

The **Arts Paper** March 2014 Free

*Serenades  
and  
Grace*

Festival of the Arts Boca  
brings together virtuosity  
in concert and in words

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Itzhak Perlman and Cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot



The tenor trio Forte

ABOVE:  
Anna Deveare Smith

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## Cover stories: Festival of the Arts Boca

### *Anna Deveare Smith, going forward on a search for grace*

By Chauncey Mabe

Anna Deveare Smith won't be mounting a full production of her new one-woman show *On Grace* at the Festival of the Arts Boca. But she will be offering the one thing that might be better — a chance for the audience to become co-creators of the play.

"I'm going to be doing excerpts from *On Grace*," Smith said by phone. "This is a presentation, not a production. It's still in development. I'll refine it according to how the director assesses the performance, and how the audience responds."

Smith is widely known from her work as an actress in film and television, especially *The West Wing*, in which she played National Security Advisor Nancy McNally, and her current job as hospital administrator Gloria Akalitus in Showtime's *Nurse Jackie*.

It's in the theater, where she invented a new kind of show, that Smith has made her most lasting mark. Nothing quite like it had been seen before — the topical one-woman, multi-character production, based on the exact words of real people interviewed by Smith.

"The audience is either the people we keep at bay until we're ready," Smith said, "or we can involve them in the process. We will open up the show for discussion, asking people what grace means to them, using the show to create a conversation. Hopefully it will be something of interest to the audience."

There's little chance anyone will be bored. Beginning with *Fires in the Mirror* (1991), about the Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, and most famously with *Twilight: Las Angeles* (1992), about the Rodney King riots, Smith has challenged and



Anna Deveare Smith will appear in her one-woman show, *On Grace*, at Festival of the Arts Boca. Photo provided

— yes — entertained audiences with her amazing ability to portray any character — from elderly black women to Korean grocers to rodeo cowboys to one of her chief influences, writer Studs Terkel.

Smith's current play, *On Grace*, grew out of her highly regarded 2008 production, *Let Me Down Easy*, which explored health care, dying, athletics, healing, cancer, and other issues related to the human body. She said *On Grace* is, among other things, about "goodness and kindness." In some ways, it's a search for the meaning of grace.

"Of course, grace has a specific meaning in Christianity," Smith said, "but it's bigger than just religion. I performed for theologians in Chicago. The rabbi said grace and mercy are comparable. The Buddhist monk laughed, and said, 'We don't think that way.' The imam was better at characterizing the Christian view of grace than some Christians."

In a secular way, Smith said, grace means beauty. "Even secular grace is about more than the body. If a dance has grace, it's about the body, but the body in movement. It's a bit beyond. It has to do with that thing

not entirely visible. And inner grace means something about responsibility. It has to do with self-evaluation."

Smith was driven to create her own path into the theater out of frustration with the way she was being treated as an actress in the early 1980s. Her experience on the long-running soap, *One Life to Live*, where she briefly played Hazel, "the shampoo girl" at a salon, almost drove her away from acting.

"*One Life to Live* did nothing for me as a performer," Smith recalled with a bit of heat in her voice. "That type of thing, most of us are doing that when we are kids, just to get the attention of casting directors. ... All I got was a couple days work in an environment where no one was nice to you. It was rough."

Smith grew up in Baltimore, where the oral tradition in the black community left an impression, and where she was the first African-American student at a Jewish high school.

"I had a classical training around the work of Shakespeare," Smith said. "He's the master of words. That went into me wanting to look into real life. If I could take another person's words, I could simulate them onstage. Shakespeare was my number one influence."

It was through her own work in the theater that Smith finally began to gain attention — "if not from America at large, then from people like Rob Reiner," who cast her in the hit film *The American President*. Smith adds, "If any young people are reading this, I suggest they figure out a balance between the traditional route of doing things and following your heart to see if that brings you any kind of career."

When Smith takes the stage to perform as many as 30 different characters in a single

play, she strides the stage like she owns it. Some critics have applauded her gift as an impressionist, but while it is true that she does much of her work with that amazingly malleable voice, what she does is not impressions but acting. But she didn't have that kind of confidence when she began. In truth, she doesn't have it now.

"No, I didn't have confidence as an actor," Smith said. "In fact, I say confidence is overrated. You should give doubt a try. I've been doing this for a long time, and I'm still not completely confident. We can wait a long time for confidence and get nothing done. I go forward, full of doubt and terror."

Smith's work in the theater has earned her a lengthy list of awards and prizes, including a Pulitzer nomination, multiple Drama Desk awards and Tony nominations, a MacArthur Fellowship (the "genius award"), a Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize (worth \$300,000). Last summer, President Obama presented her with a National Medal of Arts and Humanities.

While Smith has appeared in a number of successful movies, she loves working in television.

