Sweat
by LYNN NOTTAGE
directed by TAMILLA WOODARD
July 16 – August 21, 2022
McGuire Proscenium Stage

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“Do you know what it’s like to get up and have no place to go? I ain’t had the feeling ever. I’m a worker. I have worked since I could count money. That’s me.”

- Tracey in *Sweat*

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**About This Guide**

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

**NOTE:** Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for additional content.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Thanks for your interest in *Sweat*. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
Synopsis

In 2008, two young men, Chris and Jason, meet with their parole officer in Reading, Pennsylvania. They’ve recently been released from prison, and running into each other deeply affects them. The play then jumps back to January 2000 when three friends are gathered at the local bar in a well-worn ritual to celebrate a birthday. Jessie, Cynthia and Tracey work at Olstead’s metal tubing factory — good jobs with a long history in Reading. Stan, the bartender, knows everyone from his days at the factory before he suffered an on-the-job injury. Keeping the tradition going, Cynthia and Tracey’s sons, Chris and Jason, also work at the factory, but they each have different dreams for their futures.

As the economy changes and NAFTA takes its toll, things are no longer as stable as they once were. Local companies have layoffs and lockouts, and rumors fly about changes at Olstead’s. But Reading is a union town, and everyone has faith in the union’s strength. Months later, after Cynthia is promoted to warehouse supervisor, cracks form in decades-old friendships and the rumors prove to be true. The events that follow test years of loyalty, and a moment of violence comes at a terrible price.

**SETTING**
A local bar and various places in Reading, located in Berks County, Pennsylvania, in 2008 and 2000.

**CHARACTERS**
- Tracey, an employee at Olstead’s
- Cynthia, her best friend, also works at Olstead’s
- Jessie, their friend and fellow employee at Olstead’s
- Jason, Tracey’s son
- Chris, Cynthia’s son
- Stan, a bartender
- Oscar, a barback
- Brucie, Cynthia’s estranged husband
- Evan, a parole officer
Can a play be sympathetic to the plight of the displaced white, working-class workers of America while also holding that same group fully accountable for its defensiveness, myopia and well-documented racial prejudices?

It’s hard. Most writers pick a side. ...

But playwright Lynn Nottage’s potent and powerful Sweat, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2017 ... comes closer than any recent play to attempt to voice the feelings of (in this case) union workers in a Pennsylvania steel town in [2000], long-serving folk whose decent contract is slowly whittled away by a company salivating over the savings promised by the North American Free Trade Agreement. ...

Sweat is a piece about how these cruel bosses and their inhuman system of capitalist competition forces the various racial groupings of the working-class to feed upon themselves. And that the America we all now share is filled with the walking wounded from that bloody battle.

Chris Jones
“Sweat at Goodman Theatre,” Chicago Tribune, March 19, 2019

What Nottage captures brilliantly is the way work, however hard or demanding, gives people an identity and purpose. Tracey, who comes from a family of German craftsmen, is a militant unionist but bereft without employment. “Do you know what it’s like,” she asks, “to get up and have no place to go?” For the equally tough Cynthia, work is a means of advancement and her union card is a symbol of racial acceptance. Behind the play’s portrayal of the damage done to individual lives by what Nottage calls “the American deindustrial revolution” lies a wider picture of collapsing hopes and corporate ruthlessness. ...

I can’t think of any recent play that tells us so much, and so vividly, about the state of the union.

Michael Billington
“Breathtaking Drama About Life in the American Rustbelt,” The Guardian, December 20, 2018
As bars often are in old-fashioned and socially conscious dramas like Sweat, this one is a microcosm for a larger world. That includes not only Reading, Pa., the steel town where the play is set, but also a beleaguered part of the United States in which jobs are under siege and identity is fraying.

It is foolish to underestimate the anger in places like these, as the most recent presidential election confirmed. Though it takes place in 2000 and 2008, and one of its characters swears he will never vote again, 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.

For that reason alone, the arrival on Broadway of Sweat, which originated at the fertile Oregon Shakespeare Festival and was previously staged in New York at The Public Theater, warrants serious applause. So does the fact that it marks the belated Broadway debut of Ms. Nottage, a justly acclaimed dramatist of ambitious scope and fierce focus.

