



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: "Sweat" Is (About) Hard Work

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SWEAT * 1/2 out of ****

PUBLIC THEATER

The ironic tragedy of this working class drama is that it begins in 2008 and flashes back to events of 2000. Factories shut down, workers fight for scraps or turn to drugs, anger leads to despair...and it all ends in 2008, just when the Great Recession is unleashing its fury. History is almost laughing at these people who see the wreckage of NAFTA and can't imagine things getting any worse.

Hard times can inspire high art. But just as often it can create events so overwhelming that art goes out the window in favor of burning issues. As often happens we have multiple pieces inspired by the crushing burden of a changing economy. Sometimes the happenstance can be good: one can have two biographies of Napoleon come out within weeks of each other or two movies about kids switching bodies with adults or in this case two plays about workers that echo each other in various ways. Sometimes the comparison can be unfavorable, which is a shame, since art is not a competition.

Nonetheless, it must be said that *Skeleton Crew* by Dominique Morisseau has lingered in my mind for months while my appreciation for it grows. And the superficially similar *Sweat* wears out its welcome even before it ends on a note of almost embarrassing bathos. It's hard to believe this is from the writer and director (Lynn Notage and Kate Whoriskey) that gave us the brilliant Pulitzer Prize winner *Ruined*. It happens, especially when good intentions supplant craftsmanship. They will undoubtedly do good work again, soon.

It begins in 2008 with two young men meeting separately with a parole officer. They're trying to adjust to the outside after some unspoken crime, an act that is left unnecessarily murky until the climax. This murkiness — refusing until the end of the play to let us know what they did and what stands between them and their one-time friendship, not to mention what they need forgiveness for, if anything — is a cheap form of suspense, withholding information from the audience that everyone in the show is fully aware of all along.

Soon we flash back to 2000 when the two young men — one black and one white — are fast friends. They and their moms work the line at the local factory during the day and down beers at the local dive at night. They all curse and fight and make up and then go to work in the morning, sober or drunk. But the crushing

economy is taking its toll. One young man's dad is out on strike and then sinking into drugs and despair. The days also seem numbered for the factory still running (others have shut down or moved to Mexico). Rumors abound of closings and ownership demanding massive salary cuts and the ever-present threat of jobs going to non-union workers who will do the same labor for half the price and no benefits. And then they aren't rumors anymore.



(Photo copyright Joan Marcus)

I have purposely avoided the names of these characters. They are Characters and their speeches are Speeches. Their words feel underlined and their sentences have exclamation points. All of this brings out the worst in the actors, unfortunately. Still, some have good moments, especially Michelle Wilson, whose line-worker has easily the biggest growth of anyone in the play. Also pretty good are the bartender (James Colby) and the barback Oscar (Carlo Albán). Why? I think because they are allowed to stay mostly out of the way of the endless arguing or simply don't talk at all. In short, the more of the speechifying an actor had to deliver, the less appealing they seemed.

The confusion extends to other elements. The scenic design by John Lee Beatty included a lived-in bar that offered up dark vistas and back alleys for smoking with disarming ease. But the sound design (Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen, who both also did the original music) and projection design (Jeff Sugg) were a confusing mess. For historical context that was utterly unnecessary, many scenes began or ended with video or audio clips that were so brief and disjointed as to barely register. Adding to the unnecessary detail were constant

flashes of the day and month, as if it mattered remotely. It didn't, showing the play's inability to separate the important from the meaningless or the matters of burning importance to people involved in a labor dispute from the matters of the heart that would make a good play. And it cheats on the drama by hiding essential information from the audience. Everyone in the play knows what sent those two young men to prison but we don't find out until the end.

Nottage believes understanding *why* it happened is far more important than what happened, I imagine. (Tell that to the people whose lives they impacted.) And that's the purpose of her play. But it creates a mystery where none exists, ends the story exactly where it should begin (with the audience finally being told what has happened and then ready to see characters deal with it) and puts noble sweat and effort into a drama weighed down by heavy good intentions.

UNDER THE RADAR 2017

PUBLIC THEATER

The Public Theater's Under The Radar Festival takes place January 4-15. So why talk about it now? Because many of the shows featured at UTR have already been staged around the world. You can watch video clips, read reviews and get a damn good sense of which ones might appeal the most to you. Oh and tickets can be really cheap and if you actually wait until January, you'll find a lot of the hottest shows are already sold out or at least prove a lot harder to score.

So why wait? I'm excited by quite a few shows. 600 Highwaymen did *Employee Of The Year* in previously, which I enjoyed a lot. So they're a good bet for their new production called *The Fever*, even though it's rife with audience participation, which is my least favorite thing ever. Manual Cinema is bringing *Lula del Ray*, which has shadow puppetry and a western theme AND live music in the vein of Hank Williams, Patsy Cline and Roy Orbison? They had me at "shadow puppetry."

UTR could just as easily be called the International Under The Radar Festival since so many of the shows originate in other countries. From France, we're getting *La Mélancolie Des Dragons*, which has a cool title you can understand even if you don't speak French and a plot involving a heavy-metal theme park. (Yeah, there will be strobe lighting.)

And really snap it up immediately if you love musical theater: *Blueprint Specials* is a presentation of patriotic spectacles created by Broadway veterans like Frank Loesser in 1944 for the Army. They star Laura Osnes and Will Swenson and will be staged on the hangar deck of the Intrepid Sea, Air And Space Museum — and if it's half as much fun to see as it is to anticipate, it'll be great fun indeed.

UTR also includes concerts by the likes of Jomama Jones and PWR BTTM as well as events and eight other theatrical events I haven't even mentioned. Check 'em out.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

The Dudleys ** 1/2

Holiday Inn * 1/2

A Life ** 1/2

Love Love Love ** 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) ** 1/2

Sweat * 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.