

## Capital Rep's 'Sweat' a bracing slap from the recent past

Pulitzer Prize-winning play, built from real-life interviews, examines economic crisis in Rust Belt America at the beginning of this century

By [Steve Barnes](#)

March 13, 2024

ALBANY — Uniformly brilliant acting in the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama “Sweat” makes for a powerful if harrowing experience at Capital Repertory Theatre, where a new production opened Tuesday and runs through the end of this month.

The nine-member cast, under the accomplished direction of Margaret E. Hall, connects so intimately with their characters and the audience that we're ground down alongside them, albeit with the remove of fiction, as financial turmoil ruins life, family bonds and decades-long friendships in Rust Belt America while the Bush-Gore 2000 election unfolds.

To write the play, which premiered off-Broadway in 2016 and moved to Broadway the following year, Nottage in 2011 interviewed residents of Reading, Pa. It was then one of the poorest cities in America, where the poverty rate of 40 percent was largely due to industrial jobs lost to economic factors including the North American Free Trade Agreement.

“Sweat” uses a frame story, set in 2008, of a pair of ex-cons who were at the end of adolescence when the fracturing events of eight years earlier sent them to prison, for an incident we don't see until near the end. Most of the play is in flashbacks to 2000, when the high-spirited and still-optimistic young men — Chris (Jovan Davis) and Jason (David Gow) — are just beginning what they think will be careers at the local steel plant, and town's biggest employer, where their mothers have worked for more than 20 years.

Nottage, who won her first Pulitzer in 2009 for “Ruined,” builds the story and relationships in layers. Her acute ear for working-class dialogue and eye for the frictions baked into long friendships is only occasionally marred by an impulse for poetry and dilation. (Though gripping, The Rep's production feels every bit of its running time of two hours and 40 minutes.)

On a set by the ever-reliable Brian Prather that incorporates an industrial backdrop behind a working-class neighborhood tavern, we come to know the interwoven lives of Chris, Jason, their mothers (Inga Ballard and LeeAnne Hutchison, respectively), a former factory worker-turned-bartender (Michael Pemberton), Chris' opioid-addict father (William Oliver Watkins, amazingly good) and others.

Even if the entire audience had bingo cards to mark off perfect acting moments, there are so many that everyone would win with full cards. Hear Ballard's full-throated defense of why her character rightly deserved a promotion after 24 years on the factory floor. Watch the way Davis imbues his character with a desire for more than blue-collar labor and a pension after 35 years. Feel flabbergasted at how unrecognizable Pemberton is from his performance just two years ago at The Rep as Albany Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd in “The True.” Experience genuine shock

how we initially saw him. Likewise, with a spring in his step and an effervescent presentation, Davis portrays a fun-loving Chris who, nonetheless, struggles with his drug addicted father and his desire to go to college and leave factory life behind.

Over time, friction develops as one woman gets picked for management, layoffs ensue, a strike follows and jobs are lost. The relationship amongst the three women is fractured. A Barback (John Martinez Soliz), a young Hispanic immigrant, becomes a scab in the hopes of making more money. His betrayal escalates all of the characters except the understanding bartender, Stan, and results in the dramatic climax of *Sweat*.

*Sweat* has an effective ensemble cast. We see the closeness and the toughness in the three women: Hutchison, Ballard and Carey. We witness the need to present strong by Hutchison, the weariness and frustration of Ballard, and the emotional defeat of Carey. Gow and Davis show an incredible range going from convicts to best buds to angry workers, with Davis's character Chris wanting more. Watkins, as Brucie, Chris's Dad, gives a believable portrayal as a heroin addict who is unable to get clean for his family. Both Pemberton and Soliz make dramatic turns from the beginning to the end of the play.

Costumes by Elivia Bovenzi Blitz accurately portray the time period, the socioeconomic status, and the personality of the characters.

Nottage hits every social, financial and racial issue in this working-class town in the early 2000's. These issues unfortunately prevail. Director Margaret Hall enables this nearly three hour play to move quickly, bringing out each character's distinct personality, and engaging the audience.

As the title of Nottage's play, *Sweat* has multiple meanings, resulting in the audience getting an emotional work-out.

## **Theater Review: theREP's 'Sweat' captures blue collar life in three dimension**

By Paul Lamar  
Mar 14, 2024

ALBANY — That Boston bar Cheers, where “everybody knows your name.”