Ben Brantley
“Theatre Imagines the Local Bar as Caldron,” The New York Times, March 26, 2017

Lynn Nottage’s Sweat, which opens tonight on Broadway after a run last fall at The Public Theater, is a lot of great things: a deeply researched case history of the collapse of labor in America, a useful guide to understanding our own chaotic political moment, and a worthy attempt to put serious material before a wider public in a commercial environment. ...

Critics frequently complain about the lack of serious theater on contemporary political themes in our diet, let alone theater that brings more than just one racial or socioeconomic perspective to bear. Nottage provides these things as generously as anyone has; indeed, even the black-white conflict of the play is complicated by the presence of a Colombian-American character who is mistreated by everyone. The playwright’s generosity may be part of the problem, though. As I wrote last year, there’s a checklist quality to the dramaturgy that begins to feel obligatory: white privilege, white nationalism, Rust Belt deindustrialization, the Whartonizing of management, the opiate epidemic — all, and many more, get their due.

But great drama takes place in the space between people. The interplay of ideas can of course be a part of that, but only a part. Characters aren’t pundits, and plots aren’t treatises. Nottage knows this; her 2003 play Intimate Apparel was profoundly human while still scoring its important points. In writing Sweat, she must have believed that the politics were too important to be bossed around by the personalities. But we shouldn’t be surprised, then, if the personalities sometimes refuse to work.

Jesse Green
“Theatre Tells But Doesn’t Show,” Vulture, March 26, 2017
From Reading to Broadway

By Morgan Holmes

2008: Oregon Shakespeare Festival commissions Lynn Nottage through its American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle program.

September 2011: Nottage reads a report in The New York Times on the 2010 U.S. Census, which reveals that Reading, Pennsylvania, has the most residents living in poverty for a population over 65,000. The 41.3% poverty rate is due to the loss of major manufacturing plants and other jobs, low education rates and economic changes.

October 2011: Nottage receives an email from a friend in dire financial straits. Together they participate in the Occupy Wall Street protests. Her interest in the “deindustrial revolution” and the impact of the 2008 financial crisis grows.

January 2012: Nottage takes her first trip to Reading and sees it as a microcosm of what is happening to small cities across the country. She spends two years interviewing residents, which leads to the writing of Sweat.

January 2014: The Guthrie receives a Joyce Award to support the commissioning of Nottage to write a second play inspired by her Reading research.

July 2015: Sweat premieres at Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

November 2016: Sweat opens at The Public Theater in New York City. Nottage receives an Obie Award for Playwriting and a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.

December 2016: Sweat is performed in Reading.

March 2017: Sweat opens on Broadway and receives three Tony Award nominations.

April 2017: Nottage wins her second Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Sweat, making her the first female playwright to win the award twice.

July 2017: Nottage and a team of artists produce This Is Reading — a performance installation in the abandoned Reading Railroad station. The project tells the story of the city’s past and points toward a hopeful future.


October 2018: The Public Theater’s Mobile Unit brings free performances of Sweat to 18 cities in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Performances and community engagement programming in Mankato, Rochester and St. Cloud are produced in collaboration with the Guthrie.

August 2019: Floyd’s premieres at the Guthrie.

November 2021: Floyd’s, retitled Clyde’s in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, opens on Broadway and receives five Tony Award nominations.

July 2022: Sweat is produced by the Guthrie.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This timeline originally appeared in the 2019 Floyd’s program and was updated for this production.
About Lynn Nottage

Lynn Nottage is the first, and remains the only, woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice (*Ruined* in 2009 and *Sweat* in 2017, which moved to Broadway after a sold-out run at The Public Theater).

Named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in 2019, Nottage brings her work to the Guthrie stage for the third time, following *Intimate Apparel* in 2005 and the Guthrie-commissioned *Floyd's* (now the Tony Award-nominated *Clyde's*) in 2019. Other plays include *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (Lilly Award, Drama Desk Award nomination); *Ruined* (Pulitzer Prize, Obie Award); *Intimate Apparel* (American Theatre Critics Association and New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards for Best Play); *Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine* (Obie Award); *Crumbs From the Table of Joy; Las Meninas; Mud, River, Stone; Por'knockers;* and *POOF!*

