

SWEATing through Social Justice Lesson Plan

OVERVIEW

Students will learn about how dramatic performance can be used as an expression of social change or social awareness, as demonstrated by Lynn Nottage's *Sweat*. The students will view the University of Massachusetts Amherst's production and learn about the playwright's artistic response to the de-industrial revolution. The lesson will culminate with students creating a pitch for a play about a social issue that is important to them.

GRADE

9-12

SUBJECT

Can be used for English, Theater, or Social Justice classrooms. Focuses on literacy skills and oral communications.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What does social justice mean to you?

When was a time that you felt strongly about an issue and wanted to share your views with other people?

Why do you think Lynn Nottage chose to write about these particular people, at this particular time?

How will you determine which information is most important for you to include in your play?

MATERIALS

Teacher access to computer, projector, and speakers

PDFs of New Yorker article: *The First Theatrical Landmark of the Trump Era*

PDFs of New York Times article: *Reading PA knew it was poor, now it knows just how poor.*

Video clip of Ted Talk: *How I use Art to bridge misunderstanding*

Computers and internet access for student research

DURATION

New York Times article in class or as homework before attending production of *SWEAT*

1 lesson before production attendance, 2 afterwards (depending upon on the amount of time needed for explanation, direction, and creating.)

TEACHER PREPARATION

No extra preparation necessary

PROCEDURE

Pre-Show

1. Before coming to see the show, have students either read aloud in class or as homework the New York Times article that the playwright was particularly inspired by. This will give a background on the town these characters live in, three years after the play is set. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/us/reading-pa-tops-list-poverty-list-census-shows.html>
2. After the article is read, ask students what social justice means to them. As a class discuss the concept of social justice.
3. Ask students the Essential Question prompt: When was a time that you felt strongly about an issue and wanted to share your views with other people? Give students five minutes or so to free write. If comfortable, students may share with the class.
4. As a homework assignment, ask students to observe things in their community, school, or the world that may be an area of concern for them.

Post-Show Attendance

1. At the next class meeting, discuss the students' concerns that they have observed. Discuss how they can address these in a positive manner, such as community service, writing an op-ed to the local newspaper, meeting with local politicians, and particularly using artistic expression.
2. Now have the students watch the Ted Talk "How I use art to bridge misunderstanding" https://www.ted.com/talks/adong_judith_how_i_use_art_to_bridge_misunderstanding
3. Discuss Adong Judith's approach to social justice. Ask the students if they agree that "everyone is an expert in their own fields" and that "no one is ignorant" and why or why not? Is Judith's approach to bringing forth ideas about social justice, in including everyone at the table, something that works in all situations? Or that the students would personally use? Why or why not?
4. Ask the students why they believe Lynn Nottage chose to write *Sweat*, particularly these people at this time. What story was she trying to tell by including each of these characters?
5. Have the students read the New Yorker article "The First Theatrical Landmark of the Trump Era" Revisit Lynn Nottage's decision to write *SWEAT*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/27/the-first-theatrical-landmark-of-the-trump-era>
6. Ask the students to think back on what they had written down as important to them in the last class. Ask them if they were going to write a play about something they believed needed attention brought to it, what would it be?
7. Have the students research who they would interview for their hypothetical play. Have them do research over a class period, writing down at least two different views on the subject of people they would interview as well as how they would do primary source research. Where would they go? Who would they talk to? What would they read?
8. Have them present their idea to the class.

U.S.

Reading, Pa., Knew It Was Poor. Now It Knows Just How Poor.

By SABRINA TAVERNISE SEPT. 26, 2011

READING, Pa. — The exhausted mothers who come to the Second Street Learning Center here — a day care provider for mostly low-income families — speak of low wages, hard jobs and an economy gone bad.

Ashley Kelleher supports her family on the \$900 a month she earns as a waitress at an International House of Pancakes. Louri Williams packs cakes and pies all night for \$8 an hour, takes morning classes, and picks up her children in the afternoon. Teresa Santiago takes complaints from building supply customers for \$10 an hour, not enough to cover her \$1,900 in monthly bills.

These are common stories in Reading, a struggling city of 88,000 that has earned the unwelcome distinction of having the largest share of its residents living in poverty, barely edging out Flint, Mich., according to new Census Bureau data. The count includes only cities with populations of 65,000 or more, and has a margin of error that makes it difficult to declare a winner — or, perhaps more to the point, a loser.

