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...
Then, shortly after the Rodney King video surfaced, a Korean
Wilson mobilized a National Guard contingent, and most of L.A.
While the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King was
Fifty-five people were killed during the unrest, 2,000 were
were shut down.
On May 1, Rodney King made a plea on television: “Can we all just
got 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.

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
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.

VOCA...
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 facebookenplaywrightsarena
- Immersive and site-specific theatre in L.A.
  Chalk Repertory Theatre chalkrep.com
  Four Larks fourlarks.com
  Los Angeles Performance Practice 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
  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
  Min Song
  Doheny Memorial Library: F869.L89 A27 2005
  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
  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

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