Dramaturgy for *SWEAT* By Lynn Nottage

Dramaturgy by Karisa Meier Directed by Dr. Robert Hubbard

Location, place, and time are essential components of *Sweat*, and the setting almost serves as a character itself due to its level of importance to the narrative. With this in mind, understanding the historical context of Lynn Nottage's story is vital to understanding its characters, the conflicts they encounter, and how they respond to them.

The years 2000 and 2008, when *Sweat* takes place, were big years for the United States--not only were they election years, but an economic and political roller coaster swept over the nation. And while many NWC students were alive at the time, we were children, so we likely do not actually remember what was happening in the country or what our own parents may have been struggling with.

My goal with this project was to make the economic ups and downs of the early 2000s accessible to a college-aged audience and to help the audience at large better contextualize and more deeply understand the action that took place on stage.

About the Playwright

Lynn Nottage began her journey as a playwright while she attended Brown University and the Yale School of Drama, influenced by the writing of Langston Hughes. Upon graduation, however, she stepped into international service for Amnesty International. After years of writing press releases, Nottage wrote her first award-winning play and began playwriting professionally.

In 2003, her breakthrough play, *Intimate Apparel*, drew critical acclaim, winning the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. She continued to write and receive accolades, eventually becoming the first and only two-time Pulitzer Prize for Drama winner—awarded the first in 2009 for *Ruined*, which follows of a group of women in the civil-war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, and the second in 2017 for *Sweat*.

Nottage has co-founded the production company, Market Road Films, and serves as an Associate Professor at the Columbia School of the Arts. She continues to write for the stage and screen.

The Story Behind *SWEAT*

The seeds of *Sweat* took root in 2011 after Nottage received a letter from a friend synthesizing their experiences of struggling in working-class America during the time of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Soon after, she became aware of Reading, PA, which, according to recent census data, was one of the poorest communities in America. This invisible struggle inspired the playwright to set off for two weeks of research among the city's residents. Those two weeks became two years as the Reading community poured their stories out to Nottage in interviews.

Those that Nottage met and the suffering they experienced, seemingly forgotten by the rest of America, resonated with her own experience of economic instability and marginalization. Quoted by Columbia News in 2017, Nottage recalled, "They were saying, 'we worked the jobs for 30 years... we were deeply invested in the American dream and literally had the rug pulled out from under us in a day'... the way in which they were speaking sounded very much like the experience as an African-American that I've had of struggling and being marginalized."

Community members turned into characters and the closing of manufacturers, layoffs, wage battles, racial tensions, and the recent influx of the Hispanic population set the backdrop for this tale of fracturing relationships. Although the history of American economics is deeply present in *Sweat*, Nottage has noted in a 2017 Vulture article that "because the play takes place in the recent history and we in America have incredibly short memories...I thought it was really important to give some context without that context being a part of the play." Nottage sought not to broadcast a political commentary but, was "ultimately concerned with the drama of the community's interpersonal relationships." Each scene focuses on a different character and their relationships with the factory, their coworkers, and themselves.

Critical Reception

Following its 2017 premiere, *Sweat* was recognized for its timely narrative regarding the nation's state of economic inequality, racial tensions, and widening polarization that led to the election of former President, Donald J. Trump.

"'Sweat' is the first work from a major American playwright to summon, with empathy and without judgment, the nationwide anxiety that helped put Donald J. Trump in the White House." (NYTimes, Ben Brantley, March 26, 2017)

"Though the show has been called a "predictor" of Donald Trump's win, Nottage said 'I think the play really is about where America is now, where America was 20 years ago, where America hopefully won't be in 20 more years.'" (Marketplace, Lizzie O'Leary, December 9, 2016)

And following another tumultuous year of political tensions, another heated election, unprecedented isolation amid a global pandemic, and the reinvigoration of the racial equity movement following the death of George Floyd, *Sweat* is once again extremely relevant.

"Sweat is an incisive account of changing attitudes toward labor and class in America that examines the human costs of the urgent questions we grapple with today in the Covid-19 crisis—what counts as essential labor? How does unemployment impact our mental health? How is economic mobility shaped by race and ethnicity?" (Alliance Theatre, Jessenia Ingram, April 25, 2020)

"[The characters] blame each other for betrayals that are varying degrees of real and imagined. Yet their humanity shines through even in their worst moments; they are good people struggling against extreme pressure." (Portland Observer, Darleen Ortega, January 21, 2020)

2008

Housing Bubble

The housing bubble was one of the major factors leading to the 2007-2009 financial crisis in the United States, but for years before, it was fueled by lenient credit and lending practices. Like the Tech Bubble of 2000, investors were willing to overlook risky deals for the prospect of higher interest returns. Mortgages, the loan taken out from a bank to purchase a house, appeared to be safe investments after internet companies no longer were, and to attract investors, large financial institutions would purchase many mortgages from banks, package them together and sell them to investors as mortgage-backed securities. Investors flocked to these financial institutions, causing demand to skyrocket, and to meet this demand, more mortgages were necessary. Banks then found themselves selling mortgages to higher-risk home-buyers who were more likely to default on their payments. These subprime mortgages were approved based on old credit data and included predatory lending conditions, but were incredibly appealing to the public.