Reading began the last decade at No. 32. But it broke into the top 10 in 2007, joining other places known for their high rates of poverty like Flint, Camden, N.J., and Brownsville, Tex., according to an analysis of the data for The New York Times by Andrew A. Beveridge, a demographer at Queens College.

Now it is No. 1, a ranking that the mothers at the day care center here say does not surprise them, given their first-hand knowledge of poverty-line wages, which for a parent and two children is now \$18,530.

The city had been limping for most of the past decade, since the plants that sustained it — including Lucent Technologies and the Dana Corporation, a car parts manufacturer — withered. But the past few years delivered more closings and layoffs, sending the city’s poverty rate up to 41.3 percent.

Jon Scott, president of the **Berks Economic Partnership**, which helps businesses looking to stay in the area or move here, said that some of the city’s job losses were in fact furloughs, and that many businesses were considering opening in Reading, including an industrial laundry company at the former Dana site.

According to Mr. Beveridge, employment in the city dropped by about 10 percent between 2000 and 2010.

One of Reading’s more entrenched problems is education. Just 8 percent of its residents have a bachelor’s degree, far below the national average of 28 percent.

“Without a bachelor’s degree, forget it,” said Ms. Williams, 28, who is taking classes to earn her G.E.D.. Only about 63 percent of Reading’s residents have a high school diploma, compared with more than 85 percent nationally.

Lower education generally means higher poverty. About a fifth of people ages 25 to 34 with only a high school diploma in the United States were poor last year, compared with just 5 percent of college graduates, said Yiyoon Chung, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. For those without a high school diploma, the rate was 40 percent.

Ms. Santiago, 36, has an associate’s degree from a local community college, but said that employers wanted to see more from job candidates. She lost her last full-time job in 2007, and has worked in low wage jobs without benefits through a temporary agency ever since.

“They even want a degree to be a secretary,” said Ms. Santiago, picking up her 8-year-old son at the center.

This city has had a large influx of Hispanics over the past decade. They moved from New York and other large cities, drawn by cheaper rent and the promise of a better life. That raised the flagging population, but also reinforced the city’s already acute problems with education: Just 18 percent of Hispanics in Reading had some college education last year, compared with 30 percent of the city’s whites. Only 44 percent of Hispanics had a high school diploma.

Young men have been particularly hard hit. Because they are having trouble competing for jobs, they are dropping out of the labor force, leaving women to support the children.

Ms. Kelleher, 23, said she had been supporting her three children as well as the father of two of them. She would not be able to survive, she said, without the \$636 a month she gets in food stamps.

“For the past five years, it has been me paying the bills,” she said at the day care center, still in her waitress uniform. She wants to get married someday, she said, but only to a partner who is financially stable.

Sixty-two percent of young fathers in the United States earned less than \$20,000 in 2002, according to Timothy Smeeding, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, citing the most recent data available from the National Survey of Family Growth.

Even for young people with a bachelor’s degree, the economy is making life difficult. Vickie Moll, who runs the day care center, said the number of applications from teachers who have lost their jobs had grown as the waves of budget cuts washed over the state. “We have people in here with bachelor’s degrees making \$8 an hour,” she said.

Social services feel the effects, too. The Greater Berks Food Bank — Reading is the Berks County seat — is on track to distribute six million pounds of food this year, up from three and a half million pounds in 2007, said Doug Long, manager of marketing.

Pat Giles, a senior vice president at the United Way of Berks County, said: “It has really started to snowball. We have a growing population of younger, less educated, less skilled people. On top of that you have the economy going upside down.”

Modesto Fiume, president of Opportunity House, the organization that runs the day care center, as well as a homeless shelter and a transitional living facility, said the number of first-time families in the shelter was up sharply: of 23 new entries in June and July, 18 were homeless for the first time.

“People are here because they honestly and truly can’t find work,” said Delia McLendon, who runs the shelters. “It didn’t used to be that way.”

In the mid-1990s, welfare reform resulted in more women joining the work force. At the time, jobs were plentiful, but now work is scarce and low-income families’ lives have

become hectic balancing acts to keep the few benefits they have.

