



Play depicts economic woes, dreams dashed by NAFTA

By Bob Evans

Cynthia Levin/The Unicorn Thea



Get ready for a dose of reality when attending *Sweat*,” The Unicorn Theatre’s season opener with the most powerful, dynamic casts of recent years for a production that gives a slice of life look at struggling individuals in a working-class environment.

Lynn Nottages’s terse dialogue strips away the facades as her characters immediately shed their pleasantries as they confront the realities forced upon them as labor, management, unions and profits explode in a pressure-cooker drama.

“*Sweat*” explores the wrath of union workers after the NAFTA

legislation, begun in the Clinton administration, helped elevate Donald Trump to the presidency. The program, envisioned aiding Canada, USA, and Mexico to greater trade among the three nations. In actuality, the agreement stripped higher paying jobs from the US economy and sent manufacturing jobs to Mexico where workers accepted less hourly wages and longer hours. The result left Americans struggling to maintain their lifestyles as they watched their jobs disappear along with their wages. America was shifting from manufacturing to more service level jobs. Caught in the transition were thousands of workers powerless to compete in a world economy where profits soared for big business and the Middle class struggled to survive.



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The Unicorn's production explores several aspects of this struggle. The individual situations bring the heart and soul to this piece. Nottage's understanding and presentation of the facets of the problem give depth to the piece.

"A group of close friends share everything: secrets, laughs, and drinks at the local watering hole in Reading, PA, a Unicorn spokesman said. "But when layoffs begin at the factory where they work, friendships are shattered and loyalties are questioned in the fight for survival." The powerful play, directed by Ian R. Crawford, won a 2017 Pulitzer Prize for

Drama.

The play focuses on the impact NAFTA had on the working class and displays the flash-points of racial tensions, union verses non-union workers, and vanishing dreams as money from salaries shrinks. As companies moved high-salary jobs to Mexico, workers and unions accepted less money or faced losing jobs completely. The tensions escalated with the de-regulation of banks and loans with workers now struggling to make payments as salaries decreased.

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Along with this comes the struggle of divide and conquer as the play pits African-Americans against White and Hispanics against both. In the story, a Black worker is elevated from warehouse/line worker to middle management, causing anger, grief, and injuring long-established friendships. A Hispanic worker finally finds a way into a job he wanted for years but could not attain. But, his employment comes at tremendous price.

Nottages's play uncorks the frustration and anger as it unfolds. Bad decisions forced my situations the characters cannot control spin everything to deeper levels of frustration, stress, anger, and violence. With these situations continuing, winning becomes less the aim and the focus becomes economic survival.

Overall, the acting was brilliant from all characters as they gave each character drive, determination, and soul. One cannot leave this production without understanding the force and pressures of each character and the internal struggles they face in their survival paths.



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“Sweat” features a dynamic cast and performances beyond belief. The chemistry amazes and each actor is lifted to new levels by the others in the cast and the electricity generated by the audience. The cast features: Keenan Ramos, Matthew J. Lindblom, Teddy Trice, Jan Rogge, Cecilia Ananya, Vanessa A. Davis, Greg Butell, Justin Barron, Lewis J. Morrow.

Ramos provides a nice balance from the anger within the characters he interacts as a parole officer working with some recently released men, Lindbloom and Trice. As a factory worker and mother, Rogge faces the struggles of life before and after NAFTA destroys her life, family, and some friendships. Ananya must develop from a trusted friend to a scorned associate as her promotion changes the dynamics of her relationships. Davis shows the devastation of job loss and the easy path to alcohol to blur the pains. Butell as the bartender valiantly works to diffuse situations before they

explode in a tough balancing act. Barron explains the heart behind workers wanting a fair job for fair work in an environment that locks doors and squelches opportunity. Morrow struggles with drug, recovery, family in a multi-faceted performance of heart and pain. Trice and Lindbloom show that even best friends sometimes lead others to bad situations and that bad decisions lead to bad consequences.

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“Sweat” performed on one of the most elaborate sets in recent history on the Main Stage with two carousels so that scenes could be swivelled in or out to depict different locations. The lighting was extremely focuses so that scene changes and highlights helped the audience focus where the director wanted the action. The costumes and makeup absolutely helped the audience with scene changes and time changes. The sound, props, and set just created the atmosphere necessary to tell this intricate story of unsettled workers as they watched their jobs disappear as a result of political maneuvers that never fulfilled their promise of more and better jobs for America.

The Artistic Staff was lead by director, Ian R. Crawford. His team includes: Stage Manager, Tanya Brown; Scenic Designer, Gene Friedman; Costume Designer, Arwen White; Lighting

Designer, Emily Swenson; Sound Designer/Video Designer, David Kiehl; Properties Designer, Eric Palmquist; Dramaturg, Michelle Tyrene Johnson; Production Assistant/Scenic Artist, Taylor Jene Sullivan; Sound Board Operator, Alex Murphy.

“Sweat” runs through Oct. 17 at The Unicorn Theatre. Tickets can be purchased by phone, in person, or via The Unicorn website.

Tags: Sweat, Unicorn Theatre, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City Theatre, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment.