AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Pam MacKinnon, Artistic Director • Jennifer Bielstein, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ON PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Sweat
by Lynn Nottage
Directed by Loretta Greco

The Geary Theater
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Words on Plays
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A Note from Artistic Director Pam MacKinnon

“Throughout the scene Oscar scrapes gum from the bottom of the tables. It is an unpleasant task but Oscar is focused and determined” is a stage direction by Lynn Nottage. Stage directions help unlock how a story is told. They may even hold big themes of the play. As a director, I am forever interested in this how, not merely the what of the stories we tell onstage. I mine the text for the author’s intent with an eye toward the experience—the live event—as much as I mine it to convey the plot.

Why did the playwright write this very specific description? Is Oscar doing a lousy and under-appreciated job here, or is he gathering some useful information? Is it more important to think of him as listening or working? Is he noticed by the others, or is he invisible? Is this scene about him at all, or is he merely a part of the atmosphere of the bar? The director gets to answer these questions by focusing our attention.

I ask you to look out for this moment when you see A.C.T.’s production of Sweat. It will not make the plot synopsis, but it holds a ton of story.
A.C.T.’s Production of Sweat

Sweat was co-commissioned by Arena Stage and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle play series. It received its world premiere at OSF in 2015, directed by Kate Whoriskey. In October 2016, the play was presented in New York by The Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Patrick Willingham, Executive Director) before transferring to Broadway, where it was originally produced by Stuart Thompson and Louise L. Gund. It was nominated for three Tony Awards, and won the 2017 Obie Award for Playwriting and the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Creative Team

Scenic Designer.............................................................................................Andrew Boyce
Costume Designer..........................................................................................Ulises Alcala
Lighting Designer............................................................................................Allen Lee Hughes
Sound Designer..............................................................................................Jake Rodriguez
Projection Designer........................................................................................Hana S. Kim
Vocal Coach....................................................................................................Christine Adaire
Dramaturg........................................................................................................Joy Meads
Casting Director.............................................................................................Janet Foster, CSA
Stage Manager .................................................................................................Elisa Guthertz
Assistant Stage Manager ................................................................................Chris Waters
Associate Artistic Director .............................................................................Andy Donald
General Manager ............................................................................................Louisa Balch
Production Manager........................................................................................Robert Hand/Jack Horton

Characters and Cast

Tracey..............................................................................................................Lise Bruneau
Jason ..............................................................................................................David Darrow
Stan ..............................................................................................................Rod Gnapp
Chris.............................................................................................................Kadeem Ali Harris
Jessie .............................................................................................................Sarah Nina Hayon
Brucie ...........................................................................................................Chiké Johnson
Oscar .............................................................................................................Jed Parsario
Cynthia...........................................................................................................Tonye Patano
Evan ...............................................................................................................Adrian Roberts
Understudies.................................Anthony Fusco, Rudy Guerrero, William Hoeschler,
Susan Lynskey, and Adrian Roberts

*Information correct at time of publication.

OPPOSITE A set model, by scenic designer Andrew Boyce, of A.C.T.’s 2018 production of Sweat.
The Full Range of Life
An Interview with Playwright Lynn Nottage

By Simon Hodgson

Late one night in September 2011, playwright Lynn Nottage received an email from a friend sharing the financial insecurity that she was experiencing. “She was not asking for a handout, but just some form of solidarity,” says Nottage. “I was incredibly moved by her honesty and her willingness to be so open about her situation.”

The next day, Nottage and her friend went down to Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan to talk to people at the Occupy Wall Street movement, a protest against economic inequality. While her friend felt a sense of relief in the communal space to express her frustration, Nottage had only more questions. “Why suddenly do we have one percent which has so much wealth,” she says, “and a majority that’s beginning to suffer in ways that we haven’t seen since the Depression?” In the disconnect between the haves and have-nots, Nottage recognized the germ of an idea.

The Brooklyn-based playwright has built a career on telling the stories of the forgotten, the unsung, the marginalized. In her play By the Way, Meet Vera Stark, she explored the world of a Black maid in 1930s Hollywood. Before writing Ruined (the Pulitzer Prize–winning play set in a Democratic Republic of Congo riven by civil war), she spoke with Congolese women who had survived sexual abuse from both government soldiers and rebel fighters. For Nottage, plays represent the best way she can tell the stories that need to be told, but they aren’t the only way to effect change—after graduating from Yale School of Drama in 1989, she worked for Amnesty International for four years.

As Nottage pondered questions about financial equity that day on Wall Street, the seed of her next play sprouted. When she received a commission from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival for a play in its American Revolutions series, she intuitively knew the story she wanted to write. “The revolution that I’m interested in,” she told OSF series producer Alison Carey, “is the one that’s happening right now—the de-industrialization revolution.” Before rehearsals began at The Geary, we caught up briefly with Nottage to talk about the years of research for Sweat, the development of this play, thoughts on big city audiences, and her playwriting process from the street to the stage.
What was the research experience like for *Sweat* when you spent time in Reading, Pennsylvania?

What stood out in Reading was not the individual stories but the collective story. These people shared such a similar narrative. These were, by and large, middle-aged white guys who had so thoroughly invested in the American Dream and had assumed they would work in their jobs until they were ready to retire, and have fabulous pensions and health plans and would live out their lives in relative comfort. They were broadsided and shocked when they woke up one morning to be told, “The life that you knew is no longer going to exist. And not only is it no longer going to exist, but you’re not going to have access to it.” It forced them to rethink their identity and their relationship to the Horatio Alger myth [that hard work leads from rags to riches].

You met with former workers at the Hofmann Industries steel tubing plant, as well as residents throughout Reading. How challenging was that process?

I was surprised by how willing people were to talk. I’d anticipated being seen as an interloper coming into this community from New York City—I thought, people are not going to want to chat with me. But there was a real willingness to engage. What made a difference was that so often the journalists they engage with only come for 24 hours; they do hit-and-runs and disappear. But I spent time in Reading and they saw that I was someone who was making a real investment in the town.

We heard that you based the bar in *Sweat* on a real bar in Reading.

Yes! Mike’s Tavern used to be a bar for workers at Dana Corp., a big auto parts factory that employed a great many people in Reading. When that company shut down, it really had an economic impact. I spent more than a year at places like that. Over time people got to know me. I forged friendships and those friendships allowed people to be open and honest in a different and authentic way. I still have people in Reading who are really good friends.

Three of your plays—*Sweat*, *Ruined*, and *Mud, River, Stone*—all feature scenes in bars. Why do storytellers lean toward bars?

Right, I always forget that *Mud, River, Stone* has a scene in a bar. Though, that’s a hotel lobby, technically. In *Ruined*, the bar is a place of escape but it also serves as a place where the women feel imprisoned. For the community in *Sweat*, the bar is where people went after work to let off steam. It’s a communal space, which is different from the communal work space. It’s a place of comfort and refuge for the men and women who work at the mill.
Your plays’ settings range from 18th-century Paris (Las Meninas) to 1905 New York (Intimate Apparel) to 21st-century Mozambique (Mud, River, Stone). What threads link your storytelling?

They’re all stories about people who are marginalized. People who are struggling with identity. People whose identities have been erased. That’s certainly the case in Ruined and Sweat and Las Meninas and Intimate Apparel. They’re about working people who felt incredibly marginalized and unseen, and about how they can assert themselves in a landscape that refuses to recognize their dignity.

Like how Cynthia, Jessie, and Tracey assert themselves in the male-dominated landscape of the steel industry.

There is this misunderstanding culturally that only men are steelworkers. There are a lot of women who are working in the steel industry. They may not be on the floor of the foundry but particularly in metal tubing plants, they’re packing tubes and they’re in other roles. I felt it was really important to show the full range of life on the floor.

Throughout your career, you’ve written about ordinary, hardworking people. Vera Stark focused on a maid, Intimate Apparel was about a seamstress, while Sweat follows a group of steelworkers. What inspires this reverence and focus on working people?

Growing up in a family of working people. Those are the stories you tell, the stories that are close to home. My mom was a schoolteacher, my dad was a social worker. And I’m a worker myself. Someone asked me about my relationship to the steelworkers, and I said, “No one understands insecurity more than artists; we are always right there on the edge of insolvency.” A lot of what the steelworkers were going through really resonated with me because I understand going from abundance to nothing.
Shifting from your research to your rehearsal process, are there any unusual aspects to your practice when you’re working with directors and actors?