Nottage wrote the book for *MJ the Musical*, which featured the music of pop icon Michael Jackson and opened on Broadway in February 2022. She had two productions on Broadway during the same season (*Clyde's* and *MJ the Musical*) and was nominated for Best Play and Best Book of a Musical at the 2022 Tony Awards. Nottage also wrote the book for the musical adaptation of Sue Monk Kidd’s novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, with music by Duncan Sheik and lyrics by Susan Birkenhead. The world premiere played at the Atlantic Theater Company in 2019. In addition, Nottage worked with composer Ricky Ian Gordon to adapt her play *Intimate Apparel* into an opera, which also premiered in 2022 (after a two-year delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic) at Lincoln Center Theater. In conjunction with *Sweat*, she has also developed *This Is Reading*, a performance installation at the Reading Railroad station in Reading, Pennsylvania.

She is a writer and producer on the Netflix series “She’s Gotta Have It” directed by Spike Lee, a Dramatists Guild member and an Associate Professor at Columbia University School of the Arts. Awards include Tony Award nominations (*Sweat, Clyde’s, MJ the Musical*), a MacArthur Genius Grant Fellowship, Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award and PEN/Laura Pels Master American Dramatist Award, among others. Learn more at [www.lynnnottage.com](http://www.lynnnottage.com).
I am drawn to the interplay of voices on a stage. But I think mostly I write plays because I love the collaborative aspect of theater. A play begins with a solitary act, a few words and ideas typed across the computer screen. Those words then get interpreted by a director, by actors, by designers and finally by an audience. It is then that it becomes something more complicated and layered; it becomes the voice of many artists.

I find it exciting to sit through a production of one of my plays, knowing that I have a level of intimacy with the characters, but still not entirely sure who they will be from night to night. I almost always make discoveries about the play. An actress might lift her finger in a subtle way that suddenly and brilliantly elucidates the character or the audience might fall silent and that silence will resonate in unexpected way that opens a door for me. Someone likened writing a play and the collaborative process to skillfully introducing a topic at a dinner party. It’s fascinating to listen to how people respond to an idea, how they build upon it, deconstruct it, twist and turn it until it becomes their own. I write plays because I find a lively conversation more informative and engaging than an evening alone with my computer and a glass of wine.

“The Next Stage”
Baltimore Center Stage, February 2004

I think that things that I’m attracted to as a writer tend to be slightly more absurd. We all look at the world through our own particular filters, and when I process stuff, that’s how it comes out. Some people process stuff and it comes out in these really sort of compact cubes in which all the corners are perfectly lined up. That’s not true for me.

“Down the Rabbit Hole With Lynn Nottage”
Sonya Sobieski, The Brooklyn Rail, June 2004
I think that the gift that I have received most often in my life is a copy of *A Raisin in the Sun*. I remember getting the first copy maybe when I was twelve years old from my mother’s friend who was a writer. I had expressed an interest in writing, and she gave me a copy of *A Raisin in the Sun*. I can’t even remember who she was, but I distinctly remember the gift. Thereafter I would receive a copy of that play as a gift about every three or four years. I would open up the wrapping paper and there it would be. I guess God was trying to send a message to me.

As a result, I think it is the play that has had the greatest influence on me, as I have read it at just about every phase in my life. I understand why it occupies a space in the literary canon. I remain completely in awe of its craft. And I aspire to create something as indelible and human as that play. It is the creative high bar.

Lorraine Hansberry became this fascinating character in my life because I was introduced to her so often by various people at different stages in my life. And at each stage the play took on a new urgency because I found I identified with the struggles and aspirations of different characters depending on where I was in my own emotional journey. I continue to find new resonance in the play every time I see or read it. It is one of the remarkable aspects of the play — it so thoroughly gives a full voice to each of the characters that you find your sympathies and allegiances constantly shifting and realigning themselves. It is a gift.

In the play *Sweat*, one of the characters says, “Nostalgia is a disease,” and I do believe that it’s a disease that many white Americans have. They’re holding on [to] this notion of what America was, even though we know it never was *that*. It’s this false notion of America. It was never great, at least from my point of view. It was always problematic. The “golden age” was for like a handful of people.

“I don’t write in opposition, so I never think, “Oh, I can’t write about that.” I know that there are some writers that do write that way; I think I just follow my imagination and things that really excite me and intrigue me. When you begin a play, you’re going to have to spend a lot of time with those characters, so those characters are going to have to be rich enough that you want to take a very long journey with them. That’s how I begin thinking about what I want to write about and who I want to write about.

