



PHOTO BY DAVID KINDER/COURTESY IMAGO THEATER

Victor Mack (left) and La'Tevin Alexander star in 'Sweat,' a Pulitzer-Prize winning play that gives insight to the struggles of workers who fall into despair when they lose their jobs in the face of industrial decline.

Humanity Shines in 'Sweat'

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Cynthia begins to wonder if she was chosen for the management job so that she could absorb just this sort of blame, even while the agency to impose these decisions actually resides with company leaders who don't engage with line workers at all. And none of them notice that Oscar (Chris Ramirez), the American-born son of Colombian parents who cleans up after them at the bar, can't break into the union no matter how hard he tries.

As the world of the union workers begins to crumble, we see how easily they can be pitted against each other. Their anger and powerlessness quickly becomes anger at one another, with no agency and no access to the real decision makers, they blame each other for betrayals that are varying degrees of real and imagined. Yet their humanity shines through even in their worst moments; they are good people struggling against extreme pressure. Their anger and fear is understandable and, even when their responses to one another are far from heroic.

Under Acebo's direction, this production puts us in proximity to folks for whom options are far more limited than most of us sitting in theater seats have imagined; the characters go from being able to save for a very nice vacation to working multiple menial jobs in order to pay the rent in a slum or falling into addiction or homelessness. The uniformly ex-

cellent cast (which also includes Victor Mack as Cynthia's husband and Chris's father, Brucie, who lost his union job more than a year before the other characters and is a living prophecy of what lies ahead for all) portrays these characters with complexity and humanity, and conveys a sense of how quickly and cataclysmically their worlds are shifting--showing up to work to find that the machines have been sold; lockouts that last for endless months; contract offers involving paycuts as high as 60 percent; the pressures that lead a person to cross a union picket line.

In the end, the characters--like so many Americans in the face of industrial decline--turn on each other because that is the only direction they can find to focus their anger. They have, to varying degrees, believed in the American dream of prosperity, and when that dream crumbles, they blame who they have been primed to blame: whoever is beneath them in the hierarchy. The actions of those who really decide what happens are protected from scrutiny.

Profile Theater's production of "Sweat" plays through Feb. 2 at Imago Theater, 17 S.E. Eighth Ave.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie and theater review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. Find her review blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.

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