There’s a ritual that I always do the night before the very first preview. It’s somewhat elaborate—after this ritual, I give over the play to the actors for safekeeping because they’re going to be the stewards of the story for the length of the run. And at the end of the run I come and I take it back. One of the lovely things about being in this medium is that theater is so purely collaborative. You need others to complete the voice and tell the story. It’s really important to infuse actors with as much confidence as possible when they’re up there.

_Sweat_ premiered at OSF in the pre-election year of 2015. Since then it has been hailed for its electoral prescience—the _New Yorker_ called it “the first theatrical landmark of the Trump era.” Did you notice any difference in audience reactions?

I’ve only seen it in Oregon, New York, and Washington, DC. When we did it at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the stagehands were in the midst of a strike. The unions were struggling in a similar way to the workers represented in the play. So the play certainly had internal resonance. By and large the Oregon audience tends to be
somewhat removed from the issues that are discussed in the play because it tends to be more affluent. But they definitely leaned into the story and listened and were open to hearing it. It was before the election and before Trump was even on the landscape.

How about the DC audience?

In Washington, DC, I felt the audience was much more resistant to the narrative and a little standoffish, like “We don’t need to be told this.” But clearly they did! [Laughs] The reviewer for the Washington Post, Peter Marks, basically said—“We’ve seen this before. How many times have we seen union plays?” I actually wrote him a letter saying, “This isn’t a play about a strike, this is a play about a lockout. This is a very different narrative than the one that we’re used to.” By the time we got to New York, it became abundantly clear that the play was telling a story that needed to be told. What the play did was reflect what I heard when I did the research—a level of frustration and desperation that our politicians were not listening to and didn’t recognize.

What do you hope the Geary audience takes away from Sweat?

When I was done in Pennsylvania, one of my goals was to bridge a divide and get people to see that we all share one narrative. In Reading, you have people—all suffering in isolation and all suffering to the same extent—pointing fingers across the divide and blaming each other, not recognizing that they share responsibility for the dismantling of the culture. At the end of the play, when Chris and Jason meet with Oscar in the bar, we don’t know whether they heal. It’s an ambivalent ending. All we know is that they’re occupying the same space and that they have to figure out in the moment what to say to each other next. That’s where I wanted to leave it. I didn't want to draw any conclusions because I don't know that we will come together. I don't think of myself as being a moralizing playwright that wants the audience to leave with a specific lesson. What I do hope is that at the end of the play, the audience will go off to some bar and enter into a robust conversation about some of the issues raised by the play.
Good Times and Bum Times
Life in a Company Town

By Elspeth Sweatman

Company towns such as Reading, Pennsylvania, have a distinct rhythm. Dominated by one industry, their days are punctuated by shift bells and post-work drinks, and their years by the economic wheel of fortune: prosperity followed by layoffs, strikes by compromises. This rhythm has been composed over more than a hundred years, beginning in the manufacturing boom of the Industrial Revolution, faltering in the volatile strikes and unionization of the 1800s, and solidifying amid the patriotism of World War II. It has formed the steady beat of family life for generations; like Chris and Jason in Lynn Nottage’s Sweat, children grow up to the pulse of shift work and often follow their parents into these industrial jobs.

From this rhythm comes a unique psychology that pervades the community, impacting the lives of mill workers and non-mill workers alike. Every business and every resident has some connection to the industry. Everyone is part of the cycle of boom, bust, and boom again. It is this aspect that has made the mill closures in America’s Rust Belt over the past three decades so devastating. “You wipe that mill out and you aren’t just wiping out eight or nine hundred jobs,” says former steelworker and Chicago resident Ken Wychocki, “you’re wiping out a whole lot more.”

Forged in Fire

Riveting, jacking, stoking, drilling: these are dangerous, labor-intensive jobs. At every plant, there are the folkloric (and true) stories of someone on the job who got seriously injured—like Stan was before he began managing the bar in Sweat—or died, crushed under machinery or dissolved in molten steel. To survive this perilous world and meet the daily production quotas, workers band together; they rely on each other. As a result, “steelworkers have developed a sense of pride, perhaps even a bravado, in their ability to get the job done,” say David Bensman and Roberta Lynch in Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community.

The camaraderie that these manufacturing jobs foster is at the heart of Sweat. Tracey, Cynthia, Jessie, and Stan were brought together by working at Olstead’s—Reading’s fictional steel tubing plant—and have become each other’s chosen family. It is these bonds that make the explosive events at the climax of Sweat so dramatic and personal.

United We Stand

“When I started at the plant, it felt like I was invited into an exclusive club,” says Cynthia in *Sweat*. “And when I got my union card, you couldn’t tell me anything. Sometimes when I was shopping I would let it slip out of my wallet onto the counter just so folks could see it. I was that proud of it.” For many workers, joining the union was a sign of security; there was now someone who would fight one’s corner and protect workers’ interests. It was the union that had secured the eight-hour day, benefits, and unemployment compensation for its members and that continued to fight for improved benefits and wage increases. The unions grew so powerful in the years following World War II that many steelworkers felt that their jobs were untouchable. When Stan mentions talk of layoffs at the plant in *Sweat*, Cynthia responds, “That rumor’s been flying around for months. Nobody’s going anywhere.” She believes that the union is powerful enough to block any company measures to cut jobs.

Unions, however, were not blessings for everyone. The structure and inner workings of many unions kept workers of color in the worst-paying—and often the most dangerous—jobs in the plant, with no means of advancement. “My father, he swept up the floor in a factory like Olstead’s,” says the Colombian American Oscar in *Sweat*, “those fuckas wouldn’t even give him a union card. But he woke up every morning at four a.m. because he wanted a job in the steel factory, it was the American way, so he swept fucking floors thinking, ‘One day they’ll let me in.’” This was an all-too-common narrative for workers of color. It wasn’t until a 1974 lawsuit over discriminatory hiring and promotion practices that Black steelworkers were given equal status with their white counterparts and access to the top positions in the mill. It is partly this discrimination that spurs Cynthia to apply for the management post at Olstead’s. “I’ve stood on that line, same line since I was nineteen,” she says. “I’ve taken orders from idiots who were dangerous, or even worse, racist. But I stood on the line, patiently waiting for a break. . . . if I walk away, I’m giving up more than a job. I’m giving up all that time I spent, standing in line waiting for one damn opportunity.” Cynthia’s experience speaks to a long-standing employment battle; American workers of color continue to face classism, racism, and discrimination today.

New Management

While the blood and sweat of the plant floor and the rising power of the unions brought many workers together, it increased the divide between workers and management. When profits were high, these rifts were negligible. But in the 1970s and ’80s, as international competition made profit margins slimmer and the latest generation of management took over many of the steel mills, the resentment became toxic. “You don’t see the young guys out there [on the factory floor],” says Stan in *Sweat*. “They find it offensive to be on the floor with their Wharton MBAs. . . . they don’t wanna get their feet dirty, their diplomas soiled with sweat . . . or understand the real cost, the human cost of making their shitty product.”
This lack of connection between management and their workers was clear when companies closed plants and shipped out machinery in the middle of the night. Because many of the management staff had not grown up in towns such as Gary, Indiana, or Reading, Pennsylvania, they did not see the human side of the industry, the communities that relied upon these jobs. “Twenty-four years, and I can’t remember talking to anyone in the office, except to do paperwork,” says Cynthia in the play. “I mean some of these folks have been working there as long as us, but they’re as unfamiliar as a stranger sitting next to you on a bus.”

Collateral Damage

Despite their divisions, both unions and management had an impact on the Rust Belt towns in which they operated. Many industrial leaders such as Andrew Carnegie (U.S. Steel) and Milton Hershey (Hershey Chocolates) were involved in the initial creation of worker housing and local businesses, including the foundation of schools, libraries, playgrounds, and social clubs. In Hershey, Pennsylvania, for example, the Hershey Company paid for the town’s garbage collection and snow removal services. The unions also catered for the needs of their members, offering classes at the union hall, running a baseball league, or supporting a local marching band.