That unnamed Reading, Pennsylvania, bar in “Sweat,” which you might dub Tears.

Lynn Nottage's riveting 2017 play offers cold comfort and snarky humor in a story of this after-work destination for employees of a steel-tube factory, Olstead's.

Ballard's Cynthia sometimes can't win for losing. She's a worker, a mother, and a wife, a friend, but when she—a Black woman—has a chance to rise to management, she will be fully Cynthia. Ballard touchingly captures Cynthia's dignity and optimism in the face of resistance.

Director Margaret Hall's control over this sprawling production is evident throughout, but I noticed in particular the beautifully in-synch performances she elicits from the parents/children. The brilliant Davis and Watkins are the before and after, with the high-energy Chris morphed into the strung-out Brucie. Physically the actors are similar, but it's the rhythm of their interactions that tell all.

Tracey and Jason are hell on wheels, she a drama queen and he the male version: a sociopath. In the play's most chilling scene in act two, we're left in horror at their behavior, almost Greek tragedy in its proportion. Hutchinson and Gow move and howl in terrifying coordination.

The tech team of Brian Prather (set), Shelby Loera (lighting), Jeffrey Salerno (sound), and Kylee Loera (projection) have created a realistic and head-spinning world for this compelling action.

One more character: Oscar (John Martinez Solis), the Colombian-American, who is Stan's employee and a keen observer of the bar crowd. Pay attention to Oscar, and admire the work of Solis.

In opening night's curtain speech, producing artistic director Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill said that Nottage "has a way of talking about America," not unlike Arthur Miller.

We need her talk in 2024.

## Shedding light on working-class truths: 'Sweat' at theRep

by Shawn Robinson

Wed, March 13th 2024 at 11:08 AM

**Updated** Wed, March 13th 2024 at 11:50 AM

ALBANY, NY (WRGB) — Drinks. Secrets. Laughs and "the floor."

In a moving performance, Lynn Nottage's '*Sweat*' took center stage at the Capital Repertory Theatre last night.

in-depth monologue so that we fully understand them. Though beneficial overall, it can slow down the pace of the play.

The central figures are Tracey and Cynthia. Both are independent females, who live single lives. As Cynthia, Inga Ballard breaks your heart showing the pain of a woman who finds herself in a bind. She gets a promotion which puts an African-American woman in a position of power which challenges her relationship with those she worked with as a laborer. Ballard is wonderful as she tries to cope with a can't-win situation, a drug addicted husband and the loss of her best friends.

Tracey is an agitator. LeeAnne Hutchison plays her filled with righteous anger with an outspoken way of talking. Indeed, her strident stance towards authority triggers most of the plays conflict. Hutchison is able to balance Tracey's feistiness with a sense of caring that makes the woman's behavior understandable. She makes you understand being on the right side of history can come with a cost.

In a mirror relationship, their 20-something old sons are also best friends. Nottage use both men to show the consequences of bad behavior that stems from anger, fear and frustration, More important than who they are in 1980 is who they become in 1988. David Gow as Jason and Jovan Davis as Chris are excellent as symbols of the American Dream lost.

Arguably, the most important figure in the work is Stan, the bartender, who used to work at the factory before being injured because of unsafe conditions. He is a paternal presence, the voice of reason and the play's most tragic figure. In a marvelously understated performance Michael Pemberton makes Stan the heart of the play.

In less prominent roles. Kathleen Carey, as Jesse, the friend of Cynthia and Tracey uses her limited stage time to gather sympathy for a woman who has given up on life. She has a terrific moment of reflection that wins our compassion for her sad past.

As Cynthia's husband Bruce, William Oliver Watkins creates an effective portrait of a man who has destroyed his life. Though a negative presence Watkins forces you to understand the man's inner decency.

Last, but far from least, is John Martinez Soliz who plays the Colombian-American who is masterful at being invisible while making his presence felt in every scene he is in. Plus, when he becomes visible it is done with compassion.

The work is directed by Margaret E. Hall, who achieves what every good director should aspire to. She helms a near perfect production without leaving a fingerprint to be seen.

In "Sweat" the scene transitions are very important. Kudos to the lighting, sound designers and stage crew. "Sweat" is a play you will savor and long remember.