“Lynn Nottage’s Sweat and Blood”
The time I was in graduate school coincided with the time that was a crucial moment in American social history. It was the AIDS Crisis and the Crack Epidemic. So in school we were losing students, we were losing professors. It was really hard to make art in that environment. It felt like there were many more urgent things that needed to be attended to. After I graduated from Yale School of Drama, I felt that I wanted to do something with impact. I went to work for Amnesty International, which at the time was the largest human rights organization in the world. I was a press officer and I spent four, intense, really concentrated years doing human rights work. In many ways the time I spent with Amnesty International became my second graduate school.

During that time at Amnesty International, we were struggling with the notion that women's rights should be separated out from human rights. The organization wasn’t doing enough to address specific human rights abuses. ... I knew that there was nothing that we as an organization could do. But as a human being, I felt that I needed to respond. ...

So I closed my office door and I wrote a play. I had returned to playwriting and it felt really good. I arrived at a total synthesis of the human rights brain and the writing brain. I thought, I can do both things. I don’t know why I have to compartmentalize. For me, that was incredibly liberating.

“Lynn Nottage in Conversation With Elisabeth Vincentelli”  
A NYPL and LPTW Event, Parts I and II, Carole Di Tosti, February 6 and 8, 2019

My argument for theater is this: it’s the fact that it’s a community, that it’s an opportunity for us to breathe the same air and exchange energy and to have a really dynamic, vital conversation in ways that we can’t do in any other forum. That’s what I love, and I think it’s become increasingly rare.

In fact, one of my arguments for theater is to get rid of the lights onstage and to get rid of the proscenium and [theater] buildings and figure out how we can make theater in ways in which we aren’t dividing ourselves as much, in which theater is made in places where people actually live and breathe.

Theater is one of the few places we really get to process our American narrative in real time. I think of Sweat and Ruined and even Floyd’s [now Clyde’s]. As a theater artist, I can raise this conversation and then get immediate feedback. Sometimes that feedback is positive; sometimes people walk out and they’ll be angry. But at least I feel like we’re having a conversation.

“Playwright Lynn Nottage: ‘We Are a Country That Has Lost Our Narrative’”  
Sarah Crompton, The Guardian, December 2, 2018

I write about people who are marginalized because, as an African American woman, particularly now I am a middle-aged woman, I walk down the street and people will bump into me. To much of the population I am invisible. I had one experience, when I had my two children with me, and we were standing in line to pay, and this young white man stepped in front of me. I said, “Excuse me?” and he said, “Oh my god, I didn’t see you there.” He was speaking on a much larger basis than that. He didn’t recognize my presence, and I think that is why I write the stories that I write.

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In Conversation at the Guthrie Theater  
“Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage on why theater matters,” Minnesota Public Radio News, August 1, 2019
A Conversation With Lynn Nottage

It’s hard to talk about American theater and not mention Lynn Nottage. She’s a powerhouse playwright known for propelling the art form forward through unsung voices and untold stories. Many call her prolific, but that seems too small a word for a woman who has won two Pulitzers and was named one of *Time*’s most influential people of 2019. We asked her to share — in her own words — about playwriting, developing *Floyd’s* and dreaming up all those sandwiches.

*What advice did you find most helpful as a young playwright?*
Playwright August Wilson once told me, “A writer writes.” As a young writer, I was confused by that simple statement. But I now understand that he was wisely encouraging me to write every single day regardless of the outcome. Today, I tell young writers that succeeding in playwriting is a battle of attrition. The work doesn’t happen overnight and you have to spend time honing your craft. We live in an impatient culture that wants instant results. Too often, young writers abandon their voice before they’ve had time to develop it.

*Who helped you stay the course and develop your voice?*
There were two instrumental people who shaped me as a playwright. The first was my professor George Bass at Brown University. He was a playwright, director and founder of Rites and Reason Theatre, which celebrated the voices of African American theater artists. He taught me the essential ingredients of making theater — joy and ritual.

