

SWEAT

The Pulitzer Prize-Winning Play by LYNN NOTTAGE

Show Guide



Prepared by Paramount School of the Arts Staff

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Show Synopsis

Sweat is set in the city of Reading, PA. We open in 2008 with two men, Jason and Chris, each taking turns speaking with their parole officer Evan. Jason and Chris have been in prison since 2000. They were the best of friends, but something happened 8 years ago that completely altered the course of their lives. Flashback to 2000, we find ourselves in a bar seeing a group of people who work at Olstead's Factory.

Cynthia, Tracey and Jessie have all been at the factory for over 20 years. Cynthia a Black woman and her son Chris work at the factory together. Tracey is a white woman whose son Jason also works at the factory. Cynthia and Tracey are best friends, and their sons Chris and Jason are best friends too. We meet Stan, our resident bartender. Stan used to work at the factory before an injury to his leg forced him out of his job. We learn that most of the people who work at Olstead's have generations of family members that work or have worked in the factory. Working at Olstead's is one of the most coveted jobs you can have in Reading, PA.

Cynthia's husband Brucie works at a different factory in town, and he has had a rough few months. His factory is trying to run the union workers out, even turning down offers like everyone taking a 50% pay cut. They want all union workers to cut their benefits, and they've even gone so far as to lock workers out of the factory. Brucie is struggling not only with his job, but his sobriety, which has hit his whole family hard.

He had hoped to put in his time at the factory, and to one day retire with a great pension, just like his father.

While Olstead's is not in the same position as Brucie's factory, it's heading in the same direction and the women are starting to notice changes at Olsteads.

Cynthia and Tracey both put their names in for a promotion, hoping that having someone from the floor move to management will help prevent Olstead's from moving in the same direction as other local factories. Unfortunately, this promotion will be the start of things unraveling for the best friends.

Cynthia gets the promotion over Tracey, and rather than celebrate her friend's success, Tracey credits Cynthia's promotion to her race. She claims, "I betcha they wanted a minority. I'm not prejudiced, but that's how things are going these days." Tracey becomes aggravated when the busboy at the bar, Oscar, shows her that Olstead's is promoting job openings at the Latino Community Center in town. For decades the rules have been that only union workers could work at Olstead's. And not only that, you had to know someone on the inside to even get a job, so it can't be that Olstead's is advertising jobs at the Latino Community Center! Working at Olstead's used to be one of the most coveted jobs in all of Reading.

As the factory owners begin to explore how to cut costs, they plan to negotiate worker's contracts with a 60% pay cut and a concession on benefits. The owners even consider possibly moving the factory, leaving a lot of the people in town feeling left behind. Tracy and Jessie are rightfully outraged, while Oscar has crossed the picket line to take on some temporary hours at Olstead's. Stan tries to keep the peace while also urging Jason and Chris to move on and leave Reading. Tensions continue to rise, culminating in an event that shatters the course of everyone's life.

The Regulars

At the Bar



Evan (Bryant Hayes): Evan is an African American man in his forties; in 2008 he is Chris and Jason's parole officer after they're released from their eight-year prison sentences.

Jason (Gage Wallace): Jason is a young, white man of German descent; he's Tracy's son and Chris's best friend.



Chris (Emmanuel K. Jackson): Chris is a young African American man; he's Cynthia and Brucie's son and Jason's best friend.

Stan (Randy Steinmeyer): Stan is a white man of German descent and he's our bartender. Stan used to work on the floor at Olstead's for 28 years before losing part of his leg in an accident.





Oscar (Jordan Anthony Arredondo): Oscar is a young Columbian American man and he's the busboy at our bar.

Tracey (Linda Gillum): Tracey is a middle-aged white woman of German descent; she's Jason's mom and best friends with Cynthia and Jessie.



Cynthia (Shariba Rivers): Cynthia is a middle-aged African American woman; she's Chris's mom and best friends with Tracey and Jessie.

Jessie (Tiffany Bedwell): Jessie is a middle-aged Italian American woman; she's a close friend and co-worker of Tracey and Cynthia.



