

Meghan Landon
Dramaturgy Note – *Sweat*

“Replace judgment with curiosity,” says Lynn Nottage, author of the 2017 Pulitzer-winning play *Sweat*. The play follows nine blue-collar workers – a melting pot of differing races, genders, and political views – who live in Reading, Pennsylvania between 2000 and 2008. Despite glaring differences, these characters are precariously tied together by the thread of working-class status and poverty. Gathering nightly in a local bar to recuperate from back-breaking work at a steel factory, they argue, reminisce over dreams long past, and express volatile frustration towards the ungraspable “American Dream.”

Nottage began her journey with *Sweat* in 2011 after watching friends struggle to make ends meet due to the stock market crash of 2008. She questioned how these friends – once financially comfortable – were so quickly thrown into abject poverty. Nottage wanted to investigate this phenomenon in the context of the United States at large to witness how the rest of the nation was coping with the economic crisis. She visited Reading which was listed on the 2011 census as “the poorest city in America for its size.” That visit evolved into a project lasting two and a half years with Nottage conducting interviews with the town’s citizens. She eventually came across a collection of steel workers whose plant had been locked down for 93 weeks. Nottage found their story “incredibly compelling” and “representative” of what she heard from other workers. The people she interviewed believed wholeheartedly in the American Dream - work hard, put your time in, and you’ll be rewarded with a home surrounded by a white picket fence and an easy retirement. These interviews became the basis for *Sweat*: how did these hardworking people get left behind, and how did they attempt to pick themselves back up?

Sweat opened at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015 to rave reviews. Critics praised the play as both timely and timeless, and *The New York Times* hailed it as a vital “contribution to contemporary drama.” Since its premiere, *Sweat* has been a season staple in venues ranging from Broadway to community theatre and educational spaces. Its dive into characters largely forgotten by the nation strikes deep at the heart of its audience. When asked what viewers should take away from the play, Nottage responded that she wanted her audience to see the characters as “three-dimensional.” Moreover, her play entreats the audience to see *Sweat* as a practice in empathy. These characters may not share the same beliefs or experiences that an audience member does, but *Sweat* calls for curiosity, not judgment, to rule our response. Nottage asks us to re-evaluate our perception of the American Dream, and to question why it is so unattainable for 99 percent of the American population.