The second was Paula Vogel, who was also my professor and the first female playwright I ever met. Prior to her class, most of the plays I read in school were written by white men. I had to go well outside the academy to find plays written by women and people of color. So meeting Paula was a breath of fresh air. She was the one who encouraged me to consider being a playwright. Up until then, I thought it was a hobby and not a possibility for someone who looked like me.

*When a play idea sparks, which comes first: people, plot or platform?*
It depends. *Sweat* began with a commission from Oregon Shakespeare Festival to write a play that engaged with American history — specifically a
revolution. I didn’t know where to start, so I found my way through immersive research. I wrote By the Way, Meet Vera Stark, a play about an African American starlet in the 1930s, after watching a film series on Turner Classic Movies. I became acutely aware of the absence of strong, black females in film during that period, and I wondered about the fate of talented black actresses who dared to challenge the status quo.

What was the spark that became Floyd’s?
Floyd’s began as a conversation with Sweat, which takes place in Reading, Pennsylvania, where I spent a great deal of time interviewing residents. I wanted to write about the deindustrialization happening there, but I also wanted to write something fun, accessible and irreverent — hence Floyd’s.

Is it challenging to write multiple plays at once?
When I’m writing a play with weighty themes, I often have another play going — my side hustle — that becomes my escape. The plays are in conversation, but they demand opposite parts of my brain. With Sweat, I wanted to dialogue on an immediate, political and visceral level. With Floyd’s, I wanted to dialogue on a spiritual and emotional level. My research involved eating delicious food and chatting with a friend who owned an artisanal sandwich shop. I tasted things I love and came up with flavor combinations that felt delightful and unexpected. My favorite part of writing Floyd’s was imagining the sandwiches.

Tell us about the development process that led to Floyd’s.
Floyd’s was a commission from the Guthrie, so I was fortunate to hold developmental workshops here that helped me find the characters’ voices and dig into the play in a more expansive way. Writing at my computer is a solitary act where I spend time fully visualizing and exploring the play. But one of the best things about writing a play is the moment when you place the work into the hands of a director, actors and designers. They breathe fresh and different life into the piece, and I’m always delighted and surprised by what they discover.

You and Director Kate Whoriskey are longtime collaborators. What have you discovered together?
The first time Kate and I worked together was on my play Intimate Apparel. We instantly found that we shared a vocabulary and had fun making theater together. I feel incredibly blessed to have found an amazing collaborator I can depend on and who responds to my work. We’ve grown and evolved together. Floyd’s is our fifth collaboration, and working at the Guthrie with Kate is really quite special.

Tell us more about your research in Reading. Why did this community captivate you?
On my first visit, I assumed I would do a quick series of interviews and I’d develop a play. But I found that Reading demanded more attention. There was an air of despair, frustration and an overall sense of abandonment permeating the city, and I felt I couldn’t walk away. I was drawn to the honesty and spirit of the people and became invested in understanding their circumstances and how the economic downturn led to the city’s decline. It echoed what was happening throughout the country, and I wanted to fully understand the how and the why. What began as a simple trip became more than two years of immersion, and that engagement led to the writing of Sweat.

Yet my conversations with the people of Reading didn’t feel complete. So I created a massive performance installation with Kate Whoriskey and Tony Gerber called This Is Reading, which was based on our interviews and designed to help heal and engage the community through constructive and collective dialogue.

Floyd’s is the grace note in the Reading trilogy. It’s about formerly incarcerated people who have been marginalized and are unsure if they can reintegrate into society. They struggle until they realize they have all the tools necessary to rebuild their lives. I also think that’s true of Reading.

You often write about marginalized characters. Why is that important to you?
I’m an African American woman who is interested in writing plays through my own unique gaze. As someone who has had to embrace my outsider status, the characters I’m drawn to are the ones I understand.

Is playwriting a form of activism for you?
My parents were ordinary folks with activist impulses. I think that spirit of activism is deeply embedded in my work. It stems from my parents’ passion and my own experience working in human rights for several years. It’s in the DNA of who I am as a writer.
People, Places and Things

PEOPLE

Aryan Brotherhood
The nation’s oldest major white supremacist prison gang, founded in 1964 at San Quentin State Prison by Irish bikers to provide protection for white prisoners in newly desegregated prisons. It currently has approximately 20,000 members. Its motto is “blood in, blood out,” meaning it takes a violent attack on a rival gang member or a corrections officer to get into the gang, and death is the only way out.