"We are in an era when the best writing geniuses are in TV," Smith says. "Aaron Sorkin deserved a Pulitzer Prize for *The West Wing*. The writing on *Nurse Jackie* is extraordinary. I love working in television. Being on it. I love the crew, the whole way it's organized, and the high level of professionalism. And on our set, the spirit of joy."

*Anna Deveare Smith will be at the Festival of the Arts Boca at 7 p.m. March 11 in the Amphitheater, where she will present Reclaiming Grace in the Face of Adversity. For tickets, visit [www.festivaloftheartsboca.org](http://www.festivaloftheartsboca.org).*



## Cover stories: Festival of the Arts Boca

### *Festival changes the tenor of accidental vocal trio's career*

By Greg Stepanich

When the operatic tenor trio Forte gives its first full-length orchestral concert in Mizner Park on March 15, it will be another milestone in a brief but blazing career for three young men thrown together for the reality show *America's Got Talent*.

But for Fernando Varela, it also will be a return to the area where he first saw his future path while a member of Palm Beach Opera's Young Artist program beginning in 2004.

"I was a resident artist and lived right there in Palm Beach for two years. The Palm Beach Opera program was a great program. They really paved the way for me as a professional," said Varela, 33, speaking from his home near Orlando. The opera company experience brought him into contact with several voice teachers, one of whom gave him a piece of career advice.

"Toward the end I started doing more crossover, and my teacher said, 'This is what you need to pursue,' rather than a standard opera career," Varela said.

And it's proved to be a smart move. Varela, a native of Puerto Rico, is on the road much of the year singing in a variety of genres when he's not teaming up with his Forte colleagues, Sean Panikkar and Josh Page. The story of their coming together has now entered reality TV lore: Varela saw New Yorker Page on a viral video, made contact with him online and the two decided to recruit a third tenor to pursue a spot on *America's Got Talent*. Originally, that was a South Korean tenor named Hana Ryu, but



Josh Page, Sean Panikkar and Fernando Varela of Forte. Photo provided

visa problems forced him to drop out.

He was replaced by Panikkar, a Michigan operatic tenor of Sri Lankan descent, and TV audiences got to see the three men meeting for the first time and working to come up with an act. Forte competed last summer in the eighth season of *America's Got Talent*, finishing in fourth place, but that was enough to get their career on the road. Their first disc, *Forte*, was released in November.

Varela said one of the best things about the group is its diversity of vocal talent.

"We're all so different. We have completely different strengths. Sean is essentially a full-time opera singer, Josh is touring in a hard rock band with his brother, and I kind of cross a lot of genres of music," he said. "I'm out here performing concerts full-time across the board, covering classic rock to Broadway, pop, classical and everything in between. So we each have our own distinct strengths."

Panikkar, who has appeared in several Metropolitan Opera productions going back to 2007, was seen by local audiences last month as Macduff in Palm Beach Opera's production of Verdi's *Macbeth*, and is currently singing Rodolfo in a new

production of Puccini's *La Bohème* at London's Royal Albert Hall.

Varela said putting the group together in last-minute seat-of-the-pants fashion was actually a thrill.

"The thing about this is we all met just before *America's Got Talent*, and it's all new for everybody. That's what was so exciting about putting it together," he said. "I found it to be an advantage. There was the newness of the group, and the excitement allowed us to show growth from the start through each week. We were able to blend a lot better as we went along and hone our sound as an ensemble."

Varela, who moved to the Orlando area from Puerto Rico with his family at age 8, began working with Central Florida Lyric Opera as a high school senior, and later studied with the legendary Italian soprano Licia Albanese before going to Palm Beach Opera, where he worked with Cesar Ulloa.

He has released three of his own albums, *Dare to Live* (2008), *Prelude* (2012) and *Inspiration* (also 2012), and has sung in more than 30 countries, making appearances with groups such as the National Symphony in Washington, D.C. He's also pursued work closer to home. Since 2009, he's been the music director and soloist at St. Paul Polish National Catholic Church, a small congregation in Belleview.

"That's what I was doing for the last five years in between stints out on the road. My church family has been fully supportive and understanding as I've been on the road for the last year. I don't get back there as often as I'd

like to," he said.

For its concert at the Festival of the Arts Boca, Forte will appear with the orchestra of the University of Miami's Henry Mancini Institute.

Varela said the Boca concert, which concludes the festival, will include songs such as *Somewhere* and *My Heart Will Go On*, "kind of all the big moments we had on ('America's Got Talent')," he said. "Obviously, we'll do some additional material, and we'll do one opera aria ... We'll definitely have a diverse program. We'll go from pop to opera and everything in between."

The singers of Forte agree on the basic focus of exposing more people to classical music.