When manufacturing jobs declined in the 1980s, ’90s, and early 2000s, many of these institutions found it difficult to keep going and shuttered. Carol Bernick worked at a day care in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, until 1982, when local government funds dried up. Despite having little to do with the steelworkers in her community, she unexpectedly
found herself alongside them at the unemployment office and at town hall meetings. “The loss of one’s job has a really detrimental effect on one’s overall being,” she says. “[The] feelings that come out, a feeling of helplessness, hopelessness, being worthless, being unproductive, ’cause we have work ethic ingrained into us. And to find it shattered one day is really, really devastating.”

For many, finding work was difficult. Some employers discriminated against steelworkers because they were known for expecting high wages and generous pension packages. This was especially true for the older workers, who had been at the plants for decades. “You’d think, if you put on an application that you have thirty-five years of service, an employer would know that you are dedicated,” says Denny Wilcox in *Homestead: The Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town*. “You’d think they’d grab you in a minute. But they discriminate against you because of age.”

Those who could afford to relocate or were not tied down by a mortgage did, creating a further drain on cash-strapped tax bases and voting districts and leading to more businesses going under. After the closing of Reading’s Lucent Technologies and Dana Corporation in 2010, the poverty rate rose to 41.3 percent in 2011. No matter their age, race, or degree of education, everyone found it difficult to find work. Teresa Santiago, who left her job at a Reading candy factory to pursue an associate’s degree, found herself back there in 2011, making less than she had made before. “Eight years ago I said, ‘I don’t want to do this, I have to further my education.’ And now here I am, still packing candy, and making less.”
What Happens Now

Like their real-life counterparts, the characters in *Sweat* are bewildered by the situation in which they find themselves. “I run the full mile, I put in the time, do the right thing,” says Brucie, “But, dude, tell me what I did wrong, huh?” Life in their community had always followed the same path: steady work followed by a secure retirement. Now, seemingly through no fault of their own, that security and dream was gone. “We did everything, everything known to man I believe, to try to fight to save our jobs,” says Darrell Becker, a former steelworker at the Jones & Laughlin Mill in Pittsburgh. “And in retrospect, there was nothing there to save because they were gonna shut the plant down anyway.”

Not only do many people in the Rust Belt feel stunned at the permanent closure of the mills and the devastation of their communities, but they also feel disenfranchised. No one in the media or the local, state, or federal government seems to be listening to them. They see other industries get bailed out—the auto plants, the banks—and wonder why steel wasn’t saved. “I watch these politicians talking bullshit and I get no sense that they even know what’s going on beyond the windshield of their cars as they speed past,” says Stan in *Sweat*. These could be the sentiments of some steelworkers today, as they wait for President Trump to fulfill his promise that raising import tariffs on steel will bring their jobs back. Some remain hopeful, others cynical. “He told them what they wanted to hear so they would vote for him,” says Kimberly Allen, a steelworker at the Conshohocken plant in Pennsylvania.

While the return of the major manufacturing plants to America’s Rust Belt is uncertain, many communities are rebuilding. An influx of new people—in many instances immigrants from Central and South America—into cities such as Pittsburgh and Reading have revitalized the communities, bringing the energy of start-ups and the forward-thinking of entrepreneurs, as well as the tax dollars needed to fund local schools and other public amenities. As the silent mills slowly rust, these former company towns are discovering a new rhythm of life.


**OPPOSITE** Steelworkers from the 1970s. Courtesy Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area.
Eyes Wide Open
An Interview with Director Loretta Greco

By Elspeth Sweatman

Magic Theatre Artistic Director Loretta Greco has been a fan of playwright Lynn Nottage for years. The two briefly crossed paths in 2005 when Greco produced *The Antigone Project*—a collection of pieces by five writers, including Nottage, that transport Sophocles’s protagonist to contemporary America—and at several readings of new work at the Women’s Project in New York. Greco has followed Nottage’s work ever since.

When A.C.T.’s new artistic director, Pam MacKinnon, asked Greco to direct Nottage’s latest work, *Sweat*, for the Geary stage, she immediately said yes. She had felt the power of the Pulitzer Prize–winning drama when it premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015, and knew she wanted to explore it further. She also knew she was itching to get back to The Geary, where she had previously directed *Lackawanna Blues* (2002), *Blackbird* (2007), *Speed-the-Plow* (2008), and *The Realistic Joneses* (2016). We sat down with Greco as casting and design plans were being finalized to discover what it is about Nottage’s work and The Geary Theater that excites her.

*Sweat* will be your fifth play for the Geary stage. What makes Nottage’s work different from the other works you’ve tackled?

It’s naturalism, which is interesting because I don’t often work in naturalism. *Sweat* isn’t tweaked in a way that a David Mamet [*Speed-the-Plow*] or a David Harrower [*Blackbird*] or a Will Eno [*The Realistic Joneses*] is. It’s not magical—it really is naturalism. It really is about wanting to feel like we all could be denizens of that bar.

How do you accomplish that in a space as big as The Geary?

The thing about The Geary is there are certain plays where you want to take advantage of the pomp and circumstance and the formality, and then there are certain plays where you really need the immediacy. What is the geography between the audience and each individual on that stage? It’s a math challenge: how to create foreground and background where both are in as close proximity to the audience as possible? The design team and I discussed how “The bar can’t be further than x.” [Laughs] Every inch mattered. Because the bar is like those characters’ living room. They are a family and we want to extend
that so the audience feels that they’re part of that family too.

This is the tenth show I’ve done with [scenic designer] Andrew Boyce. He marries this beautiful sense of intimacy and the personal with his stunning architectural sensibility. He’s such a beautiful dramaturg. In our research, we both fell in love with Reading and the fact that it doesn’t look like the poorest city in America. You can see its finer glory; the beauty of the town still remains. Remember the Reading Railroad, the card in Monopoly that’s a good property to own? We wanted to capture that sense of pride and the beauty of the city.

How are you doing that, giving the audience a sense of the city outside the bar where most of the action takes place?

With the glory of The Geary—that depth of field—we can really create the sense of context, around and above the intimacy of the bar, of the city moving on through images and video on these billboards above the bar. Those billboards are thrilling. That’s an opportunity that you rarely get in most spaces, even in some Broadway houses. You don’t have the depth and you don’t have the height that The Geary has.

What research have you done into Reading and the economic circumstances covered in Sweat?

When I was younger, I used to do an enormous amount of research. I felt that it was my responsibility to know the entire history of the piece. I do less of that now. I try and follow the writer’s lead. So I’ve read a massive amount of Lynn talking about her process and the articles that inspired her. Lynn may be one of the greatest writers who really believes in research, research, research. But then she tosses that all aside and she delves into the humanity of these characters. She has distilled everything into this stunning community of human beings. So I’m just reading the play like a crazy person, coming back to it as the Bible. I’ve really let Lynn pave the way and give me the leads that she feels are important.
You've directed a number of plays that explore what the American Dream means for people today. What is it that fascinates you about this topic?

I'm interested in class. I'm kind of a class warrior. We so rarely have genuine pieces of work in our culture that deal with the working class, that recognize the beauty and the dignity of what it is to really believe in hard work and your piece of that bigger American Dream. I've directed a lot of [playwright] Sam Shepard, who was interested in the broken promise of the American Dream. He's the opposite end of the spectrum from Lynn; Sam wasn't a researcher, but he viscerally followed the emotional terrain of this country, the promises and the hope that the country was built on. That fascinates me. I don't know what comes first—the chicken or the egg—but it is something that compels me.

Like Sam, Lynn is looking at identity. We're tied to this identity of the American landscape and the promise of, “If you work hard, you'll be rewarded.” Provisions will be there for you and the next generation will have even more bounty; they will do better. Lynn's looking at what's broken, at these beautiful people who feel incredibly disenfranchised as the country begins to de-industrialize, and asking what do we do to regain the dignity of the working class when the one percent is so intent on making the gap wider and wider.

Yet Sweat isn't trying to provide any answers.

I don't think Lynn is interested in that. She's listening and trying to get it right. The play enlists us to be active in the audience, to wrestle with these complications and with
how we re-engage this whole swath of people who have been marginalized through no fault of their own. What’s to be done? I think that to pretend that you have a pat answer would be really dissatisfying and would just hijack the beauty of the piece. So Lynn leaves us with the work ahead. She’s asking big questions. How do we retain our best selves and not turn on each other even when everything around us is falling apart? Can there be hope? That’s a fair question right now.