Bradley
Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 2000 but lost to Al Gore. Bradley was a former basketball player: He won an Olympic gold medal in 1964, was named NCAA Player of the Year in 1965 and played 10 years in the NBA on the New York Knicks. He’s also a Rhodes Scholar.

James Garner
American actor known for his TV roles in “The Rockford Files” and “Maverick,” plus several movie roles.

Joni Mitchell
Canadian-American singer, songwriter and producer. She released her debut album in 1968 and went on to become a leading figure in her generation of musicians. Among her hits are “Both Sides Now,” “Chelsea Morning,” “Big Yellow Taxi,” “Woodstock” and “The Circle Game.”

Larry Holmes
American boxer and former heavyweight champion who actively competed professionally from 1973 to 2002. His professional record was 69 wins (including 44 knockouts) and six losses. Though a native Georgian, Holmes has lived in Easton, Pennsylvania, since 1957.

white hats
Many manufacturing and constructions sites have color-coded hard hats to help quickly identify who’s who and what skills are onsite. There may be some variation in the color assignments, but generally managers, supervisors, engineers and forepersons wear white hard hats.

PLACES

Albright
Private liberal arts college located in Reading, Pennsylvania, founded in 1856, making it the oldest institution of higher learning in Berks County. Named for German evangelical preacher Jacob Albright, the school offers certification programs in Early Childhood Education and Secondary Education.

ashram
A spiritual and yoga retreat, often led by a guru.

Atlantic City
A gambling resort city on the New Jersey coast, approximately two hours southeast from Reading via the expressway through Philadelphia, known for its casinos, boardwalk and beaches.

Berks
Berks County in southeastern Pennsylvania. Reading is the county seat of Berks, a mostly urban county of 411,000 people that includes 71 townships/boroughs and one city, though it also has farms and rural areas and is considered part of Pennsylvania’s Dutch Country.

botanica
A shop chiefly within a Hispanic community that sells herbs and traditional charms, amulets, oils and candles for religious and spiritual practice.
Centro Hispano
Also known as Hispanic Center, this social services organization serves greater Reading and Berks County and is dedicated to improving the quality of life for the Latinx population.

Colombia
A country in northwestern South America on the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea that includes the only land border (shared with Panama) with Central America.

hippie trail
A journey popular among hippies during the 1960s and 1970s from Europe through central Asia into south Asia, often ending (or starting) in India. The route could be done cheaply, sometimes by hitchhiking or taking buses. The exact path may vary, but in the play, Jessie names many of the typical hot spots: Istanbul (Turkey), Tehran (Iran), Kandahar and Kabul (Afghanistan), Peshawar and Lahore (Pakistan), and Kathmandu (Nepal).

Kodiak
The main community on Kodiak Island in the Gulf of Alaska, 250 miles southwest of Anchorage.

Myrtle Beach
Vacation resort city in South Carolina on the Atlantic Ocean featuring long, white, sandy beaches, approximately 600 miles south of Reading.

‘Nam
Short for Vietnam. The Vietnam War (1955–1975) was a military conflict between the communist government of North Vietnam (aka the Viet Cong) and the government of South Vietnam and its ally, the U.S.

parole office
An inmate begins a relationship with the parole board and its agents several months before release. Within 24 hours of release, a parolee meets with a parole agent and subsequently meets with the parole agent as often as parole conditions require.

rectory
Church-owned housing provided for a minister or priest.

Penn
A major east-west street in central Reading.

Pomeroy’s
Major department store in Reading, which had a landmark store at 6th and Penn Street built between 1892 and 1957, with 10 branches in other Pennsylvania cities and malls, plus one in New Jersey.

Puerto Ricans
Puerto Ricans make up the largest subgroup of the Hispanic population in Reading and Berks County.

Sneaker Villa
Local business based in Reading that eventually grew into a regional chain called Villa with 125 locations in 10 states until it merged with NTLR in 2017.

Tijuana
The second-largest city in Mexico (one of the participating countries in the North American Free Trade Agreement) located directly across the border from San Diego, California. Tijuana is one of the maquiladora export processing zones, where parts enter duty-free, get assembled in Mexico and then get exported back to the U.S. with only value-added duties paid. A company can move its business to one of these zones, pay local wages and abide by local safety laws, bring in their parts tax-free and export them with minimal extra cost. The percentage of exports from the U.S. to Mexico’s maquiladora zones in the first 10 years of NAFTA went from 39% to 61%.

