

At the Public Theater in New York City

## *Sweat*: An honest depiction of the American working class

By Fred Mazelis  
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Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* is an unusual and rewarding play, depicting social reality not often seen in the American theater. Set in the decaying industrial city of Reading, Pennsylvania, the work shows, through the lives of its eight major characters, what decades of concessions, deindustrialization and plant shutdowns have done to the living standards and social conditions--and texture of existence--of tens of millions of workers and their families.

The play, directed by Kate Whoriskey, has just finished a successful two-month run at New York City's Public Theater, and is headed to Broadway in the spring. The same writer-director team was responsible for *Ruined*, which appeared off-Broadway in 2009 and is set in the Congo during the long civil war there. Like *Ruined*, *Sweat* is the product of lengthy research. Nottage and a team of assistants spent more than two years interviewing about 100 people in Reading.

Nottage explained, in a recent interview in the *Los Angeles Times*, that she seeks to focus attention on "spaces that are under-illuminated." She was drawn to Reading after hearing that the city of some 88,000, the fifth-largest in the state of Pennsylvania and only about 125 miles west of New York City, was the poorest city in the United States, according to 2010 census figures.

Reading, with 41.3 percent of its residents officially living in poverty, ranked highest among US cities with more than 65,000 people below the poverty line. However, it is only the first among near-equals. Its history and current economic state are not fundamentally different from those of many small and larger cities across the US.

The list of factories that have closed or drastically reduced operations in Reading in recent years is a long one. It includes the Hershey Company, AT&T, Lucent Technologies, the Dana Corporation and many others. The state of Pennsylvania, with a current population of about 12.8 million, lost 314,000 manufacturing jobs between 1998 and 2013.

While the characters and story line of *Sweat* are fictional, they are the product of the intensive research and interviews conducted by Nottage. The play is situated within a definite time and place, the action framed by exact dates that introduce, via supertitles, the various scenes in the narrative.

Much of the action is set in the year 2000. A brief prologue,

however, takes place in 2008. A parole officer is interviewing two young men, Jason and Chris, who have just been released from prison for a crime which is not further explained at that point.

The play then proceeds to explore the background, leading up to events eight years earlier that changed the lives of these and the other characters.

After the introduction of Jason and Chris, the next scene flashes back eight years to a neighborhood bar, where we meet the other characters. They include Tracey and Cynthia, friends and co-workers at a local steel-tubing factory and the mothers of Jason and Chris, respectively; Jessie, another co-worker of theirs; Stan, the local bartender and a veteran worker at the same plant, who left after being injured on the job; Oscar, Stan's helper and assistant at the bar, an immigrant from Colombia; and Brucie, the estranged husband of Cynthia, who, in the course of a 93-week lockout, succumbed to despair and to drugs.

The action unfolds over a period of several months. The atmosphere is one of increasing fear and helplessness in the face of the ever-present and mounting threat of a plant shutdown and job losses. At one point Tracey and Cynthia discuss the possibility of applying for a supervisory position in the plant. They both wind up applying, and Cynthia gets the job. Tension continues to grow as the threat of a lockout looms on August 4, 2000. The workers are replaced by scabs. Over the next three months the stresses expand to the boiling point. November 3, 2000 is the fateful day that charts the course of the next eight years for these characters.

The final scene, set on October 18, 2008 and including Chris, Jason, Stan and Oscar, brings the various strands of the story together in a grim, unsentimental and vaguely humanist conclusion. *Sweat* could hardly be more appropriate, in a presidential election year in which the cry of anger and desperation was heard, from voters and non-voters alike.

Lynn Nottage's play is welcome for its honest depiction of life in Reading and, by extension, life for the majority of workers in the US and other advanced capitalist countries. The cast was excellent in every respect, including Will Pullen as Jason, Khrist Davis as Chris, Carlo Albán as Oscar, Michelle Wilson as Cynthia, James Colby as Stan, Johanna Day as Tracey, Miriam Shor as Jessie and John Earl Jelks as Brucie. The play, which was co-commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Arena Stage in Washington DC, came to New York after

appearing in Oregon and Washington.