There’s something about the last scene that just blows me away. There are four men onstage and they are different in a multitude of ways—culturally, generationally—and yet they’re bound by Reading and by what’s happened to their city and how that has personally wreaked havoc on them. But they’re trying to see a way forward, and Lynn leaves us before they can find the vocabulary to do that. That’s mind-blowing, because moving forward is not something that is easy or pat; it’s complicated and she allows that complicated moment to breathe.

Why do you think this play will resonate with a Bay Area audience?
In San Francisco, we’re aware that the state of California is looking more and more like the rest of the country will look in 25 years; we understand that it is going to be a majority-minority [minorities will make up the majority of a population] very soon and there is an embracing of that. It’s a good thing, an economically thrilling thing, a culturally thrilling thing, in terms of innovation and diversity. Our cultural makeup is shifting hugely, quickly, and for the better. So it’s interesting to look at a spot in the US where people didn’t see this coming. They didn’t see what NAFTA was going to do. They didn’t see that the breaking down of the unions was even a possibility. So there is that panic as industrial jobs move overseas and that tragedy of being bereft both of literal livelihood and of identity.

The Geary audience is always a hungry audience for authentic stories about social conundrums. They are really gonna dig this play, and I hope that it spurs incredibly deep, rich conversations about what is to be done, where we are headed, and what will happen to this enormous section of our workforce. How are people seen, how is dignity restored, how do we close this gap between the one percent and the ninety-nine percenters, how do we stop being OK with living in a country where so many people are living in poverty? How is that moral, and how are we responsible for one another as citizens, as human beings?

What does Lynn Nottage’s Sweat tell us about America right now?
Lynn came into Reading with eyes wide open. She learned, listened, and then conjured these characters; she’s asking us to not look away, to keep our eyes wide open and to see what she sees. Too many people are looking away right now. I hope the power of the play and the humanity of it will allow people to keep their eyes wide open just as Lynn has, in order to be altered in a way and to think about something anew and their place in what the future’s going to look like.
Geology was destiny for 19th-century Pennsylvania. The state had all of the raw materials necessary for the production of steel at scale: iron ore, coal, and limestone. It also had transport links via the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, local experience in manufacturing, and access to investment from Pittsburgh financiers. Steel was the metal of the future: strong, durable, and versatile, it was valuable in bridges and buildings, ships and railroads. As America began to rebuild the infrastructure that had been shattered by the Civil War (1861–65), Pennsylvania was poised to lead that industrial expansion. Dozens of towns across the Keystone State would be forged on steel mills, including Homestead, Braddock, and Reading, the town that inspired *Sweat*.

It took a handful of visionary industrialists to transform these individual steel towns into a nationwide industry. Andrew Carnegie was a hardworking Scottish immigrant who made a small fortune in iron and railroads before diversifying into steel in the 1870s. Carnegie’s genius was not in foreseeing the economic possibilities of the steel process, but in getting to grips with the breadth and complexity of the entire business—owning the sources and generation of iron ore, operating the transportation of raw materials, managing the workforces and factories that created the steel, and controlling the market distribution of finished steel. After he joined forces in the 1880s with Henry Clay Frick—an aspiring businessman who had bought up dozens of coal fields across Pennsylvania—the Carnegie Steel Company set out to maintain quality levels and reduce costs by controlling every aspect of steel production. From the 1880s through to the beginning of the 20th century, Carnegie would become the industry’s most successful entrepreneur.

**1901–60: The U.S. Steel Era**

Carnegie’s shrewdness and vision laid the groundwork for the industrial conglomerate that would dominate America’s economy in the first half of the 20th century: U.S. Steel. Formed by a merger between three steel companies (including Carnegie’s), U.S. Steel would become a virtual monopoly, aided by favorable government oversight in the 1920s and fueled by military contracts during both world wars. In 1943, the midpoint of America’s commitment to World War II, the company employed 340,000 people...
nationwide, its largest ever workforce. By 1946, the year after the war ended, America was manufacturing 54.1 percent of the world’s steel. And with much of the globe in ruins, the company was set to dominate for decades.

Steel wasn’t just building skyscrapers; it was creating cities. All around the Great Lakes, towns were prospering thanks to the steel industry: Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, Gary, Milwaukee. The industrial tide also lifted other steel-related businesses, from the iron ore fields outside Duluth to the auto industry in Detroit. Throughout these communities, steelworkers benefited substantially from the industry’s increasing profitability. By the 1950s, they had earned a series of pay increases (in part as a payback for an agreement by the United Steelworkers of America and the American Federation of Labor not to strike during World War II). In the 1960s, steelworkers would add to those gains with commitments to pensions.

As America’s industrial economy expanded, working on the blast furnaces that created molten steel became increasingly rewarding. The labor was physically demanding and dangerous, but for thousands of working-class Americans, including people of color and immigrants from Eastern Europe—Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Slovaks—the mill represented a ladder to greater prosperity and higher standards of living. For some families, just like Chris and Cynthia in *Sweat*, young people would follow their parents’ path to work at steel plants. “The big thing was the pay,” says Robert L. Anderson, a former U.S. Steel blast furnace laborer and union organizer. “I’ve never made that good money in my life. There were people with college degrees that were working at mills because they could get better pay there than they could doing something else.”

**The Beginning of the Rust Belt: Inaction Replaces Innovation**

America’s steel industry was so successful in the first half of the 20th century that, to many of its employees and executives, its dominance seemed inevitable. True, there had been occasional strikes (often following temporary downturns in the business), but by the 1960s, union leaders and management heads had reached similar conclusions—with so much money rolling in, why rock the boat? For executives, it was easier to remain on good terms with the union by offering a three-percent annual raise and reap the bulk of the profit rather than risk a strike that might shut down the mills.

What both unions and management failed to appreciate, however, was that the foundations of America’s booming steel industry were rotten. In the earliest years, Carnegie had invested heavily in new technology that reduced the price of steel and enabled him to better compete for a significant share of the steel market. But in the mid-20th century, America’s steel magnates were more interested in keeping profits high than in finding the next technological advance; over the two decades following the end of World War II, they agreed secretly (and illegally) to fix prices. The result was a lack

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1 In 1962, President John F. Kennedy called out the actions of U.S. Steel and other corporates for their “simultaneous and identical actions” to increase prices, calling the move “a wholly unjustified and irresponsible defiance of the public interest.”
of innovation—with prices held artificially high, there was no incentive to develop new technology and undercut a competitor.

The clearest illustration of this technological inertia can be seen in the continued building of traditional blast furnaces from 1945 to 1965, instead of investing in basic oxygen furnace (BOF) technology. This novel steel-making process used pure oxygen (rather than air) to refine pig iron into steel, resulting in fewer impurities, faster production, and reduced labor costs. John F. Heinz, a speechwriter for Bethlehem Steel, recalled the company’s intractable decision-making: “The definition of intelligence or ability was to do things the Bethlehem way,” he said. “The Bethlehem way was ‘The way we always did it in the past.’” Not till the late ’60s did any US mills incorporate BOF technology; by then it was too little, too late. In Great Lakes manufacturing towns from Buffalo in the east to Milwaukee in the west, corrosion was setting in. The Rust Belt was starting to form.

Internal technological planning was not the only failing by American steel companies. Their management teams also made international mistakes. Instead of investing in cheap, high-quality iron ore from Brazil and Australia, they pumped millions into developing low-grade iron ore fields in northern Canada. Not only was this ore more difficult and expensive to extract, but in order to make it usable for blast furnaces, the mills needed to

2 The term “Rust Belt” is often attributed to Walter Mondale, the Democratic candidate for the 1984 presidential election, who told a crowd of Cleveland steelworkers, “Reagan’s policies are turning our industrial Midwest into a rust bowl.” Journalists adjusted “rust bowl” to “rust belt” to play off another American economic region, the Sun Belt.
turn it into pellets—another step in the process, another cost that made US steel more expensive than steel manufactured abroad.

The Rise of International Steel

The Rust Belt was not just forged by the decision making of US steel executives. Internationally, competitors were taking aim at America’s lead. In postwar western Europe, engineers and entrepreneurs were desperate for an edge to rebuild their countries’ devastated economies. Industrial scientists from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland refined the BOF process, gaining a substantial advantage for European manufacturers in what was becoming an increasingly global industry. In the Far East, Japanese industrial corporations developed a postwar industry based on BOF techniques, producing steel that beat their North American rivals on price. By the 1970s, according to industry analysts Donald F. Barnett and Louis Schorsch, Japanese steel firms were dedicating 1.6 percent of their net sales to research and development. Their American counterparts earmarked just 0.6 percent.