Wharton
The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, with its main campus in Philadelphia, is a top-ranked prestigious business school offering undergraduate and graduate degrees, including a Master of Business Administration.

Whitner’s
Department store that originated as a dry goods store founded by C.K. Whitner in 1877 and established on Penn Street in 1883. A fire destroyed the first structure; a new building opened in 1911.

THINGS
arepas
A staple of Colombian food. There are nearly as many varieties of arepas and ways to serve them as there are bread, but these grilled or gridled cakes are typically made of white corn flour and served with butter and cheese or stuffed.
Carhartt
A workwear clothing company founded in 1889 by Hamilton Carhartt to create bib overalls for railroad workers.

Green Stamps
S&H Green Stamps, a loyalty rewards program of Sperry and Hutchinson Company from the 1890s to 1980s with peak use during the 1960s and 1970s. Participating retailers would issue stamps upon checkout, customers would collect them in little booklets and redeem them for items in the enormous S&H catalog.

Lockout
An employer-initiated work stoppage. When a contract has expired, a business may prohibit workers from returning to work until a new contract is negotiated. (For example, the 2022 MLB season was delayed because of a lockout of players as a new contract was worked out.) It's the parallel move that employers can make as opposed to an employee-initiated strike.

NAFTA
The North American Free Trade Agreement was negotiated by the George H.W. Bush administration and established in 1994 under the Bill Clinton administration to promote trade between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico, creating a free-trade zone among the three countries. Gradually, between January 1, 1994, and January 1, 2008, most tariffs and quotas were eliminated on products exported and imported among the three countries. Side provisions were intended to prevent businesses from relocating in search of lower wages and looser health, safety and environmental regulations.

Pretzels
Reading is the self-declared Pretzel Capital of the World, with the local industry dating to the 1860s. By 1948, Reading was producing a third of all pretzels baked in the U.S. These are most commonly “snack pretzels” (hard pretzels), but there are plenty of soft pretzel bakeries in Reading as well.

Rhythmic gymnastics
A sport within the larger umbrella of gymnastics that includes group and individual competition on the floor with a ribbon, hoop or ball.

Seven, eight dollars an hour
In 2008, minimum wage in Pennsylvania had just been increased a dime to $7.25 per hour, which remains the minimum wage in Pennsylvania today.

Strike
An employee-initiated work stoppage used as a negotiating tactic to pressure an employer into terms favorable to employees during contract negotiations.

Steel tubing
Tubes that may be round, square or rectangular and vary in dimensions, thickness and length. Steel tubes are usually used for structures like scaffolding (as opposed to pipes, which are used for transporting liquids and gases).

Union
A trade or labor union represents workers, often by specific industry or trade, and collectively bargains with an employer for wages, working conditions and other benefits on behalf of the workers.
Reading’s Cyclical Economy

Reading, the county seat of Berks County in southeastern Pennsylvania, took its name from the city in Berkshire, England, and gave its name to the railroad made famous in the board game Monopoly. That railroad helped establish Reading’s textile and steel industries and make it the fourth-largest city in Pennsylvania. The city later became known for its outlet shopping and as the self-declared Pretzel Capital of the World. As these news excerpts indicate, Reading’s fortunes have risen and fallen as local, national and global factors buffeted its economy.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

A Garment Factory’s Slow Death
At 1:10 p.m. last Tuesday, the knitting machines inside the Talbott Mill fell silent. ... Friday was the final day for [Supervisor Stanley] Boyer and 40 other workers in the knitting shop, the first section of the mill to be phased out. By the end of the year, the entire Talbott Knitting Mill will close, leaving 450 garment workers out of work. Talbott, a division of U.S. Industries Inc. of New York, has reigned for 30 years as one of the largest garment-making factories in both Reading and Pennsylvania. ...

In the last decade, the textile and garment industries have suffered steady attrition as production moved to factories with lower costs. Before, most of the work was finding its way to non-union companies in the South. But now, foreign competitors are seizing an increasingly larger share of the market.

