



When the Jobs Leave Town

city that symbolized what was happening in America, a city that had gone from industrial powerhouse to abject poverty. That city, she found, was Reading, Pennsylvania, the home of the Reading Railroad, once one of the most powerful railroads in the country.

“I think we’re undergoing one of the greatest revolutions in our history,” she says. “In 50 years we’ll look back on this time and understand that fully.”

Reading began to go through a precipitous decline in the 1970s, which began with the collapse of the railroad. In the mid-’80s, several key sectors in manufacturing began to falter. In the 1990s and early 2000s, in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the steel and textile industries began to significantly erode and jobs were sent overseas. States also started to adopt “right-to-work” laws that inhibited union power. Currently, 40 percent of the people in Reading live below the poverty line, which is considerably above the national average. It has a 50 percent high school graduation rate. Though the city is beginning to see some economic growth, the 2011 census singled out Reading as “the poorest city in America.”

“I wanted to find out how could this happen so quickly,” Nottage said. “And how could the revolution I’m looking at—the de-industrial revolution—change America so absolutely that you have people stuck in the towns, trapped, simply because they don’t even have enough money to move.”

Nottage began visiting Reading in early 2012. With assistant Travis Ballenger and an army of interns, she conducted a wide range of interviews over two years, starting with Reading’s first African-American mayor, who had been recently elected. Then they included the police department, the United Way and people living in shelters. They spoke to a dozen workers at union offices and found more on the picket sites. “I think workers just want to go on record to say that there are so many folks like them who are struggling,” she says, “and the fact that anyone is willing to listen gives them a sense of hope.”

She was most touched by a session with some workers who had been locked out of their factory for 93 weeks. “They were largely middle-aged men who had been working up to 40 years. It was their entire identity. They were making metal tubing. When they were 18 or 19 years old, they began probably at minimum wage, and in some cases had worked themselves up to \$45 an hour.”

Lynn Nottage’s latest play takes a searing look at the de-industrial revolution in a struggling town.

By Catherine Foster

Sweat, an American Revolutions commission, got its start with a late-night email from Lynn Nottage’s close friend, a single mother of two.

“She said she was completely broke; she was having a very difficult time making ends meet and had reached a level of desperation,” Nottage recounts in an interview at OSF. Her friend wasn’t asking for a handout, but said she wanted her close friends to understand her circumstances. “I just need some guidance. I need a shoulder to lean on just because I’m going through a very, very hard time.”

The email broke Nottage’s heart. “I’d known this woman extremely well, and I had no idea the depths of her despair. She lives two doors down from me, and it made me realize that probably most of us are living two to three doors away from someone who is either in poverty or on the verge of poverty, and that’s the nature of the culture we’re living in right now.”

The Occupy Wall Street movement was just beginning. “We had no sense of what this was. All we knew was that there were these people in Zuccotti Park sitting there and saying, ‘99 percent of us are suffering while the 1 percent are continuing to get richer and richer.’ So my friend said, ‘Let’s go over there.’”

The two walked in circles and chanted. Later, her friend said, “I actually feel a little better. Nothing has happened, but I feel better to know that at least there is a voice to what I’m feeling, and I’m not by myself.”

The collapse of Reading

The incident prompted Nottage to think deeply about how poverty was shifting the American narrative that hard work is all it takes to become successful. She wanted to write about a

Then, one Monday, the men arrived to find half the equipment had been shipped out overnight. In that moment, half those jobs were gone. It soon got worse. Management slashed workers' pay to \$15 an hour, cut benefit packages and increased work days. Even that wasn't enough: Management locked them out. The workers picketed for 93 weeks, knowing they would never set foot back into that plant but determined to make a symbolic gesture. "I was really quite moved," Nottage recalls, "because these are people—white, middle-class, blue-collar men—who had traditionally been on the opposite side of the divide from me, this African-American artist living in Brooklyn, and I thought, for the first time, we're standing eye to eye. They understood what it meant to be marginalized by your own culture. They spoke quite compassionately about their fellow workers and eloquently about their situations and about directions they felt America should be going."

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—Lynn Nottage

When the workers stayed on strike, management brought in replacement workers— young Latinos and men from the surrounding counties who for years had wanted to get hired but were shut out because of the union and nepotism. The deal those workers got was even worse: no contracts, no benefits. "They can work these guys to death for six months and then say 'Bye-bye,'" Nottage says. "It's really cruel out there, what these factories are doing."

Severed friendships

Those events are mirrored in *Sweat*. A group of longtime co-workers and friends meet in a bar to complain, rant and commiserate about the rapidly declining situation in the factory. Because of the strike, Oscar, the bar's Dominican busboy, has an opportunity to finally work at the plant—as a scab. For him, it's an immigrant's dream of getting ahead. But the locals who have been working at the plant for so long regard his crossing the picket line as tantamount to treason, and the tension spreads to violence.

"I know it's not a new story, but I feel like it is very much the narrative of today," Nottage says. "It's not just the narrative of steelworkers, it's the narrative of people in white-collar jobs, who had this assumption that they had taken all the necessary steps to assure their job security, and then one day they wake up and everything they know is gone. I know many people like that. We live with a level of uncertainty in America that we haven't known, at least in my lifetime."

In the world of *Sweat*, the co-workers are a racial mix of black, white and Latino. "I'm just representing what I saw," Nottage says. "In Reading, there are people who have worked in those factories who had relationships and friendships that crossed color lines. The play isn't about race, but the conversation isn't absent. It's part of the subtext of the piece. But it is a play about class."

Nottage's last play for OSF was *Ruined*, in 2010, which was based on interviews with Congolese women in refugee camps who had been raped during ongoing military conflicts. A play with that subject matter could have been a grim slog to sit through, but *Ruined* was leavened with humor, humanity and hope and has since gone on to be performed around the country.

"What I'm trying to do is get at the heart of the story, because as a playwright I'm interested in healing," she says. "I hope when you leave my plays, somehow the spirit has gone through some subtle transformation. I think it's true of *Ruined*. I think it's true of *Intimate Apparel* (2006). There's a spiritual alchemy that goes on, that when you leave, you're not quite sure what you've experienced, but you have a different relationship to the community."

Creating Social Sculpture

"When we were interviewing people in Reading, I began to feel like a carpetbagger who was feeding off their misery and then leaving and capitalizing on it. It's not going to do the economically strapped city a lot of good if I create a piece of work that talks about them from a distance, but doesn't directly engage the community. So, we came up with this idea of doing a social sculpture—a piece of performance art that combines activism, community and art, something that can live in the heart of Reading. It will be a piece of art that puts the people who most need to be in dialogue into the same space. This way they can directly experience and explore what's happening to their neighbors in a visceral way.

Reading is a fragmented city with a great racial and economic divide; people live in close proximity, but in very different communities. We thought, what if we can create this installation that invites people into the same space so that they can bear witness to what's happening to the entire town and recognize that their narrative is a communal one, not just about their small insular community but about a larger Reading community that is collectively experiencing the impact of the economic downturn.

In October, we're going to bring a creative team to Reading for four days, where we will collaborate with the community, and begin to discuss how to create a piece of art that not only reflects community, but is also a vital part of the community. We're hoping we can build a model for art-making that you can then be used in other cities, where we invite a team of diverse filmmakers, visual artists, theatre artists and trans-media artists to immerse themselves in a community and then create a collaborative piece of art that helps bring the community into dialogue.

The goal is to leave the city with this piece of art that would continue to exist and reflect the story of the community as it evolves. Reading still thinks of itself in the past tense, and we very much want to help the community find a present-tense narrative."

—Lynn Nottage