One of the most positive elements of the play is its generally truthful accounting of the relationship between race and class in American society today. At a time when the theater--and cultural dialogue as a whole--is almost entirely dominated by talk of "white society," "white privilege" and the allegedly unbridgeable gap between the races, Nottage shows that workers of different races and nationalities face the same conditions and the same challenges.

This is not to say that racial and ethnic tensions are ignored in the play. They are present, but they are depicted in a realistic and almost matter-of-fact manner. What emerges from the dialogue and the actual story of these workers and their families is how similar they all are, beneath the surface of their skin color. The city of Reading, according to latest figures, is about 48 percent white and 14 percent African American. More than half the population is Hispanic.

Tracey, who is white, at one point suggests that her African-American friend Cynthia obtained her management job because she was black. Tracey and Jessie do not trust Cynthia, and understandably suspect she is withholding information from them, as rumors swirl of equipment being moved out of the factory in expectation of a plant closure.

Brucie discusses racial divisions, including the struggle his own father had to get a job in the factory when, having picked "his last bale of cotton," he came north in 1952 as part of the "Great Migration."

Jason, meanwhile, is turning angry and bitter, while his friend Chris has more hopes for the future, and hopes to return to school. Oscar, the immigrant, adds another element to the story of the working class in 21st century America.

What emerges in the end is that, despite changes in the composition of the working class, the basic social issues remain.

Amidst the tensions between them, all of the characters express, in one fashion or another, their disgust with the existing system and its political representatives. In one scene, in March 2000, listening to discussion of the upcoming presidential election, the appearance of George W. Bush on television is met with general contempt. In August of that year, one character says that after "watching these candidates talking bullshit, I decided I'm not voting." "Amen to that" is the reaction.

When the workers are forced to accept a 60 percent pay cut, they blame it on NAFTA (the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement passed during the Bill Clinton administration). The union offers a bag of groceries, comments one of the workers. "It's fuckin' humiliating," says Jason about the lockout. "They won't let me clean out my locker."

Nottage makes a distinction between the black and white workers she met in Reading that contains a grain of truth if properly understood. The playwright, who is black, told the *LA Times* that "The language they [white workers] were using sounded very familiar to me, language that for 100 years or more African Americans have been using to describe our circumstances. 'We feel marginalized,' 'We feel unheard.' 'We feel disenfranchised' ... I felt for the first time we all shared a narrative."

Nottage is wrong to suggest that a "shared narrative" has just emerged, although perhaps she means that she hasn't felt it previously. Despite the history of slavery, Jim Crow and pervasive racism in the century following the Civil War, there are numerous instances of common struggle, from the days of the IWW to the organizing struggles of the 1930s and the battles for civil rights in the 1960s. Objectively, there is one working class in the US. But Nottage is right when she suggests that the artificial divisions that have been used to pit white and black workers against one another are being fatally undermined by the current crisis of the profit system. In that sense the "shared narrative" is a weapon against all those who seek to divide workers along racial lines. *Sweat* is not without weaknesses. There is much that is gripping and realistic, but, as in *Ruined*, the playwright stops well short of fully probing and exploring the roots of economic and social disaster. This weakens the overall effort.

To the extent the play communicates the desperation facing the working class, that there seems to be no way out of their dilemma through the established institutions, including the Democratic Party and the trade unions, it poses some crucial questions.

The play ends with a brief and understated plea for empathy and human connection. This is an increasingly common refrain from a section of the liberal middle class. The workers are portrayed simply as victims.

"Where do we go from here?" says Nottage in the abovementioned interview. "All of us are in pain. All of us feel a certain level of trauma. Are we going to remain divided? Or are we going to try to come together and heal?"

Who is going to come together and for what purpose? At this moment, of course, there are those who call for a "coming together" to rescue the Democratic Party after its latest electoral disaster. There are others who recognize the need for uniting the working class against the system that is responsible for the conditions depicted in *Sweat*. This is not the message of *Sweat*, although it is one conclusion that could be drawn from the suffering depicted on stage.

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