

Great Change, Great Pain and *Sweat*

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“Both tears and sweat are salty, but they render a different result. Tears will get you sympathy; sweat will get you change.”

--Jesse Jackson

We Americans are on the eve of one of the most divisive elections in our history. We're in the midst of the Black Lives Matters movement. Citizens here in Rochester and around the world are calling for deep and meaningful change in what they recognize as systemic racism, particularly in institutions whose mission is to protect all citizens. We as a nation gasped with shock at the videos of George Floyd's and Daniel Prude's deaths. Protests, police clashes, and yes, even some riots exploded as a result. People are calling for change and its painful—a painful journey that Lynn Nottage knew was coming. In her Pulitzer prize winning play, *Sweat*, Nottage masterfully unfolds a story that sounds a warning call much like Paul Revere's ride: great change is coming, but blood, sweat, and tears will be shed when it does.

Nottage Senses a Problem

In 2011, Lynn Nottage received an email from an old friend who had lost her job and was struggling to get by. Shocked and moved by her friend's condition, Nottage set out to explore, as she puts it in a 2017 TheatreTalk interview,

“...what was happening to folks...living no more than two doors away from me, who had been solidly middle class, who had invested in the American Dream, had signed that contract and then one day woke up and discovered that they didn't have a pension, you know, they didn't have enough savings to even keep their homes and found themselves really struggling and so I think that I went in pursuit of questions like what's happening.”

Nottage began her research in 2012 and was joined by Kate Whoriskey, a director and friend. Together, they discovered that Reading Pennsylvania was ranked as the poorest city in the country. Major industries were gone and 41% of their population was unemployed. Nottage and Whoriskey traveled there to conduct interviews and to see if they could find out what was happening. What Nottage discovered was that public policy, legislation, and politics all had a hand in disintegrating the blue collar, working-class American Dream. They thought their research would take one or two months. They stayed for two-and-a-half years, and the resulting play is *Sweat*.

Pain, Anger, Fear, Frustration and Loss

As we shuffle back and forth between 2000 and 2008, we see each character grapple with the pain, anger, fear, frustration, and loss that comes from an economic roller coaster that dramatically shifted the “haves” to the “have-nots” in American society.

Though not the first factor in the demise of the steel union power, the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement certainly gave corporations the hammer they needed to further drive the nail into the coffin. According to Jeff Faux from the Economic Policy Institute,

“As soon as NAFTA became law, corporate managers began telling their workers that their companies intended to move to Mexico unless the workers lowered the cost of their labor. In the midst of collective bargaining negotiations with unions, some companies would even start loading machinery into trucks that they said were bound for Mexico. The same threats were used to fight union organizing efforts. The message was: “If you vote in a union, we will move south of the border.” With NAFTA, corporations also could more easily blackmail local governments into giving them tax reductions and other subsidies.”

Through the play’s dialogue and action, the once secure steel workers are losing jobs because corporations have shifted machines (and their jobs) south of the border. Here’s some insights from an online entry titled *Steel Crisis* from 2019:

“The American Iron and Steel Institute finds employment in the steel industry peaked in 1953 at 650,000 employees. Employment declined to just 512,000 jobs by 1974, approximately when the steel crisis began, and declined further to just 399,000 jobs in 1980 and further still to 236,000 jobs by 1984. Although the bulk of job losses occurred in the 1974-1986 period, steel employment would continue to decline for decades, reaching just 142,000 jobs in 2015.”

At the same time, African Americans were just earning equal status in the unions and feeling that at least at the steel mill, they were equals. In the play, one of the lead characters, Cynthia, says to the bartender, Stan,

“... when I started at the plant it felt like I was invited into an exclusive club. Not many of us folks worked there. Not us... 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.”

By 2000, when the play’s action begins, the once powerful and mighty unions had been reduced to bargaining for scraps. As Bruce says in the play,

“Cuz when we walked out of the textile mill thinking big, they locked us out, beat down our optimism and we couldn’t get back in. Nearly two years later and there ain’t a damn thing we can do about it.”

Lock outs (locking out union workers from their jobs) became the weapon of the corporate backlash, and replacing union workers with temps who were often Latino immigrants added more fuel to this already smothering fire.

This is the backdrop for *Sweat*, where we see a microcosm of this transformation unfold inside Stan’s bar. What begins like a scene from the sitcom *Cheers*, where everyone is a big, happy family sharing a pint or

two at the local tavern, morphs into a fragmented snapshot of how great things can turn very badly. The security of good jobs and comfortable wages has disappeared, and the residents of Reading Pennsylvania are being forced to face the changes or lose everything. For our friends at Stan's bar, the change proves to be too much. Good friends, under these immense pressures, become bitter enemies.

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That brings us to November, 2020. Our candidates argue about traditional jobs versus new green jobs, climate change, and a myriad of conflicting ideologies that have led to everything from The Womens Marches to KKK rallies, from statues of Civil War leaders from the South being taken down to monuments of Fredrick Douglass being destroyed in our own city. We, like Nottage's characters, are in great pain, and we, like the good people in *Sweat*, find that when pushed to the limit, we too can turn bad. Change is on the horizon, though most of us don't know what it will be. What we do know is, with it will come great pain, many tears, and a sweat that will hopefully bring us all to a better place.