Brucie (Joshua L. Green): Brucie is an African American man in his forties; he's Chris's father and Cynthia's estranged husband.

Lynn Nottage Biography

Lynn Nottage, the writer of *Sweat*, was born November 2nd, 1964 in Brooklyn, New York. Her mother was a schoolteacher and her father was a child psychologist. Nottage received a Bachelor's in Arts degree from Brown University in 1986 and obtained a Master's in Fine Arts degree from the Yale University School of Drama in 1989.

Nottage's works portray rarely-captured moments in American history that revolve around complex issues in society with the lives of working class African American women in the early 20th Century.

Sweat portrays themes of identity, politics, and race by telling the story of working class people in Reading, Pennsylvania who are laid off from their jobs during the de-industrialization of the town, causing a huge swath of working class folks to be out of a job. People who for two or three generations made really good livings, solidly middle class and union jobs, suddenly out of work.

Nottage won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2009 for *Ruined* and again in 2017 for *Sweat*. She is the first woman of any race to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice since the Pulitzer Prizes were established in 1917.

Nottage is also the second playwright of color to have won the prize twice. The research for *Sweat* was conducted just a few hours' drive away from Brooklyn, in Reading, Pa., which was ranked the nation's poorest city in 2012.

“I found it really fascinating that one of the poorest cities was in the Northeast, because we usually think of the Rust Belt, we think of the South, but this poverty is so close to us,” Nottage says. The people of this former steel and textile town at first felt quite far from her: Reading (pronounced “redding”) is home to a lot of white supremacists, if swastika and Iron Cross tattoos are any guide. But sitting in a room with these unemployed men, Nottage says, “What surprised me was my ability to empathize with people who I always thought were on the other side of the divide. When you interview black and Latino folks, there is a narrative that has existed for the last 50 years of being sort of disaffected from the culture. But I sat in rooms with middle-aged white men and heard them speaking like young black men in America—they feel disenfranchised, disaffected.” Sweat follows two generations of employees at Olstead’s, a local plant that begins to lay off workers in 2000, in the wake of NAFTA, and by 2008 has all but shut down. The downturn frays friendships along generational and racial lines and irrevocable violence erupts.

NAFTA

While NAFTA is only mentioned briefly in Sweat, this bill had a huge impact on the core setting of our play.

NAFTA, or the North American Free Trade Agreement, was implemented to promote trade between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. It went into effect on January 1st, 1994. The agreement reduced or eliminated most tariffs on trade between the three countries. It also removed investment restrictions and protected intellectual property rights. Finally, its provisions addressed environmental and labor concerns, attempting to establish a common high standard in each country. NAFTA was a controversial agreement, it improved the U.S. economy in ways of trade growth and investment, but hurt the U.S. economy in the areas of employment and balance of trades.

About one-fourth of all U.S. imports, such as crude oil, machinery, gold, vehicles, fresh produce, livestock, and processed foods, originate from Mexico and Canada, which are, respectively, the United States' second- and third-largest suppliers of imported goods, as of 2019. In addition, approximately one-third of U.S. exports, particularly machinery, vehicle parts, mineral fuel/oil, and plastics are destined for Canada and Mexico.

Check out the table below for a few pros and cons of this bill.

Pros	Cons
A spurred surge in cross-border trade and investment	Caused loss of manufacturing jobs, especially in certain industries
Increased competitiveness of U.S. industry	Increased inflation in the U.S.
Opened up opportunities for small businesses	Increased U.S. trade deficits
Implemented universal, higher health, safety, and environmental standards	May have spurred Mexican immigration

Whether NAFTA helped the U.S. economy is a matter of some debate. Certainly, trade between the United States and its North American neighbors more than tripled, from roughly \$290 billion in 1993 to more than \$1.1 trillion in 2016. Cross-border investments also surged, and U.S. GDP overall rose slightly.

But economists find it's been tough to target the deal's direct effects from other factors, including rapid technological change and expanded trade with countries such as China. Meanwhile, debate persists regarding NAFTA's effect on employment (which was badly hit in certain industries) and wages (which largely remained stagnant).

Glossary

There might be a few unfamiliar terms in this play, check out those definitions below!