Ms. Santiago loses her subsidized day care if she is out of work for more than 13 days, she said. The loss would take months to reinstate, so she hurries to find any work, whatever it pays, every time her temp job ends. Earning more than \$10 an hour means losing health insurance, she said, though her children remain covered through Medicaid.

And jobs just seem to pay less. Ms. Santiago recently took a temporary job at a candy factory where she had worked more than eight years ago, when she was still in her 20s, before she had completed her associate's degree. At the time she was making \$10.50 an hour. In her most recent stint, her hourly wage was \$9.25.

“Eight years ago I said, ‘I don’t want to do this, I have to further my education,’ ” she said. “And now here I am, still packing candy, and making less.”

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THE FIRST THEATRICAL LANDMARK OF THE TRUMP ERA

Lynn Nottage's play "Sweat" is a tough yet empathetic portrait of the America that came undone.

By Michael Schulman

The playwright Lynn Nottage sometimes doesn't know what her plays are about until well after she's finished them. At the Yale School of Drama, in the late nineteen-eighties, she based a play on a news item about a Brazilian town where locals had found a glowing capsule thought to have supernatural powers; it turned out to contain radioactive waste, and more than a hundred thousand people were contaminated. Sometime later, Nottage realized that she had been writing about AIDS, which had claimed the lives of a number of her classmates and teachers. After her mother died, of Lou Gehrig's disease, in 1997, she wrote a play called "The Emperor and the Scribe," about a dying African ruler and his amanuensis. "It wasn't until a year later I was, like, 'Oh, that's about me and my mother,'" Nottage told me.

With her latest work, "Sweat," Nottage's accidental insight was not into herself but into the American electorate. The play is set in Reading, Pennsylvania, where she spent two and a half years interviewing residents. Much of the action takes place at a bar where the steelworkers hang out; among them are Cynthia, who is black, and Tracey, who is white. Both apply for a job in management; Cynthia gets it. Soon, the company issues layoffs—it's shipping jobs to Mexico—and *the workers are locked out*, pitting Cynthia against her old friends. The bar's tenuous ecosystem unravels: economic anxiety begets racial resentment (Tracey thinks that Cynthia got the promotion because she's black), xenophobia (a Colombian busboy who works as a scab is targeted), and violence.

The play opened at the Public Theatre last November, five days before the Presidential election, which gave the country a new fixation: the Rust Belt working class. Who were these people who had cast their lot with Donald Trump? Why had the media—and the Democrats—largely ignored their troubles? Nottage was an unlikely teller of the story: an Ivy League-educated black woman from Brooklyn. "One of the mantras I heard the steelworkers repeat over and over again was 'We invested so many years in this factory, and they don't see us. We're invisible,'" Nottage said. "I think it profoundly hurt their feelings."

Nottage, who has thick dreads and a warm, warbling voice, has built a career on making invisible people visible. Her plays, including “Ruined,” for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, are vigorously researched and unapologetic about their social concerns, at a time when critics tend to dismiss “issue plays.” At fifty-two, she is sprightlier than her more serious work suggests, a quality that helps earn the trust of her subjects, whether in Africa or in coal country. “Lynn carries something with her,” Kate Whoriskey, the director of “Ruined” and “Sweat,” said. “People immediately recognize that she has integrity.”

“Sweat”’s transfer to Studio 54—it is Nottage’s Broadway debut—may make it the first theatrical landmark of the Trump era: a tough yet empathetic portrait of the America that came undone. “Most folks think it’s the guilt or rage that destroys us,” one character says. “But I know from experience that it’s shame that eats us away until we disappear.” Nottage wasn’t prescient—she was as shocked as anyone by the election result. But what wasn’t shocking “was the extent of the pain,” she told me. “These were people who felt helpless, who felt like the American dream that they had so deeply invested in had been suddenly ripped away. I was sitting with these white men, and I thought, You sound like people of color in America.”

“Sweat” had its origin in 2011, with an e-mail from one of Nottage’s neighbors in Brooklyn, a single mother, who confessed that she was broke. “She has this bubbly, outgoing personality, and it was really kind of devastating to realize that she was in such dire straits,” Nottage recalled. “It made me think a lot about how close we live to poverty.” The next morning, Nottage brought the friend to Zuccotti Park to see the Occupy Wall Street protest. The friend cheered up, she said, because “she wasn’t alone.”

