

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Sweating America's False Promises

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 19th, 2018

They may not have exclusive dominion over history, but it's a fact that artists are the ones who show us the way. Visionary playwrights, in particular, zero in on looming events destined to alter the society that bred them. Morality, or the lack of it, has a lot to do with that and, as we know only too well, morality seldom prevails.

That prescience is certainly true of Ibsen's plays, many of Shakespeare's, some of O'Neill's and all of August Wilson's. If society itself is slow to notice deep change, the writers are not. The analogy with Wilson is particularly strong when it comes to playwright Lynn Nottage, since both writers tend to overwrite, yet have the talent to do it eloquently enough that we are willing to forgive.

With her increasingly powerful body of work, Nottage has gradually elbowed her way into that pantheon of the socially conscious. Ushering her arrival there was her previous Pulitzer Prize winner, *Ruined*, an unforgettably gritty ode to survival by the population of an isolated brothel in war-torn Congo, that remains an anchoring achievement.

Nottage's most recent Pulitzer winner, *Sweat*, now on stage at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum, is a step by step indictment of all that went wrong in human terms with the original NAFTA agreement (never mentioned by name) and its decimating effect on a large segment of the American labor class. It lays bare a perilous aspect of our unequal society in which some people profit while others are hung out to dry.



l-r, Mary Mara & Portia in *Sweat* at The Mark Taper Forum.

These laborers, who had been paid perhaps too well, saw their jobs and lavish pensions nickel and dimed and eventually shipped out of the country, with nothing offered to replace them. The action in *Sweat* is confined primarily to a working-class neighborhood bar in Reading, PA, an industrial town that Nottage researched meticulously (as she always does) and found to be among the poorest in the country.

What we find on stage is a small group of workers and barroom *habitués*, men and women who work "the line" at the town's principal plant. They spend their off hours drinking away time and money, gossiping, nursing long-standing grudges or relationships, with few other preoccupations to interfere as they patiently wait for a secured retirement.

The women are tightly knit. The widowed Tracey (Mary Mara) is the most combative, Jessie (Amy

Pietz) is by now the real drunk of the lot and Cynthia (Portia) is the most levelheaded and ambitious. Cynthia eventually makes the cut to a coveted white-collar spot in the company, only to be thrown to the wolves when upper management needs an expendable foil.

The barkeep, Stan (Michel O’Keefe), an injured survivor of the line, looks out for this little band that he considers friends as well as former colleagues. His helper, Oscar (Peter Mendoza), the lone Latino in the room, is an American-born Colombian who keeps largely to himself, until he becomes a focus of resentment when the political climate changes.



l-r, Will Hochman, Michael O’Keefe & Grantham Coleman in *Sweat* at The Mark Taper Forum.

Cynthia and Tracey have sons who are buddies as well as co-workers at the plant, following in their parents’ footsteps. Tracey’s Jason (Will Hochman) has inherited his mother’s short fuse, while Cynthia’s more thoughtful Chris (Grantham Coleman) displays better judgment about life and what he hopes to do with his. His parents are divorced and his drug-addicted father, Brucie (the exceptional John Earl Jelks), has fallen on particularly harsh times. The dynamic unleashed among father, mother and son reflects the rhythm of the larger social tensions of the day.



John Earl Jelks in *Sweat* at The Mark Taper Forum.

Nottage, who has chosen to make her play jump around in time delineates the date of each scene in astute political detail — transitions that are vividly informed by Yee Eun Nam’s fast-moving projections. They leave it to you to make the connections for the plight of these sidelined workers, sinking in frustration, coping badly with their altered circumstances and a society that offers them neither gratitude nor a clear path forward.

If *Sweat* refrains from overt judgment, it is deeply aware, unassuming in its undertaking and dynamite at nailing the failures that mattered and how they came about, even when the Taper production isn’t always what it could be.



Peter Mendoza & Mary Mara in *Sweat* at The Mark Taper Forum.

Designer Christopher Barreca’s bar room set, for instance, is a major distraction. Instead of providing the claustrophobic intimacy of an old neighborhood hangout, we see actors forced to sprint across a space the size of an airplane hangar. Rather than find ways to shrink the bar, a decision was apparently made to expand the relationships instead, forcing the actors to try to bridge the void. It doesn’t work. (The same mistake was made with the Taper’s February staging of *Water By the Spoonful*, which had its own oversized and inappropriate setting. It didn’t work then either.)

Ann Militello’s lighting and Emilio Sosa’s costumes go some distance in rectifying the atmosphere and Lisa Peterson keeps a firm directorial hand on the action, which is swift and often funny, even if the issues of the yawning space remain unsolved.

Despite that factor and the play’s length and slight tendency to preach, the production rarely drags. Its characters are human. Its closing moment could be stronger, but by then the tale has been told and its argument reverberates keenly in a society that has yet to come to grips with its issues, its anti-immigrant rage, opioid devastation and gun fatalities. Nottage doesn’t do the work for us, but she does give out very clear instructions on connecting the dots.

*Top image: l-r, Amy Pietz, Mary Mara & Portia in Sweat at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.*

*Photos by Craig Schwartz*

**WHAT:** *Sweat*

**WHERE:** Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

**WHEN:** Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Oct. 7.

**HOW:** Tickets, \$30–\$99 (subject to change), available at 213.628.2772 or online at [CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://CenterTheatreGroup.org) or in person at the CTG box office (at the Ahmanson Theatre). Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community: Information and charge at [CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS](http://CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS).

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