"I think our programs have something for everybody. You can't gear it toward just one kind of person; it just won't work," Varela said. "Our mission is to attract new people to the art form, to get people who've never set foot in an opera house to enjoy classical singing."

And *America's Got Talent* was a great place to get that mission underway, he said.

"There aren't that many places that will actually take a chance on classical singing and expose it to the masses," he said. "People always ask me, 'Would you do it again?' and I say, unequivocally, yes. I would do this all over again in a heartbeat. It's opened so many doors for me that have been shut for such a long time."

*Forte appears at 7:30 pm March 15 at the Amphitheater during Festival of the Arts Boca. Call (561) 368-8445 or visit [www.festivalofthearts-boca.org](http://www.festivalofthearts-boca.org).*



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## Cover stories: Festival of the Arts Boca

### *Itzhak Perlman to collaborate in a concert of cantorial bliss*

By Greg Stepanich

It's a 1950s Saturday in Tel Aviv, in the fledgling state of Israel, and the radio's playing cantorial music, as it always does on Saturdays.

It's music that sticks with one person in particular, a young, prodigiously talented young violinist who will soon make his mark in the world as a teenage phenomenon. But through all the decades and accolades that followed, Itzhak Perlman never forgot the music he heard in those years.

"They would play these old cantorial records over and over again, and he became an authority on them," said Hankus Netsky, a New England Conservatory of Music professor and longtime Perlman

collaborator. "And Itzhak, like me, had this view: What was wrong with that music? It was really powerful, it was unique, it was really artistic, it was very complex. It had taken 1,000 years for it to get where it was, and so why not go back to it?"

"Go back to some sources that have been almost forgotten — the cantorial recordings of (Yossele) Rosenblatt, for example — and get that music out there," Netsky said. "It's a great artistic tradition for everyone, not just the Jewish community."

Perlman will get a chance to demonstrate that at this year's Festival of the Arts Boca, when he'll be joined by Cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot of New York's Park Avenue East Synagogue for a concert

March 9 called *Eternal Echoes: Songs and Dances for the Soul*, based on Perlman and Helfgot's album of the same name, released in 2012.

Three days before that, Perlman will be the soloist in the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto with the festival's house orchestra, The Symphonia Boca Raton.

Perlman's deep interest in what he has called "Jewish comfort music" led him to this project, but Netsky said neither he nor the violinist were interested in recreating the big, full Romantic orchestra arrangements that accompanied a certain kind of cantorial record in the later 20th century, such as the popular recordings by opera singers Richard Tucker and Jan Peerce.

"That was not the style Perlman wanted on this project. Recordings with a very large orchestra, grandiose to the point of being bombastic," Netsky said, speaking from his office at the conservatory in Boston, where he has worked for 36 years. "Itzhak right away said, 'No timpani, no brass, I want gentle arrangements.'"

What Perlman wanted was something more like chamber music, similar to the 1920s recordings Rosenblatt made with arranger Nat Shilkret.

Indeed, Helfgot's tense, cutting tenor is quite similar in sound to that of Rosenblatt (1882-1933), a Ukrainian-born cantor whose popularity in the early years of the last century enabled him to do a cameo in the very first talkie, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*.

Perlman asked Netsky, 58, who was music director for the violinist's other traditional Jewish music project,

*A Fiddler's House* (1996), to do the arrangements for the album with the older records in mind, and he fashioned settings for songs such as *Sheyibone Bays Hamikdosh*, *Shoyfer Shel Moshiakh*, *Dem Trisker Rebn's Nign* and *Mizmor L'David*.

The Yom Kippur prayer *Kol Nidrei* also was arranged, chamber-music style, for the album.

Netsky, a Philadelphia native who is the chairman of NEC's Department of Contemporary Improvisation, also teaches jazz studies there and is the founder and director of the Klezmer Conservatory Band.

For tours of *Eternal Echoes*, Netsky brings along a no-frills eight-piece band and sticks to the spirit of the arrangements.

"If it's going to get rowdy, it's going to get Jewish rowdy. If it's going to get loud, it's going to get Jewish loud. Kitsch is what we avoid," he said.

The March 9 concert should be enlightening for all sorts of listeners, he said.

"For some members of the Jewish audience it will be an attempt to connect with something they don't have any experience of at all. They want to kind of imagine their great-grandparents involved in it," he said.

"For the non-Jewish listener, it's: What is this? And they come out of the concert really just very turned on."

*Eternal Echoes will make its Florida premiere at 7 pm Sunday, March 9, at the Mizner Park Amphitheatre during the Festival of the Arts Boca. For more information, or to purchase tickets, call (561) 368-8445, toll-free at 866-571-ARTS, or visit [www.festivaloftheartsboca.org](http://www.festivaloftheartsboca.org).*

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