But Nottage was perturbed: “How did we arrive at this point?” She decided to investigate a struggling city. She read in the *Times* that the Census Bureau had found Reading to be the poorest American city of its size, with a poverty rate of more than forty per cent. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival had commissioned her to write a play about an American revolution; she chose the de-industrial revolution, which she called “the biggest shift in American sensibilities since the nineteen-sixties.” On her first trip to Reading, she and her assistant pulled into a gas station, and a guy told them, “Can I give you a piece of advice? Get out before sundown.”

Nottage wasn’t fazed. In 2005, she had travelled to Uganda, to research the play that would become “Ruined.” The idea was to re-set Bertolt Brecht’s “Mother Courage and Her Children” in the Congo, which was reeling from civil war. During three trips, she

interviewed women in refugee camps and demobilized soldiers from the Lord's Resistance Army. At one point, she and her husband, Tony Gerber, a documentary filmmaker, were trying to cross the border on foot, after a banana truck blocked their car. A crowd surrounded them and began shouting at Gerber, who is white. "They're saying they're going to stone him to death," their translator told them brightly. "But I don't think it's going to happen, so don't worry!"

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

How Ramen Changed in America

"Ruined," which is set in a Congolese brothel, opened at Manhattan Theatre Club in 2009. Ben Brantley, in the *Times*, noted its "raw and genuine agony." There was talk of moving it to Broadway, but, Nottage said, "repeatedly I heard, 'There are no black actresses who can open a Broadway play.' It was frustrating—the unwillingness to gamble on this play that had proven to be very successful, because it was written by a woman of color and starred women of color."

Some playwrights work within a consistent aesthetic world—Arthur Miller's mid-century morality plays, Annie Baker's chatty hipster miniatures—but Nottage shifts wildly from play to play, calling her oeuvre "schizophrenic." After "Ruined," she wrote "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark," a postmodern screwball comedy about a nineteen-thirties Hollywood star resembling

Hattie McDaniel. Her most popular work is “Intimate Apparel,” about a black seamstress in early-twentieth-century New York. “What drew me to it was that it was a full story of a woman,” Viola Davis, who starred in it Off Broadway, in 2004, said. “Lynn’s characters go on a full journey. In the end, you fully understand their pathology.”

Nottage feels that what unifies her plays is their “morally ambiguous heroes or heroines, people who are fractured within their own bodies, who have to make very difficult choices in order to survive.” Each character in “Sweat” commits a reprehensible act, whether it’s Cynthia’s failing to stand with her friends on the picket line or Tracey’s exhibiting a newfound racism. The plays also give voice to marginalized lives. “Her main characters happen to be African-American women who are dark-skinned and who probably otherwise wouldn’t be considered beautiful,” Davis said. “She gives you the beauty, because she gives their lives a lyricism. She pays attention, in the same way Arthur Miller pays attention to Willy Loman.”

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Though “Sweat” harks back to the working-class naturalism of Clifford Odets, Nottage is eager to push beyond the proscenium. She teaches a graduate course at Columbia, called “American Spectacle,” and takes her students on field trips: a Coney Island sideshow, a murder trial, a Times Square mega church. “I had this feeling that arts institutions were closing in and demanding that playwrights shape their visions to the space,” she said one night last month. “So the goal is to create a whole generation of resistance.” I had met her and six students at the Slipper Room, a burlesque club. She was interested in “the gaze,” she said, and in “the way people slowly remove layers. It’s an exercise in subtext.”

A rowdy crowd formed as the show began. Like a hip Mary Poppins, Nottage sipped a bourbon as her charges watched a woman in a flapper dress strip to her panties while hula-hooping. After the show, Nottage gave the students an assignment. “Think about what dialogue you want to have with the audience,” she told them. “This burlesque show is less about stripping all the layers than about audience engagement and spectacle.”

Nottage lives in the house where she grew up, a century-old brownstone on Dean Street, in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, filled with modern art and African masks collected

by her parents, Ruby and Wally Nottage. One recent night, the house was buzzing with people, including Nottage's brother Aaron and Gerber, her husband, who observed that the ages of the house's population ranged "from eight to eighty-eight." The eight-year-old was their son, Mel, whom they adopted from Ethiopia. The eighty-eight-year-old was Wally, who was downstairs, in hospice care.

