

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

## OPINIONATED JUDGE



BY JUDGE DARLEEN ORTEGA

# Feeling the Punch

## Working class upheaval on the Ashland stage

It often takes a generation or more before we can grapple very honestly with our most complicated stories, especially if they involve people at the margins, or people who aren't in a position to control the dominant narrative. It takes even longer if the marginalized are the protagonists of the story. Think of how long it took, for example, for someone to make a feature film with Martin Luther King Jr. as its protagonist; how much longer will it be before we begin to see more plays and films that delve honestly into the experiences of, say, black schoolchildren in the segregated South, or undocumented immigrants in the era of fences at the U.S. border?

In many ways, we are still in the middle of the so-called economic restructuring at the center of "Sweat," Lynn Nottage's new play currently experiencing its world premiere at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland -- and that is part of why it feels so bold. Commissioned as part of OSF's American Revolutions program, supporting new plays that focus on moments of change in American history, "Sweat" is set in the rust-belt community of Reading, Penn., formerly a manufacturing stronghold where a union card was the ticket to a solid



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

Stephen Michael Spencer (from left), Jack Willis and Tramell Tillman perform in "Sweat," a dramatic new play that centers on the upheaval that comes to a union town when working class jobs disappear because of new economic realities. "Sweat" runs through the month of October at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland.

living and middle-class respect, however modest. Now, however, Reading is one of the very poorest cities in America, with more than 40 percent of its residents living below the poverty line in the aftermath of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). "Sweat" explores some of how that transformation has been experienced

by working class people, whose lives have changed course dramatically.

The play is constructed around an ensemble cast -- three middle-aged women who have worked in a particular factory for more than 20 years; the sons of two of the women, beginning what they fully expect will be the basis for a solid living if they want it; a bartender who worked for decades in the same factory before becoming injured on the job; a man who has

been locked out of his factory job for an extended period; a probation officer; and a young man who hasn't been able to break into the union. The play moves back and forth in time between 2008, after two of the characters have served time in prison, and 2000, before all of the characters felt the impact of the NAFTA shifts.

Like many Americans, I have a passing awareness of economic upheaval over the past 15 years or so, as manufacturing jobs have

increasingly moved overseas. But the specifics have largely escaped me; they are definitely not the focus of the dominant news stories. Nottage's new play goes there -- and not from the vantage point of folks with any say in such matters. Having spent two years engaging with members of the Reading community, Nottage has built a story around characters who begin (mostly) as friends, and end up at odds -- but like the rotating set of this play, she circles these stories. The play's movement swirls like a cyclone; in the beginning we know things went bad but we don't know how and don't understand the relationships between these characters. As we swirl back and forth in time and through the shock of lock-outs and increasingly draconian moves from management, we get a sense of the crisis closing in. When we finally reach the conflict that changes the life trajectory of several of these characters, we almost feel the punches ourselves.

One of the things I most appreciate about this play is that the characters occupy no one position. Too often in films and television

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30



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