Jennifer Lin, June 26, 1984

The New York Times

Day by Day Economics as Seen in Reading, Pa.
Throughout the nation, from automobile factories to dairy farms, businesses and workers are hearing talk of recession and fearing its consequences on their lives. No one place is a perfect microcosm of the U.S. But the Reading area reflects both the weaknesses and the partly offsetting strengths of the economically floundering mid-Atlantic region. While its large manufacturing base tends to reflect contraction quickly, Reading’s economy as a whole is diverse, and occasional visits here may provide a look at how one city deals with difficult economic times.

Some analysts think recession has already put its clammy grip on Reading and the rest of Berks County. One important gauge is a drop in the amount of electricity used by industry. This proxy for industrial output has trailed 1989 levels in three of the last four months. And the unemployment rate, though below the national average, has climbed one and a half percentage points since September 1989.

Robert D. Hershey, Jr., December 5, 1990
USA: Dana Corporation Announces Plans to Close Reading, Pa., Facility

Dana Corporation announced today that it plans to close its structural products manufacturing facility in Reading, Pa. The specific date of the closure will be determined following discussions with officials of the United Steelworkers of America, Local 3733, which represents many of the workers in the facility.

Mike Greene, president of Dana’s Structural Products Group, said the closure of the 75-year-old plant reflects the continuing evolution taking place in the automotive industry. “The closing of the Reading manufacturing plant is a direct result of changes in automotive supplier logistics requirements. Manufacturing efficiency now requires that our facilities be located closer to our customers’ operations,” he said. “Global competitiveness, coupled with the requirement to serve our customers’ evolving needs, led to the decision to close the facility.”

bcusack, August 23, 2000

Pennsylvania Stagnation: Is NAFTA the Culprit?

There is no doubt that American manufacturing has been hard hit by globalization. Between 1967 and 2000, manufacturing employment went up or down with the business cycle, but never dipped below 16.5 million workers. Since 2001, the U.S. has lost 3.4 million manufacturing jobs and employment dipped below 14 million.

Pennsylvania manufacturing has been even harder hit, with 208,000 jobs lost — a 24 percent decline — in the same period. Overall employment growth in the state continues to lag that of the rest of the country; jobs in the nation as a whole have grown three times as fast as jobs in Pennsylvania.

Furthermore, real median wages in Pennsylvania fell 2 percent between 2001 and 2007.

Robert E. Scott, April 17, 2008

The New York Times

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

Reading, a struggling city of 88,000 … 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. …

Now it is No. 1, a ranking that the mothers at the day care center here say does not surprise them, given their firsthand 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.

Sabrina Tavernise, September 26, 2011
For Further Reading and Understanding

PLAYS BY LYNN NOTTAGE


Crumbs From the Table of Joy and Other Plays, Theatre Communications Group, 2003.

Intimate Apparel and Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine, Theatre Communications Group, 2006.

Ruined, Theatre Communications Group, 2009.

By the Way, Meet Vera Stark, Theatre Communications Group, 2013.


Sweat, Theatre Communications Group, 2017.

Ruined, Theatre Communications Group, 2019.


BOOKS ABOUT LYNN NOTTAGE


ARTICLES


www.americantheatre.org/2015/07/10/how-lynn-nottage-inveterate-wanderer-found-her-way-to-reading-and-sweat

“Lynn Nottage: ‘Nostalgia is a disease many white Americans have’” by David Smith. The Guardian, February 17, 2016.

www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/17/lynn-nottage-sweat-donald-trump-bernie-sanders


www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/lynn-nottage-sweat


FILMS

This Is Reading by Market Road Films. A documentary about the performance installation created by Lynn Nottage and a team of artists in an abandoned railroad station in Reading, Pennsylvania. The piece weaves resident stories into one cohesive and celebratory compelling tale of the city. 2018. 55 minutes.

American Factory by Higher Ground Productions. A documentary about the arrival of a Chinese company that opens a factory on the location of a shutdown General Motors plant in Ohio. The promise of jobs and the renewal to the community they offer give way to frustration on both sides as Chinese management encounters an American workforce. 2019. 115 minutes.

RADIO AND PODCASTS


www.arts.gov/stories/podcast/lynn-nottage#transcript


www.mprnews.org/story/2019/08/01/lynn-nottage-on-importance-of-theater