Nottage's parents bought the house in 1966. Wally was a social worker focussing on juvenile delinquency, and Ruby taught at a public school in Bed-Stuy. They were a social, sophisticated couple, and their friends included artists, politicians, and feminist leaders, like Bella Abzug. Ruby gave her children an Afrocentric education, and filled in their picture books with a brown marker—the Little Prince became black. Along with Betty Shabazz and Eugenia Clarke (the wives of Malcolm X and John Henrik Clarke), Ruby formed a program called the Black School, which Nottage attended on weekends. "We learned to tie-dye, because tie-dyeing was traditionally a black art," she recalled.

The surrounding neighborhoods were self-segregated—a few blocks away was all Italian—but Boerum Hill in the seventies was a bastion of multiculturalism. The writer Jonathan Lethem grew up down the block, and later fictionalized the area in his novel "The Fortress of Solitude"; Nottage's brother (now a Brooklyn district attorney) was the model for a character named Henry, and the stoop where the kids play games was the Nottages', where Wally would keep watch. "Their house was a haven and a beacon," Lethem told me. "They would open their back yard to kids in the neighborhood. The snacks were laid out: bug juice and paper cups for every kid."

Wally and Ruby were hands-off parents. The kids played in the street, "like free-range chickens," Lynn Nottage said. One summer, she and Aaron were at a sleepaway camp in Pennsylvania (where Nottage beat her fellow-camper Laura Linney for an acting prize), and their parents were a week late picking them up. "When we got older, they started talking about places they had been, like Guadeloupe," Aaron said. "That's when I realized: they'd send us away, and they would travel."

As a child, Lethem recalled, "Lynn was a watchful, wise-beyond-her-years presence on the block. I felt the power of her awareness and her watching and, sometimes, her intervening kindness." When Nottage was twelve, her father slipped while carrying a piece of slate in the back yard. Not realizing that he had broken his back, he took the kids to Prospect Park to play Frisbee. "He came home and didn't move for two years," Nottage recalled. She switched from private to public school, while Ruby supported the family on her teacher's salary.

In ninth grade, Nottage and Lethem started at the High School of Music & Art, where he studied painting and she played the flute. Every day, they shared an hour-long ride on the A train, which Lethem recalled as “a mind-blowing exodus from the local scene through the entire length of Manhattan up to a Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street.” Together, they honed their powers of observation. The conductor would sit with his wife until she kissed him and got off in lower Manhattan. Then, a few stops later, his mistress would get on. “We’re these two bug-eyed kids who’ve been told to stick to the conductor like glue,” Lethem said, “and he spotted us, day after day, watching this little playlet go on.”

At school, a racial double standard asserted itself. An English teacher who was inspirational to Lethem bedevilled Nottage. When she signed her name to papers, she got B’s or C’s, but on anonymous exercises she got A’s. Nottage wrote the teacher a letter saying, “I deserve a 96 in this class, and here’s the reason why.” Years later, Lethem asked Nottage for her memories of Boerum Hill. “She said, ‘Every kid we grew up with either went to jail or into law enforcement.’ I replied, looking at her and myself, ‘There was a third way—you could become a writer.’”

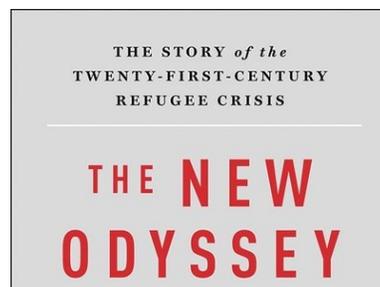
Nottage had grown up seeing plays by the Negro Ensemble Company, most memorably Charles Fuller’s “Zooman and the Sign.” But when she enrolled at Brown University, in 1982, she was pre-med. Organic chemistry put an end to that, and she gravitated toward her playwriting professor, George Bass, the executor of Langston Hughes’s estate. “He was into ritual, and theatre as a sacred space,” Nottage said. Once, he told the students to close their eyes and hold out their hands, and gave each a chunk of Hughes’s ashes. (Nottage still has hers, in a silver case.)