Rectory: a rector's house. A rector is a member of clergy in the Episcopal Church who has charge of a house.

Aryan Brotherhood: The oldest and most notorious racist prison gang in the US, started in California in the 1960's. Members have come to use a variety of symbols, but most common is a shamrock in combination with a swastika.

Chablis: a dry, white, burgundy wine from Chablis in Eastern France.



Nike Flightposite: popular Nike shoe design.

Moxie: force of character, determination or nerve.

Gimlet: a cocktail of gin (sometimes vodka) and lime juice.



Carhartt: a clothing company directed towards blue-collar working class individuals. Often constructed from heavy-weight cotton fibers in neutral colors, the garments are designed to withstand the toughest of conditions.

Green Stamps: Trading stamps. The most popular of the trading stamps that shoppers collected from the end of the 19th century - 1980s were S&H (Sperry & Hutchinson) Green Stamps.

Supermarket chains, department stores, service stations, and retailers bought the stamps, then gave them to shoppers in quantities and denominations based on how much the shoppers spent in the store. The object was to create customer loyalty. Shoppers then cashed in the stamps at redemption centers or by mail and received household and sporting goods as well as other items.

Catching Shade: shade is a subtle, sneering expression of contempt for or disgust with someone.

Buena Suerte: Good luck in Spanish.



Arepas: a flat, round, cornmeal cake popular in Central and South America, particularly Columbia and Venezuela. Resembles English muffins and are made with various toppings or fillings.

Discussion Questions

- What was your initial reaction to *Sweat*?
- Did any characters resonate with you and why?
- What is Lynn Nottage's message about the nature of the middle class in modern America?
- Examine the effects of stress on the play's characters and the coping methods each character uses to deal with emotional turmoil. Which characters' methods are effective, which are ineffective?
- How do the following themes show up throughout the play? Is one theme more prevalent than another? Did your perspective on the themes change after viewing *Sweat*?
 - Working Class Disillusionment
 - Relationships, Status, and resentment
 - Economic Strain and Race Relations
 - Shame, Regret, and Forgiveness
- In what ways does shame specifically influence the attitudes or decisions of each character? Conversely, how does pride shape the attitudes and decisions of the characters in the play?
- What questions do you still have about *Sweat*? If you had a chance to ask Lynn Nottage any question, what would you ask?

Continue Learning

Sweat deals with many complex and serious topics that you may want to revisit and learn more about. Check out our recommended articles or episodes to keep learning!

- The article “How Lynn Nottage, Inveterate Wanderer, Found Her Way to Reading and ‘Sweat’” gives you more backstory on our playwright, Lynn Nottage, and her journey researching and writing this show.
<https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/07/10/how-lynn-nottage-inveterate-wanderer-found-her-way-to-reading-and-sweat/>
- The New York Times article “Reading, Pa., Knew It Was Poor. Now It Knows Just How Poor.” gives you some insight to the financial state of many residents in the city our play is set.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/us/reading-pa-tops-list-poverty-list-census-shows.html>
- The article “The call to occupy Wall Street resonates around the world” covers the protests calling to “Occupy Wall Street” that we just starting up when Lynn Nottage was beginning her research and writing of *Sweat*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/19/occupy-wall-street-financial-system>
- The article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” is an edited down version of Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” essay, where the American feminists and anti-racism activist explores various hierarchies interlocking in our society. https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf

- The articles below look at protests from 2019 in Canada that mirror the struggles our factory workers endure in *Sweat*.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/yellow-vests-canada-alberta-1.4974721> <https://www.toronto.com/news-story/9140430-take-our-poll-unifor-president-jerry-dias-vows-to-continue-protest-at-gm-headquarters-blockade-in-oshawa/>
- This episode of the Podcast “The Daily” called “Who Do You Want Controlling Your Food” discusses our current beef prices and how those profits are not trickling down to ranchers, shining a light on workers in America.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/podcasts/the-daily/beef-prices-cattle-ranchers.html>

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"Sweat Themes." *LitCharts*, Lynn Nottage Playwright, 2022 <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/lynn-nottage-sweat/themes>

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