality that has disproportionately and systematically impacted Black communities. While changes in technology and media have made it more visible, it is not new or occasional.

## ON LANGUAGE

### Was it an uprising? A riot? A rebellion?

People use different terms to describe what happened in L.A. in spring 1992. And the terms they choose reveal a lot about their world view. USC sociologist Karen Sternhermer wrote about this for the blog *Everyday Sociology*, saying, “civil unrest is the broadest term.” It means “a disruption of the typical social order,” which can include both riots and rebellions. The term “riot” is usually used to describe unruly mob behavior, violence, and mayhem—the phrases “senseless violence” or “mob violence” tend to go with “riot.” A “rebellion” or “uprising,” on the other hand, is a form of public protest by people who are fed up with an unjust status quo and take to the streets to provoke change, often when other avenues have been exhausted to little or no avail or when a triggering event provokes immediate response.

To see how the different terms tend to reflect different world views, consider the ways elected officials described what happened in 1992. Maxine Waters, a Black progressive Democrat who has represented Southern California communities in Congress since 1991, described the events as a “rebellion” or “insurrection” caused by the underlying reality of poverty and despair brought about by a government that had effectively abandoned poor people through the loss of local jobs and institutional discrimination, especially by police and financial institutions. Conservative politicians, who tend to prioritize “law and order,” saw things differently. President George H. W. Bush, for example, said the unrest was “purely criminal” and “mob brutality.”

These different perspectives reflect a political and perceptual divide that persists today. You may recall similar questions surfacing when people took to the streets after police shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014.

### South Central ► South L.A.

In 1992, the area we now know as South L.A. was usually called “South Central,” and “South Central” was often shorthand for gangs, drugs, and violence. In the years after 1992, a conscious shift in language occurred alongside an increase in social services and investment in the community, with people intentionally referring to the area as “South L.A.” instead of the stigmatizing “South Central.” In 2003, the city of Los Angeles officially changed the name of the area—which comprises 25 neighborhoods in 51 square miles—to South L.A.



LAPD advance upon protestor on the south lawn of City Hall in Downtown Los Angeles after the officers were acquitted on April 29 1992.

## VOCABULARY CORNER

### Immersive and Interactive Theatre

Immersive theatre creates a physical environment in which the audience is not separated from the performance in the way they are in a traditional production (i.e., when they are in seats watching a performance that takes place on a stage). Immersive theatre also often engages all five senses, with audiences not only watching and listening but also touching, tasting, and smelling elements of the show. And immersive theatre sometimes creates opportunities for each audience member to have a unique experience of the show—for instance, when things are happening in multiple rooms or multiple parts of the room at the same time, audience members may choose where to be and what to watch or engage with, and as a result they will each experience the show differently.

Interactive theatre breaks the “fourth wall” that separates the performer from the audience in conventional theatre. Instead of being passive observers, theatergoers at an interactive theatrical production become active participants in the piece.

Immersive and interactive theatre are related and often overlap. *Immersive* tends to refer to the space or setting, emphasizing the shift from a stage-and-seats setup to an encompassing environment shared by performers and audience. *Interactive* refers to the element of audience participation and active engagement in the production.

### Site-Specific Theatre

A theatrical production created to be performed at a particular location that is not a standard theatre. Site-specific productions are often interactive, with the audience expected to move around and be immersed in the setting.

## PLAYWRIGHTS’ ARENA

*The Hotel Play* marks the 25th anniversary of the Playwrights’ Arena, a theatre dedicated to exploring the diverse voices of Los Angeles. Playwrights Arena was founded in 1992 by Jon Lawrence Rivera and Steve Tyler. They are dedicated to discovering, nurturing, and producing bold new works for the stage by Los Angeles playwrights. Playwrights’ Arena develops new works through a series of readings, workshops, and roundtable discussions.



Four Larks creates “junkyard opera” and transforms old warehouses or nondescript storefronts into lavish environments.

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- ◉ Did *The Hotel Play* change your understanding of the 1992 L.A. uprising? What had you previously heard or known about it?
- ◉ What do you think: were the events that erupted in L.A. in late April 1992 a riot or a rebellion?
- ◉ What events from the year you graduated from high school do you think might have reverberations in 25 years?
- ◉ How do you see the political divide between those who call for law and order, and those who call for social and economic justice, playing out today?

## TO LEARN MORE, EXPLORE THESE RESOURCES:

- ◉ John Ridley's documentary *Let It Fall: Los Angeles 1982–1992*
- ◉ *Geography of Rage: Remembering the Los Angeles Riots of 1992*, ed. by Jervey Tervalon
- ◉ The recent documentaries *I Am Not Your Negro* and *13th*, both of which look at the intersections of race, policing, and justice in the United States
- ◉ *The Playwrights' Arena* on Facebook [facebook.com/playwrightsarena](https://www.facebook.com/playwrightsarena)
- ◉ Immersive and site-specific theatre in L.A.  
Chalk Repertory Theatre [chalkrep.com](http://chalkrep.com)  
Four Larks [fourlarks.com](http://fourlarks.com)  
Los Angeles Performance Practice [losangelesperformancepractice.org](http://losangelesperformancepractice.org)

## DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

**ANTHONY ANDERSON** of the USC Libraries has selected the following resources to help you learn more about the play and the events of 1992 that inspired it.

### RECOMMENDED BOOKS

*The 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (2014)

Louise Gerdes, editor

Doheny Library: F869.L89 N414 2014

*The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (2005)

Robert Gottlieb

Leavey Library: HN80.L7 N49 2005

*Performance and Activism: Grassroots Discourse after the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992* (2009)

Kamran Afary

Leavey Library: F869.L89 A23 2009

*Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (2005)

Min Song

Doheny Memorial Library: F869.L89 A27 2005

*Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992* (2003)

Anna Devere Smith

Leavey Library: PS3569.M465 T95 2003x

### RECOMMENDED DVDS

*Bridging the Divide: Tom Bradley and the Politics of Race* (2015)

Leavey Library: DVD 10372

*Los Angeles Burning: Memory, Justice and the 1992 Riot* (2013)

Leavey Library: DVD 9441

### SELECTED ELECTRONIC DATABASES

Find scholarly resources about the 1992 Los Angeles riots through these electronic resources, accessible through the USC Libraries homepage at [libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu)

- ◉ Black Studies Center
- ◉ America: History & Life with Full Text
- ◉ JSTOR
- ◉ Project Muse
- ◉ World Cat