The Rust Belt in Real Terms

There was a price to be paid for neglecting innovation and American steel communities would pay it. By 1980, the US share of world steel output had dropped to 14 percent. Japan controlled 16 percent. America’s declining market share in steel may have looked stark on Wall Street balance sheets, but on Main Street, the picture was far worse. As US mills’ competitiveness dwindled, they laid off workers nationwide or closed plants, often with no warning. The result was a downturn in industrial cities around the Great
Lakes—as well as traditional manufacturing hubs such as Youngstown, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore. Arthur Leibowitz, a former U.S. Steel craneman, remembers the company’s cold-blooded decisions: “They shut down the Youngstown works on Thanksgiving Day while people were driving to work.” As blue-collar jobs disappeared, businesses declined and families were torn apart, leading to the social problems depicted so powerfully by Lynn Nottage in *Sweat*—depression, addiction, and anger.

**Structural Pressures**

The hardworking cities of the Great Lakes not only suffered from corporate corrosion, but they also fell victim to nationwide economic shifts. Steel industry profits were hit by new alternative materials such as ceramics, plastics, and aluminum. Using these manufacturing substitutes, American cars became lighter (averaging 2,800 pounds in the 1980s, compared to 3,850 pounds a decade earlier), requiring less steel. Aluminum replaced steel in canned drinks; the rise in frozen meals reduced orders of steel for canning food. Lower demand for steel meant lower prices for mills and fewer jobs for steelworkers, another contributing factor to depressed steel communities.

In the historical reckoning that often follows industrial failure, many industry analysts blamed management, but labor unions also played a part. By the 1970s, says *New York Times* labor correspondent William Serrin, union leaders at the national level were out of touch with factory floor workers; they were stuck in zero-sum relationships with management (a win for the company is a loss for the workers and vice versa) and concerned solely with making short-term gains for their members (such as earning

Women welders at the Bethlehem Shipbuilding training school during World War II. P82-125s.6000. Bethlehem Steel Photo Collection. Courtesy San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.
hourly increases and controlling hiring for specific tasks), instead of tapping employees’ on-site expertise to improve overall company efficiency. “My first day on the job as inspector, we were walking down along the trestle [an elevated track for transporting ore], and this bond wire on the third rail was burning up,” says Mike Bilscik, a former motor inspector at U.S. Steel’s Duquesne Works. “I knew that in a half hour it’s gonna be a major job, so I said, ‘Why don’t we fix this?’” The response from his colleague? “Don't do anything unless the boss tells you to.”

When profits dropped in the last decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, steel companies were committed to surplus headcounts, high labor costs, and pension plans that limited their financial flexibility. Although steelworkers continued to work as hard as ever, the unions that had won fundamental rights for their members remained locked in an outlook which was outdated in a globally interlinked economy. Some workers (like Stan and Brucie in Sweat) saw the writing on the wall for the union’s negotiating power. Others continued to view their representatives as their protectors, holding out hope to the bitter end that the union would do right by them.

21st-Century Steel

The Rust Belt was not caused by one event, nor did it form in a single year or one presidential administration. Although the story of Sweat focuses on 2000 and 2008, the economic downturn that affected manufacturing centers throughout the Midwest and the Great Lakes region began in the 1980s and continues to impact communities
today. And while the characters in Lynn Nottage’s play blame economic decisions (such as the North American Free Trade Agreement) for their situation, many of the causes of the Rust Belt were decades in the making. American steel-makers made long-term misjudgments and mistakes which were exacerbated by global economic forces.

Although newer US “mini-mills”—smaller companies that produce steel by using electricity to superheat scrap metal instead of blast furnaces—have offered promising signs in the last two decades, recent global economic shifts are less encouraging for the men and women of America’s steel mills. As the world’s economy has become more integrated since 2000, the trend toward seeking markets for cheaper labor has only expanded, increasing the competitive pressure on established US steel manufacturers to cut costs.

Recently, the US government has sought to revive the national steel industry, imposing a 25 percent tariff on foreign steel imports in June 2018. By making foreign steel more expensive, American policy-makers hope to make domestic steel products more affordable, boosting profits, increasing sales, and creating jobs. But raising the price of steel also hurts US manufacturing companies that use metal—vehicle manufacturers, auto parts makers, appliance producers—as the 30 percent steel tariffs imposed by President George W. Bush demonstrated back in 2002. While popular with blue-collar workers, this tariff will almost certainly be insufficient to restore America’s steel-making industry to the heights it reached in the 1940s and ’50s. But for many former steelworkers in the Rust Belt, the fact that their industry and communities are back in the national spotlight is a reason for hope.

Of All the Gin Joints

The Dramatic Appeal of Bars

By Elspeth Sweatman

Whether writing a slapstick comedy, a sci-fi action flick, or a tense family drama, writers for both stage and screen have been drawn to bars. But what does this setting add dramaturgically to a story? What opportunities and challenges does the presence of alcohol provide a storyteller?

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

For many people, their local bar is like a second home. It is a place where they can leave behind the cares of the day and be their authentic selves. The bar in Lynn Nottage’s Sweat (2015)—inspired by the real-life Mike’s Tavern in Reading, Pennsylvania—is home for Tracey, Cynthia, Jessie, and Stan; this is where they spend their time between shifts at Olstead’s Mill. They aren’t spending time with their biological families (though mothers and sons are both frequenters of the same establishment); they are drinking with their chosen family. Moe’s Tavern in the animated television series The Simpsons (1989–present) performs the same function for Homer and his fellow workers from Springfield’s nuclear power plant.

But these chosen families are not always made up of colleagues. Bars bring together strangers too, often people from different walks of life who wouldn’t necessarily have met otherwise but become unlikely friends. In Shakespeare’s Henry IV, Part One, Prince Hal rubs shoulders with thief Bardolph and inn-keeper Mistress Quickley as well as the knight Sir John Falstaff in the Boar’s Head tavern. And in long-running television classic Cheers (1982–93), the Boston bar is the hangout of mailman Cliff, graduate student and waitress Diane, retired baseball coach Ernie, and psychiatrist Frasier.

The inviting atmosphere created by this chosen family provides a writer with a foundation on which to set their central conflict or situation. One of the most familiar conflicts is the appearance of an outsider who destabilizes the group. In William Saroyan’s The Time of Your Life (1939)—a Pulitzer Prize–winning play set in 1939 San Francisco that was performed at A.C.T. in 1970 and 2004—the tight-knit atmosphere of Nick’s Pacific Street Saloon, Restaurant, and Entertainment Palace is shattered when cop Blick threatens to close the place. Playwright Martin McDonagh’s recent West End
and off-Broadway hit, *Hangmen* (2015), also centers on a family under threat. Retired hangman-turned-pub-owner Harry Wade faces a harrowing choice: admit he hanged an innocent man, or his daughter will be killed. In situations such as these, the closeness of these families of characters raises the stakes for both storytellers and audiences.

**In Vino Veritas**

Alcohol is often nicknamed the truth-telling serum. It affects the brain’s prefrontal cortex, where rational thought and decision-making occur. It lowers both our verbal and physical inhibitions; we are more likely to say things without thinking them through or to get in a fight with someone. For storytellers, these characteristics create moments of incredible humor—take actors Stockard Channing, Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman, and Dianne Wiest howling with laughter and calling each other “witch” after downing too many midnight margaritas in the film *Practical Magic* (1998)—but also moments of unforgettable drama. Think of the bar fights in the blockbuster films *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Trainspotting* (1996), or the suspense as James Bond prepares to down his shot with a scorpion on his hand in *Casino Royale* (2006).

Onstage, alcohol’s effect on characters’ judgment creates a tension and inevitability that propels a play forward. In *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) by Edward Albee and *August: Osage County* (2007) by Tracey Letts, the characters slowly reveal secrets as they consume drink after drink. Public facades are shattered, and the characters must find a way of picking up the pieces and moving forward. As the men in Harry Hope’s saloon guzzle down drinks in Eugene O’Neill’s *Iceman Cometh* (1946), confident salesman Hickey goads the other men to turn their pipe dreams—of reopening his casino, of getting his conviction overturned, of returning to the circus—into realities, then confesses to murdering his wife so that she wouldn’t have to bear witness to his own inability to reform. As the others realize what Hickey has done and the consequences of the actions he has convinced them to take, they return to the solace of alcohol. In both of these dramas, these revelations may not have occurred without the steady supply of the truth-telling serum.