Soon enough, the housing market was filled with buyers, rapidly driving real estate prices up. Financial institutions created a web of liabilities, risks, and assets based on irrational optimism in the housing market, which was bound to fall apart. By October 2007, lenders found themselves unable to keep up with their mortgage payments and began defaulting on their loans, causing home prices to fall, leaving financial institutions stuck with their bad loans, resulting in their own bankruptcies. All this panic eventually led to the financial crisis in 2008.

Stock Market

On September 15, 2008, the Lehman Brothers, a massive global investment bank that was highly staked in subprime mortgage practices, filed for bankruptcy. This triggered a loss in the Dow Jones by 500 points, which at the time was the largest single-day drop since 9/11. Companies lose financing, and trade with other countries take a hit. The repercussions are global.

Bank Bailout

Following the stock market crash, the Federal Reserve begins pumping money into banks to prevent their collapse. Congress seeks to pass the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, proposing a $700 billion economic relief bill to bail out financial institutions. But on September 29, 2008, it failed to pass Congress. This caused the largest single-day drop in the American stock market since 1987— over 700 points for the Dow Jones Industrial Average, 8.8% for S & P, and 9.1% for the NASDAQ. This federal relief bill would not pass until October 3, 2008, eventually stabilizing the stock market, but the national impact would last for years.

Financial Crisis & Great Recession

What came to be called the Great Recession was a general decline in the global economy from 2007 to 2009. International trade was impacted but the domestic fallout was felt most deeply by American workers. In the months that came after the stock market crashed, unemployment rose and millions of Americans lost their savings and their homes to foreclosure. More individuals took temporary jobs, households took on more debt, and union/worker protections declined. Increased poverty and economic hardships would impact education, future job opportunities, tightened credit standards, and income distribution in the long-term. This time of recession would not see an end until 2009, thanks to increased government relief plans and new regulations. While the U.S. suffered greatly, the resilience of American workers has been proven time and time again.

2000

Y2K

Y2K is the shorthand term for "the year 2000" which referenced a period of short-lived paranoia regarding the ability for computer programs to recognize new dates from 2000 (represented as "00") as distinguishable from 1900. It was assumed that computers would fail to adjust their calendar systems, display data incorrectly, and crash. Thankfully, when January 1, 2000 came and went, few problems actually arose.

The whole debacle is often simply attributed to fearmongering and exaggeration, however, adequate government outreach and the hard work of software engineers sought to ensure readiness and dispel anxiety. Programmers developed new software marketed as Y2K compliant which surged in sales right before January, subsequently attributing to the dot com bubble in early 2000.

NAFTA

The North American Free Trade Agreement was signed between the United States, Mexico, and Canada on January 1, 1994. It sought to eliminate tariff (taxes on exports) barriers, remove investment restrictions, establish industry standards, and improve international trade. While small businesses were meant to benefit, fear grew throughout the US that manufacturers would leave the US, or that previously American-held jobs would go to migrants to take advantage of cheap labor. Greater demand for foreign products, like avocados, and fewer tariffs made Mexican products more appealing, so jobs left America and went to Mexico simply because of the price of labor.

While trade (and trade deficits) grew between the three countries, the personal repercussions were felt deeply by thosein manufacturing communities. The changes happened gradually until individual jobs and entire communities were affected. It's difficult to say whether the loss in jobs was directly due to NAFTA, yet disagreement with the policy increased and was exacerbated by the economic recession as time went on.

Tech Bubble

Throughout the '90s, what is known now as the Tech Bubble was gradually built up as growing internet businesses, traffic, and success encouraged investors to eagerly fund internet companies. These backers based their confidence in technological advancements and willingly overlooked metrics of success, which drove stock prices in these companies high above their actual value. Fevered entrepreneurship and "Get Big Fast" marketing schemes allowed venture capitalists to sell their stocks at high prices and make lots of money without the actual economic success of the company.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average peaked on January 14, 2000, at 11,722.98 points and the NASDAQ peaked on March 10, 2000 at 5,048.62—neither would return to this height for several years. The bubble was bound to burst, and it did. By 2002, the NASDAQ had dropped 78%, to 1,114 points. Stock prices fell, investors stopped funding and were forced to sell, and trillions of dollars in wealth vanished. Many companies were forced to file bankruptcy. Investors and tech companies were driven to change their operation mentalities, and while the infrastructure to maintain the internet era remained, the burst of the Dot-Com bubble was regarded as the start of the economic recession.

Working Families

Working families in America saw several changes through the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Wage increases caused the bottom to grow closer to the middle, with fewer poverty-level workers; however, income inequality maintained the same trend, isolating the middle from both the top and bottom.

Stressors for these families included what is called the time crunch—an increase in workers per family and hours worked per week—and the challenge of balancing work and family. Greater income was met with the greater costs of transportation, childcare, and less leisure time. More families were collecting debt, and because of higher interest rates, that credit became burdensome once the payments outweighed other economic obligations.

According to *The State of Working America 2000-01*, from the Economic Policy Institute, which offers a biennial examination of economic data and its impact on the American people, "The United States has the most unequal income distribution and one of the highest poverty rates among all the advanced economies in the world. The U.S. tax and benefit system is also one of the least effective in reducing poverty" (Bernstein, Schmitt, Mishel, 2001).

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