MORE FROM THIS ISSUE

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THE POLITICAL SCENE



BOOKS



DEPT. OF HYPHENATES



SHOUTS & MUR

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Another teacher was Paula Vogel, who “introduced me to the notion that you can make a career as a playwright,” Nottage said. In 1986, she started at the Yale School of Drama, but the AIDS and crack epidemics overshadowed her time there. She didn’t think the school was invested in her as a playwright, and in turn she felt less invested in playwriting. “I thought, I need to do something that feels like it will have impact,” she said. After graduation, she sold her computer and began working as the national press officer for Amnesty International. The job had international scope—she toured with the Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú—but she was frustrated that the group neglected women’s issues like genital mutilation. She would draft press releases about human-rights abuses, hoping for a blurb in the *Times*. “I thought, There must be a better way of communicating stories,” she said. One day, after seeing a portfolio of domestic-abuse victims by the photographer Donna Ferrato, she closed her office door and wrote her first play in years: a one-act called “Poof!,” about a battered wife who tells her husband to go to hell, after which he spontaneously combusts.

Nottage sent the play to the Actors Theatre of Louisville, where it won a prize in a festival. She quit her job and started temping and writing. At Playwrights Horizons, she joined a workshop for black playwrights, which turned into “a therapeutic bitch session”: she and the others felt that nonprofit theatres were using them to fill a diversity quota but not producing their work. Eventually, in 1997, Playwrights Horizons did stage Nottage’s “Mud, River, Stone,” about a well-off New York couple who go to Africa to “find their roots.” As the play was going up, Nottage’s life was undergoing huge changes. Her daughter, Ruby, was born three weeks before rehearsals. During previews, her mother died.

At the same time, her grandmother Waple Newton was succumbing to alcoholism. In her day, Newton had been a splendid raconteur, with friends like Shirley Chisholm. As Newton lost her lucidity, Nottage cleaned out her house, in Crown Heights. Wedged between the pages of an issue of *Family Circle*, Nottage found a passport photo of her great-grandmother Ethel Armstrong. With her mother gone and her grandmother incapacitated, she had no one to ask about Ethel’s life, so she decided to invent a life for her. The play that resulted,

“Intimate Apparel,” won a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and became the most produced play in the country in the 2005-06 season.

The day after “Sweat” had its first preview on Broadway, Nottage, Gerber, and a film crew drove to Reading. Nottage didn’t want to feel like “a carpetbagger,” so she and Gerber had devised an installation piece that will open in Reading in May, a Joseph Beuys-like “social sculpture” combining performance, visual projections, and interviews documenting the city’s decline and attempts at rebirth. The work, called “This Is Reading,” will occupy the long-vacant Franklin Street Railroad Station.

The demise of the Reading Railroad, which remains a two-hundred-dollar property on the Monopoly board, is intertwined with the city’s slump. As chronicled by its native son John Updike, Reading once thrived on its steel mills and coal mines and became “the outlet capital of the world.” The train to Philadelphia shut down in 1981, along with foundries and textile factories. Manufacturing jobs have dropped thirty per cent since 1995, and only eight per cent of residents have a bachelor’s degree. A majority of the city’s population is now Hispanic, further alienating the white working class.

The group parked at the Reading Railroad Heritage Museum, which opened in 2008, in a defunct steel foundry. A guide showed them the collection: model trains, old maps. Nottage said that she was looking for artifacts for the installation, part of a “visual tapestry” to trigger memories of the way Reading used to be.

Afterward, Nottage and I drove through town, passing a bar called Mike’s Tavern, which had inspired the central location of “Sweat.” “You don’t see the poverty, but it’s there,” Nottage said. She approached her research with the motto “Replace judgment with curiosity,” but her empathy was tested at times—for instance, when she noticed that an ex-con whom she’d been interviewing had white-supremacist tattoos.

In a restaurant at the new DoubleTree Hotel, we met a sixty-five-year-old native named Doug Graybill. After serving in Vietnam, Graybill had problems readjusting and was repeatedly arrested. (“I would actually beg the cops to shoot me,” he said.) Despite stints as an ironworker, he struggled to make ends meet and was periodically homeless. Eight years ago, he and his wife, Liz, started a nonprofit group called Veterans Making a Difference. Graybill would bring food and supplies to shantytowns that had sprung up in the woods; during Nottage’s research for “Sweat,” he guided her there to interview the residents.