**Escape from Reality**

Bars often form a liminal space: between dreams and reality, between past and present. This may be a result of the alcohol consumed in them, or of their décor, which can create a time-warp effect by remaining constant decade after decade. When one is in a bar, one can exist in both the past and the present. In the film *The World’s End* (2013), Gary King tries to recapture his unworried youth with his friends by going on a pub-crawl in their hometown. He hopes that the nostalgia of these familiar bars will help him return to a time when his life was simpler and he was happy. But as they discover that something strange is going on in their hometown, these pubs take on a space between dreaming and reality. Do these pubs really look the same, or are the pints messing with their minds? And is their town really being invaded by aliens?
While the bars of Newton Haven in *The World’s End* force Gary and his friends to confront reality, the bar in *The Iceman Cometh* allows the characters to escape from it. The residents of Harry Hope’s saloon decide at the end of Act Three to leave the bar and attempt once again to achieve their dreams. Ultimately, however, each man returns to the bar. “The life of the pipe dream,” says Larry, “is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober.” For O’Neill’s fateful drinkers, dreams are a more comfortable refuge than reality.

**The Bigger Picture**

Because bars are public spaces—where strangers as well as friends come together—they often act as a microcosm for the larger world. In the classic World War II film *Casablanca* (1942), German soldiers and French refugees warily share the tables of Rick’s Café Américain. When the German occupiers begin to sing “Die Wacht am Rhein,” the rest of the bar launches into the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise,” literally voicing their resistance by drowning them out. At the level of *Casablanca*’s plot, this pivotal scene changes everything; Rick has chosen a side, both in terms of his feelings for former flame Ilsa and also in terms of the larger battle for control that is happening in his town and was occurring in towns across the globe during World War II. This allows a wider audience to identify with this scene and with the broader themes of the film.

Stan’s bar in *Sweat* stands for not only the community of Reading but the hundreds of communities across the Rust Belt. The bewilderment, despair, anger, and resilience expressed by Tracey, Cynthia, Chris, and Jason are emotions that many Americans have felt as mills have closed and jobs have moved overseas. The devastating event in the final minutes mirrors conflicts that have taken place in bars throughout the country in recent years. This makes Nottage’s story universal. *Sweat* may be set in the early 2000s in a town in Pennsylvania, but the human story at its center resonates just as strongly today.

A Synopsis of *Sweat*

Act One

September 29, 2008: Twentysomething Jason meets with Evan, his parole officer. Reticent to explain his bruised eye and cut lip, Jason answers in monosyllables, until Evan threatens to write him up for being belligerent. A biker sucker-punched him for looking at his girl, Jason claims. Evan isn’t buying it. “You looking to get back inside,” he presses. Jason blurts out that he ran into Chris, an old friend.

The scene shifts. Evan is now talking with Chris, who is also struggling to adjust to life after prison. Bumping into Jason brought back memories of what happened between them and of all the moments since that he’s wished he had acted differently. As they approached one another, Chris says, he thought they might fight, but instead, they hugged.

January 18, 2000: Friends and coworkers Cynthia, Jessie, and Tracey are celebrating Tracey’s birthday in their favorite Reading bar. In the background, Colombian American busboy Oscar cleans tables, ignored by everyone except the bartender, Stan. Jessie has already passed out, but Cynthia and Tracey are laughing, dancing, and flirting with Stan. As he pours Tracey and Cynthia another drink, they gossip about a local man who went mad after losing his job at Olstead’s steel factory. Pretty soon, Cynthia and Tracey’s positions could be outsourced to Mexico, Stan warns. That’s just a rumor; they’ve nothing to worry about, Cynthia says. What about the rumor that Olstead’s will promote someone from the factory floor to management? Tracey is skeptical until Cynthia says she might apply. Tracey decides to apply too.

February 10, 2000: Chris and Jason chat at the bar. Jason is dreaming about the Harley-Davidson he wants to buy, while Chris complains that between his girlfriend Monique, his love of sneakers, and school tuition, his paycheck is gone. Wait, Jason asks, did he say school? Chris was accepted into a teaching program at Albright College. Jason assures him that he’ll be back at Olstead’s in no time—it’s the best money around. Stan agrees; not many people walk away from jobs at Olstead’s. Chris tell them he hates jacking, and with management poking around on the floor last week, their jobs might be gone soon anyway, replaced by machines.

March 2, 2000: Stan and Brucie, Cynthia’s ex-husband, are watching the Republican presidential debate between McCain, Keyes, and Bush. Brucie is discouraged; he’s been locked out of the textile mill for 93 weeks and his union is turning down a new contract, which means he loses his retirement fund. What did he do, he asks, to deserve this? Stan feels lucky that his injury at the plant got him out. It showed him how little the company cares for its employees anymore. Jessie and Tracey walk in with
Cynthia, who is uneasy at seeing her ex-husband. Brucie demands to speak with her, but she rejects him. He tries a different tactic; taking her hand, he apologizes. Cynthia softens, and the two share a kiss. As he asks her what he can do to make it right between them, Tracey moves in to support her friend. Cynthia turns her back on Brucie, who becomes distraught.

April 17, 2000: While Tracey stands outside the bar, smoking, Oscar approaches and asks her about an Olstead job posting he saw at the Latino community center. Olstead's isn't hiring, Tracey insists, and even if it was, he'd have to know someone to get work there. “I know you,” he says. Changing gears, Oscar asks Tracey about the celebration happening inside the bar. It’s in honor of Cynthia’s promotion, sneers Tracey. She claims that she didn’t get the job because she turned down her boss’s sexual advances and they probably wanted to hire Cynthia, a minority candidate. “I’m not prejudice, but that’s how things are going these days,” she says.

May 5, 2000: Jessie waits in the bar beside an uncut birthday cake and tells Stan the latest news from the mill. Tracey isn't taking Cynthia's promotion well, she says. Cynthia arrives, glowing about having a desk, her own computer, and air-conditioning. Chris, Cynthia’s son, and Jason, Tracey’s son, show up and now it’s a party. The group reminisces about starting work at Olstead’s and Jessie becomes aware of the lost possibilities, the roads she didn’t take. When Tracey arrives, Jessie teases her playfully,
Cynthia not so playfully. As Cynthia and Tracey warily broach the tension between them, Tracey reminds her not to forget about her friends sweating it out on the factory floor. She pulls out the Spanish-language flier advertising temporary jobs at the mill. Cynthia will tell them first if she hears of any lay-offs, right? Cynthia promises she will.

July 4, 2000: As fireworks light up the sky, Chris and Jason learn that Olstead’s has moved machinery out of the mill. There’s a list of laid-off workers on the gate with both their names on it. If management offers small cutbacks, Brucie advises them, take the offer. But Chris and Jason are spoiling for a fight and head out to the factory.

**Act Two**

October 13, 2008: Jason arrives at Tracey’s bare apartment for the first time since he left prison. He needs money; when his mom lends him five dollars, he starts to say that it’s not enough, then realizes that Tracey needs the money more than him. The scene switches to Chris at Cynthia’s apartment. He’s surprised—the spartan apartment is very different from her last home. She apologizes for not coming to visit him in prison; despite working two jobs, she found the journey too expensive. Chris asks about Tracey, but Cynthia dismisses the question—their friendship is over.

July 17, 2000: Back at the bar, everyone is yelling. Cynthia defends herself; she only found out that Olstead’s was shipping out the machines at the same time as everyone else. The union won’t allow this, Tracey and Chris argue. It’s too late, Cynthia says, it’s already done. Plus Olstead’s wants to cut pay sixty percent. No way will Tracey and the crew on the factory floor agree to the new deal. Fight for us, she pleads to Cynthia. “I will burn this factory down,” she says, “before I let them take my life.”

August 4, 2000: It is Cynthia’s birthday, but she’s drinking alone. She tells Stan that she’s proud of rising through the ranks, but ashamed at what’s happened at the mill, especially of locking out her friends. Tracey and Jessie enter, see Cynthia, and stop short. “How does it feel to shit on your friends?” Jessie says. Does she have any idea how humiliating the lockout was, Tracey asks Cynthia. She wasn’t even allowed to clear out her locker. And Cynthia never helped her. Tracey reminds her about that weekend in Atlantic City when Cynthia fought with another woman over Brucie. That’s the woman Tracey loved: tough, scrappy, loyal. Join us in the lockout, she urges. No, Cynthia says; she’s gone through too much to get her opportunity in management. She won’t give it up now.

September 28, 2000: Chris confronts his dad, who is slumped over a table in the bar. Realizing that it’s pointless, he buys Brucie a beer and refocuses his frustration on the workers crossing the picket line at Olstead’s. “I wanna smack ’em,” Chris says, clenching his fist. He remembers seeing his dad on the line when Chris was a boy. “You looked like warriors,” he says, “arms linked, standing together.” What happened to that solidarity?
Brucie warns him that Chris’s sacrifice for the union may be fruitless and that going back to school offers a better path.

October 7, 2000: Stan finds out that Oscar has begun working at Olstead’s. Don’t do it, he cautions, it’s taking cash out of other people’s pockets. It ain’t his problem, Oscar retorts. He has been trying to get a job in the factory for two years. Good fortune has finally come his way and he doesn’t care about offending the strikers.

Tracey comes in and orders a double vodka. Put it on her tab, she tells Stan. New rules, he says, she has to pay up-front. As she counts out coins, she takes out her anger on Oscar. Crossing the picket line may not be personal to him, but it is to her.

November 3, 2000: Chris and Jason are amped up. There’s been a fight on the picket line between strikers and temporary workers. Reading isn’t the town it used to be, Stan muses. People have forgotten that the steel mill isn’t the only thing they can do with their lives. Chris admits that being on strike is not what he expected—without money, life is hard. He’s seen what the lockout has done to his dad. Tracey comes in and joins Jessie, who’s been sitting drunk at a table for some time. Chris buys them both drinks. When Oscar comes in, they all fall silent.

As Oscar moves to collect his belongings from the back of the bar, Jessie, Jason, and Tracey yell abuse at him. Chris and Stan try to calm them down, but Jason’s angry; he wants to make a point with Oscar. Stan slams a baseball bat down on the bar. Sit down! he says. Jason sits reluctantly. Oscar collects his gear and shakes hands with Stan. Chris tries to distract his friend with their evening plans, but Tracey goads Jason, reminding him that Oscar is now cashing what used to be his paycheck. Jason blocks Oscar’s path. As Stan intervenes, the stand-off turns into a brawl involving all four men. Chris winds up with a bloody nose. Stan and Oscar end up on the ground, badly hurt.

October 15, 2008: In the parole office, Chris and Jason tell Evan separately about how the events of that night still haunt them. Chris is having nightmares and Jason is sleeping in a tent in the woods, unable to escape the memory and his shame. Evan reminds them to think not about the past but about the present: what can they do now to rectify the situation?

October 18, 2008: Chris and Jason return to the bar for the first time, but it’s different, more upscale, with artisanal beer on tap. Oscar is the manager now. He is wary of the two men. As the three struggle to express their feelings, Stan staggers in. He’s crippled and moves with difficulty. Stan starts to wipe down tables, until the cloth slips from his hand. Jason picks it up, then thanks Oscar for taking care of Stan. “That’s how it oughta be,” says the bar manager. Chris and Jason feel the weight of what they’ve done, but they don’t yet have the words to atone.
A Sweat Glossary

Albright College is a private, liberal arts college in Reading, Pennsylvania.

Arepas are flat, round patties made of maize (corn) and filled with meat, seafood, eggs, cheese, or tomatoes. They are staples of Colombian and Venezuelan cuisine.

Artisanal beer refers to beer made at microbreweries or craft breweries. Because these breweries make smaller batches than the larger corporate breweries, they focus on quality and flavor over quantity. In Sweat, the replacement of mainstream beers such as Budweiser and Yuengling with artisanal beer marks the changing demographics of Reading.

The Aryan Brotherhood is a white supremacist, neo-Nazi prison gang with approximately 17,000 members. They are involved with various forms of organized crime, including drug trafficking, extortion, and murder-for-hire. Members can often be identified through their tattoos, which include green shamrocks, the swastika, and Celtic symbols.

An ashram is a hermitage or monastery in several Indian religions, including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Traditionally, ashrams were built in secluded areas where residents could seek intellectual and spiritual guidance.

Atlantic City, New Jersey, is known for its casinos and beaches. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was one of the top tourist destinations in the US.

'Banger is a shortened version of the slang term gangbanger, a member of a violent street gang.

Bill Bradley (b. 1943) is a former professional basketball player and former US senator who ran in the US presidential Democratic primaries against Vice President Al Gore in 2000. After losing heavily in the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary, Bradley dropped out of the race in March 2000.

Black History Month is an annual celebration of Black history and culture, celebrated in the US each February. It remains a contentious issue; some argue that it is unfair to dedicate time to one culture over others, while others argue that it is counterproductive to confine Black history to a single month.

A blood blister occurs when one’s skin is pinched, trapping blood underneath.
unbroken skin. Blood blisters are a frequent injury for those who work in factories or plants, as skin can easily be pinched in machinery.

**Buena suerte** (which means “good luck” in Spanish) is a resin or oil that is believed to bring luck, fortune, and success. It is frequently sold in *botanicas*, small stores that specialize in herbal and traditional remedies, incense, and other spiritual items.

A **bunion** occurs when the joint that connects the big toe to the foot becomes deformed, causing the big toe to bend inwards. While the exact cause is unknown, it has been attributed to wearing tight shoes for extensive periods of time.

**Carhartt** is the name of a US company that makes durable work wear. It is a popular and respected brand among blue-collar workers.

**Cat** is slang for “a person.”

**Chablis** refers to a wine district in northern France. The Chablis grapevines produce a dry white wine known for the purity of its aroma and taste (often described as having notes of steel and flint).

“**Chum the waters**” refers to the practice of throwing chum (bait) into an ocean or lake to entice fish or sharks up to the surface. This makes them easier to catch. In *Sweat*, this phrase is used as an expression to describe the mill management’s tactic of offering a promotion to the line workers to ward off any union or strike action.

**Dyslexic** refers to dyslexia, a reading disorder that makes it difficult for people to spell, read quickly, and read aloud. Affecting three to seven percent of the US population, it is the most common learning disability in America. In *Sweat*, Tracey doesn’t read the newspaper because she is dyslexic.

**George W. Bush** (b. 1946) served as the 43rd president of the United States from 2001 to 2009. Much of *Sweat* takes place during Bush’s first presidential campaign, in which he positioned himself as a “compassionate conservative.” Shortly after taking office, Bush imposed steel tariffs in an attempt to support the US steel industry, which instead led to higher prices on a range of goods that used steel.

**Diabetes** is a disease in which the level of glucose (sugar) in the blood is too high and the body is either inefficiently using insulin—the hormone used to transfer glucose throughout the body—or failing to produce enough of the hormone. In *Sweat*, Chris mentions diabetes when Jason shares his plan to open a **Dunkin’ Donuts** franchise, a doughnut and coffee chain with roughly 11,000 locations worldwide. High-sugar carbohydrates such as doughnuts can cause blood sugar level spikes and weight gain, both of which can lead to diabetes.

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**Craps** is a game in which players bet on the outcome of a roll of dice. A **craps table** refers to the version of this game played in casinos. A **high roller** is someone who gambles with large amounts of money.

**High-sugar carbohydrates** such as doughnuts can cause blood sugar level spikes and weight gain, both of which can lead to diabetes.
A gimlet is a cocktail that is typically made of two-parts gin, one-part lime juice, and soda. In a vodka gimlet, vodka replaces gin.

“The hippie trail” refers to a journey many members of the beatnik and hippie subcultures took during the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s to explore alternative religions and spiritualities worldwide. The cities located on this trail are (from west to east) Istanbul, Turkey; Tehran, Iran; Kandahar and Kabul, Afghanistan; Peshawar and Lahore, Pakistan; and Kathmandu, Nepal.

James Garner (1928–2014) was an American actor who starred in such films as The Great Escape (1963), Murphy’s Romance (1985), and The Notebook (2004). Gimp is a derogatory term for a person who is not able-bodied. It is usually used to refer to someone with a visible physical disability such as a limp or an amputated limb.

A green card is the name for the identification document distributed to residents of the United States whose immigration status authorizes them to permanently live and work in the US. The application process to receive a green card can take several years.

Green stamps were a line of paper coupons that could be traded for products in a rewards catalogue. Introduced by the company Sperry & Hutchinson in 1896, this early US example of a retail loyalty program ran until 1991.
A Harley-Davidson bike is a motorcycle manufactured by the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. These iconic, chopper-style motorcycles are known for their steeply angled steering and the distinctive rumble of their engines. Harley-Davidson has five factories across the world, including one in York, Pennsylvania.

Joni Mitchell (b. 1943) is a singer-songwriter whose music blends folk, rock, jazz, and pop. In Sweat, Cynthia says that Jessie used to look like Mitchell because she wore a headband and had “hair down to [her] butt.” For most of her music career, Mitchell maintained a bohemian look, wearing her long, light blonde hair down, often with flowers braided into it.

Kicks is a slang term for shoes. Nike Flightposite and Air Jordan XVII are two models of shoes mentioned in Sweat.

Kodiak is the largest city on Kodiak Island, Alaska. Kodiak’s population is just over 6,000 people.

Larry Holmes (b. 1949) is a former professional boxer who is one of only five boxers to have defeated leading heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali. He grew up in Easton, Pennsylvania, which inspired his boxing nickname “The Easton Assassin.”

A laxative is a drug that relieves constipation by softening stools and increasing bowel movements.

To have moxie means that a person is courageous, determined, or has a lot of nerve.

**TERMINOLOGY OF THE STEEL INDUSTRY**

A lockout is when an employer excludes its workers from the workplace until an agreement is reached.

Crossing the line refers to the physical act of crossing the picket line to enter a factory or business. This is viewed as a betrayal by many strikers.

Cutting back the line means reducing the number of workers on a specific task or section of the manufacturing process.

Jacking may refer to the process of hoisting and maneuvering finished steel in a factory.

Scab is a derogative term for a strikebreaker, someone who crosses a picket line and takes the job of a union worker or striker. Scabs have frequently been used by companies to combat the power of unions.

A shake-up is an extreme reorganization. This is another tactic that companies have historically used to undermine unions and strikes.

A union rep is an employee elected to represent their fellow employees and protect their interests. Union reps form an important link between national union leaders and the workers.
Myrtle Beach is a popular vacation spot on the South Carolina coast. Approximately 14 million people visit this city every year. It has become attractive as a retirement community due to its 120 golf courses (it’s been nicknamed the “Golf Capital of the World”), low costs, and a long stretch of beach that runs for almost 60 miles.

'Nam is the American slang term for Vietnam, or the Vietnam War. In Sweat, Stan mentions that he “got to see a little of the world after 'Nam,” meaning that he traveled after serving with the US military in the Vietnam War.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is an agreement between Canada, Mexico, and the US that eliminates trade tariffs between the countries. This has allowed the three countries to grow economically, but it has also led to many manufacturing jobs leaving the US. Stan complains that “all your jobs are in Mexico” in Sweat.

Olive Garden is an Italian-style restaurant chain with pasta dishes that generally range from $12 to $16. In Sweat, Chris mentions that a movie ticket and a meal at Olive Garden could cost him two days’ worth of work.

Opa is the German word for grandfather.

The Panama Canal is a man-made waterway passing through the Central American nation of Panama. Built by US engineers and completed in 1914, the 50-mile canal connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and enabled ships to avoid the treacherous journey around the tip of South America. More than 800,000 ships pass through the canal every year.

A piña colada is a sweet cocktail made of rum, cream of coconut (or coconut milk), and pineapple juice. It can either be blended or shaken with ice.

Professional wrestling is a combination of wrestling, athletics, and entertainment. All matches are predetermined and all moves performed are planned in order to avoid injury. One of the defining moves in pro wrestling is throwing one’s opponent to the floor.

Reading is a city in southeastern Pennsylvania with a population of approximately 87,000 people. It has been dominated by the iron and steel industries since the 18th century. In 2011, Reading was named the poorest city in America. Penn Street is one of the main streets in downtown Reading. Pomeroy’s and Whitner’s are both former department stores.

A rectory is the home of a rector or local priest.

Rhythmic gymnastics is an Olympic sport in which participants combine ballet, gymnastics, and dance with apparatus manipulation—throwing and catching either a rope, hoop, ball, set of clubs, or a ribbon. The gymnast must continuously move throughout the routine.

“Rig in the gulf” refers to the 175 oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. Despite the cramped conditions and dangerous work environment, jobs on the rigs are sought after because they are well-paid and workers receive more time off than in many other occupations.
A riptide occurs when the return flow of waves after they have crashed on a beach creates a strong current. Riptides can be very hazardous for swimmers, as they can be swept out into deep water. In *Sweat*, Jessie compares getting caught up in her work and relationships to a riptide, pulling her away from her dream of traveling the world.

“He’s a scratch in the vinyl” compares someone’s repetitive tendencies to a scratched vinyl record. The scratch causes the needle of a record player to skip and repeat the same section of the recording.

Shade is a slang term for the expression of contempt or disdain for someone.

The Sixers refers to the professional basketball team, the Philadelphia 76ers. They have a loyal following in much of the Midwest.

Sneaker Villa is a footwear and clothing retailer in the Northeast and Midwest United States.

Spic is a racial slur directed at people of Central American, South American, or Caribbean descent. It is believed to have derived from the word *spiggoty*, a derogatory imitation of the phrase “no speaka de English.”

T. Rex is the colloquial term for the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, a carnivorous dinosaur with a long tail, powerful back legs, and huge skull. In *Sweat*, Tracey compares Cynthia’s anger at seeing another woman flirt with her husband to this animal.

“That damn question” refers to the question “Have you been at any time incarcerated, convicted, or had adjudication withheld of any crime?” that appears on many
employment forms. As of September 2018, 31 US states have adopted “ban the box” legislation that prevents employers from asking applicants about their criminal record. However, Pennsylvania only adopted this legislation in 2017; both Jason and Chris in Sweat would have had to answer this question on their job applications.

**Tijuana** is a large city located on the Baja California Peninsula in Mexico. Because it is located on the US-Mexican border, it has become a destination for many American companies looking for lower production and labor costs.

A **Transformer** is a character from the toy and film franchise of the same name. They are action figures that can be folded into a vehicle, device, or animal. In Sweat, Chris compares seeing Brucie transform from his father into a strike leader to the transformations of these characters.

**Uncle Sam** is a popular patriotic symbol of the United States, as well as a personification of the American government and its various institutions. In Lynn Nottage’s play, Chris uses this figure as a stand-in for the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which takes a certain amount of money out of his paycheck for taxes.

**Viper** is the common name for more than 200 species of venomous snake, including rattlesnakes, copperheads, and adders. Vipers produce venom to immobilize and kill their prey. During Sweat, Cynthia compares the company’s executives to
this animal because of their ability to strip their workers of any opportunity to fight back.

Wall Street, a street in New York City’s financial district, is home to one of the US’s major stock exchanges, the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE). Wall Street has become synonymous with the US’s financial markets, but also with corruption, particularly during times of recession.

A warlock is the male equivalent of a witch. In contrast to the positive powers associated with a wizard or sorcerer, warlock magic is considered evil.

Wharton's MBAs refers to a master of business administration degree from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. It is ranked as the number one MBA program by Business Insider. This degree is one of the things that separates the machine workers from the mill management in Sweat.

The World Book refers to a multi-volume encyclopedia that covers a wide range of topics. Aimed at children, it is a mainstay in many school libraries. The latest edition of the encyclopedia fills 22 volumes.
Questions to Consider

1. Reading, Pennsylvania, is a town that has prospered and declined, partly on the back of its steel mill. How do the rise and fall of businesses affect communities?

2. Sweat has been described as a story which represents the shattering of the American Dream. How does the playwright give a human heart to this deeply politicized narrative?

3. What were the factors that contributed to the creation of the Rust Belt?

4. How would this play be different if it was set in a character’s home or in the break room at Olstead’s Mill instead of a local bar?

5. How do the images and video projected on the billboards above the set provide context that supports the play’s storytelling?

6. Playwright Lynn Nottage was inspired to write about Reading, Pennsylvania, by hearing about a friend’s economic predicament. What are the similar stories in your Bay Area community?

7. Both Chris and Jason weigh the steady paycheck of a steelworker against the potential rewards of teaching and owning a business. What are the risks and rewards of changing careers and chasing your dream?

For Further Information