“So, how is Reading doing?” Nottage asked Graybill, who sipped soup.

“It’s not getting any better,” he said. He told her that he had burned out and had had to cut down on his services. With his bad back, he could no longer haul heavy bags of food into the woods. “It was just getting to be more and more. I can’t keep everyone out of jail and I can’t pay everyone’s rent. I can’t buy formula for every baby.”

“What about your boy in charge—Trump?” Nottage asked. Though Reading had leaned toward Clinton, Berks County had gone for Trump by a ten-point margin; Obama had won by nine points in 2008. Graybill voted for Trump, because “I didn’t want to give up my guns,” he said. But he wasn’t optimistic. “Nobody’s going to make it any better,” he told Nottage. “Obama didn’t make it any better in eight years. Trump’s not going to do it in eight years. Nobody’s going to, unless there’s the same number of jobs there were forty years ago.”

“A lot of those jobs aren’t coming back,” Nottage said gently.

Graybill said that he’d been seeing “the Wizard” (his shrink) once a week, but he was haunted by the desperation around him. “I can’t hear another sad story. I can’t hear about another person going to jail. I don’t want to hear about three sick kids and no food.”

Nottage nodded: “When I was at Amnesty International, I was seeing a chiropractor three times a week.”

“I feel guilty,” Graybill went on. “Because I got a chance to shower and shave this morning, and put on deodorant and clean clothes.”

“When you come and you hear these stories, you feel incredibly guilty,” Nottage agreed. “That’s the reason I wanted to come back. You can’t just run away.”

Before Nottage starts a new play, she makes herself a soundtrack. For “Intimate Apparel” (which she and the composer Ricky Ian Gordon are turning into an opera), the playlist included ragtime artists like Scott Joplin. For “By the Way, Meet Vera Stark,” she listened to Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith. The “Sweat” soundtrack began with “Smooth,” by Santana. “From the moment I conceived the play, that’s how I heard it starting,” she told me.

She was in a rehearsal room, where the cast was about to run Act I, Scene 2. It’s the first scene at the bar, when the subject of the open supervisor position comes up. “The real darkness is there and looming in the distance, but hasn’t yet touched them,” Nottage explained.

At the Public, the scene opened with everyone dancing to “Smooth,” which Nottage liked because it represented all the characters: “You have a little R. & B., a little rock and roll, a little pop, a little Latino flavor.” But the production hadn’t cleared the rights for Broadway, so Whoriskey, the director, had lined up alternatives. The stage manager played Ricky Martin’s “Livin’ la Vida Loca,” while the actors danced.

Nottage frowned. “It’s fun, but it’s too fast,” she whispered to Whoriskey. “They’re going to have heart attacks.”

They tried Marc Anthony’s “I Need to Know.” “Much better,” Nottage said. (Later, she lamented, “There’s no song that’s as perfect as ‘Smooth.’”) The actors ran the scene, in which the characters discuss the possible layoffs:

CYNTHIA: That rumor’s been
flying around for months.
Nobody’s going anywhere.

STAN: Okay, you keep telling
yourself that, but you saw what
happened over at Clemmon’s
Technologies. No one saw that
coming. Right? You could wake up
tomorrow and all your jobs are in
Mexico, whatever, it’s this NAFTA
bullshit—

TRACEY: What the fuck is NAFTA?
Sounds like a laxative.

Nottage laughed. The scene is set in 2000, but the workers she met in Reading were well aware of NAFTA, which resulted in jobs moving overseas. In the campaign, Trump used the fact that Bill Clinton had signed NAFTA as a cudgel against Hillary. (“Worst trade deal ever.”)

If “Sweat” shows the fissures that were forming in Reading, the election cracked them wide open. “Now it’s like the San Andreas Fault,” Nottage said. Her characters, who already face long odds, would be even more divided in Trump’s America, and just as invisible. “I worry about Reading, which needs good governance in order to resurrect itself,” she said. “I fear that it’s going to be overlooked.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated that workers in Nottage’s “Sweat” go on strike, pitting Cynthia against her friends. In fact, the workers in the play are locked out.

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