

A PLAY GUIDE FROM THE DESK OF  
ASHLIE CORCORAN, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

# Sweat

By Lynn Nottage

*In partnership with Citadel Theatre*

October 18–November 18, 2018

STANLEY INDUSTRIAL ALLIANCE STAGE



# Notes from Ashlie Corcoran

A few years ago, I was lucky enough to see the Broadway production of *Sweat*, and I was entirely riveted by it. This piece is raw, passionate, and treats each of its characters with equal compassion and scrutiny. Shortly after I saw that production, it was announced that the play had won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. This would mark the second time this deserving playwright, **Lynn Nottage**, earned this award, making her the first woman to win it twice.

Nottage conceived of this play after hearing a cry for help from a friend who was unemployed and struggling to make ends meet. Nottage felt a desire to investigate poverty in America through a new work, and took to Reading, Pennsylvania, the poorest city in America at the time, to conduct some research and interview the residents. The result is this critically acclaimed and hugely relevant play about a group of friends and a community that is formed and dissolved amid the changing landscape of America.

This production of *Sweat* is a creative co-production with the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton. That means that after the show is built, rehearsed, and makes its

debut here in Vancouver this fall, it will then move to Edmonton for another run in January. It also means that half of the artists working on this production are from Vancouver, and half are from Alberta.

I am so grateful to the creative team behind this piece, who has worked diligently to breathe life into this strong piece of drama. **Marci T. House** championed this play to be a part of the 2018/2019 season, and



Ashlie Corcoran; photo by Mark Halliday

**Daryl Cloran** (Artistic Director, Citadel Theatre) and I asked **Valerie Planche** to direct. The incredible cast is comprised of **Lora Brovold, Chris W. Cook, Andrew Creightney, Alen Dominguez, Marci T. House, Anthony Santiago, Nicole St. Martin,** and **Ashley Wright**. The production team is Sound Designer **Mishelle Cuttler**, Costume Designer **Jenifer Darbellay**, Assistant Costume Designer **Alaia Hamer**, Set Designer **Shizuka Kai**, Lighting Designer **Daniela Masellis**, Voice Coach **Alison Matthews**, Assistant Director **Jay Northcott**, and Fight Director **Jonathan Hawley Purvis**. **Rick Rinder** and **Jenny Kim** make up the stage management team.

This is the Canadian premiere of this Pulitzer Prize-winning play, and I am thrilled that our Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage will house this incredibly timely and moving piece of theatre.

Enjoy!

Ashlie Corcoran  
Artistic Director



Costume illustrations by designer Jenifer Darbellay



# SWEAT

## **Synopsis** **(spoiler alert!)**

### ACT I

As the play opens, it's September 29, 2008, the period of the U.S. financial recession; on this particular day, the U.S. stock market experienced its largest ever single-day decline. Our setting is a parole office in the small, blue-

collar city of Reading, Pennsylvania. Evan, an African-American parole officer, talks to Jason, a Caucasian in his late twenties, recently released from prison. Evan tries to ask Jason about his current living situation, but Jason is deliberately laconic.

Evan is clearly fed up with Jason's attitude and his reluctance to provide a detailed update on his life. After much coaxing, Jason admits that he recently ran into Chris (African-American, the same age as Jason), which caused some tension. Evan urges him to speak to some of his feelings surrounding this. We infer from their

conversation that something happened between Jason and Chris—something traumatic. As Jason talks about this, Evan switches to speaking to Chris in a conversation taking place around the same time. Chris is also there to give Evan a status update. He describes his struggles in trying to find employment and overcoming the fact that he now has to check the “previously incarcerated” box on applications. Chris tells Evan that he ran into Jason, and relays the emotions that were stirred up as a result. He explains that after the initial surge of frustration and anger, the two men began to hug one another. Chris felt like he could “go home,” for the first time in eight years.

The next scene takes place eight years earlier, on January 18, 2000. Three women in their forties are dancing and drinking in a bar. They are Cynthia (African-American, Chris’s mother), Tracey (Caucasian, Jason’s mother), and Jessie (Caucasian, passed out face down at the table). The women are celebrating Tracey’s birthday, and are all inebriated to varying extents. Stan (Caucasian, in his fifties), the bartender, asks how Jessie will get home, but no one seems overly concerned; this is evidently not new for her. Cynthia announces that she is leaving because she has an early shift the next morning. Tracey convinces her to stay for another drink, as the conversation turns toward the women’s shared place of employment, a manufacturing plant called Olstead’s. Stan then asks Cynthia where Brucie is, and she replies that she wants nothing to do with him. She tells them that Brucie’s drug habit has worsened since he’s been out of work; he stole her Christmas presents and tropical fish tank one night while she slept. As they continue to chat, they mention other Olstead’s employees who have fallen on hard times since being laid off. It’s clear that things are not going well for workers at the plant. The trio share stories and rumours that paint a picture of a company cutting workers to save money and moving some of its

operations to Mexico. (Oscar, a Puerto Rican man, in his early twenties, who works at the bar, is present in the scene the whole time.) Jessie wakes up ready for another drink, though she is still extremely intoxicated. Stan refuses, and she becomes belligerent. Cynthia manages to get her under control and Oscar leads her to the bathroom. While Jessie is away, the trio discusses how her drinking has spiraled since her husband left. Though this impacts her work performance, they decide not to say anything since management is already “looking for reasons” to let them go. This reminds them that there will be a new management position opening up, and Tracey has heard that they may hire someone “from the floor.” Cynthia reveals that she is considering applying for the role herself. While Tracey is incredulous that either of them would ever be selected, she decides to apply as well. Stan, who worked at Olstead’s before injuring himself on duty, laments the fact that no one at the company cares about its employees any longer—not like they did during his youth. At this point, Jessie returns from the bathroom, in no better shape than before. She argues a little more with Stan over getting more alcohol, and Cynthia prepares to scold her on her behaviour. Cutting them off, Tracey pleads for everyone to just forget about work and enjoy her birthday. The scene ends in celebration.

February 10, 2000: Jason and Chris, eight years younger (early twenties) than when we first met them, are drinking in the same bar. Both young men are complaining to Stan about how difficult it is to make ends meet; they are also employed by Olstead’s. Chris reveals his plans to quit and attend school, which leaves Jason feeling hurt: he doesn’t want his friend to leave the plant, and is offended that he never brought it up until now. The tension leads Jason to make a racially charged comment to Chris. Chris graciously refuses to take the bait, and

instead tries to make Jason understand that he's sick and tired of the monotony of the floor at Olstead's. But there's more to it, too: Chris has caught wind of plans to replace many of the workers with "buttons," i.e., machinery. Jason brings up the "cruise to Jamaica" that the friends evidently dreamt of taking together, and insists that they are "a team." When Chris remains firm on leaving, Jason sulks a bit, then offers to buy Chris a shot.

March 2, 2000: Stan and Brucie (an African-American man in his forties, Chris's father) are in the bar, talking politics. Brucie is pessimistic about the voting options in the upcoming national election, and the conversation soon turns to work. At this point, Brucie has been locked out from his job at a textile mill for 93 weeks, after having rejected the employer's proposed terms. He wants to hold out, but is becoming discouraged. Stan recounts his story of getting injured. He describes

how the only time that Olstead's higher-ups called him in the hospital was when they were afraid he might sue; this is a memory about which he is clearly still bitter. In a moment of vulnerability, Brucie admits that he has no idea "what to do" with his life. He then shares a story about how a fellow union member accused "him" (meaning African-American people in general) of taking his job. Tracey, Cynthia, and Jessie enter the bar. Brucie is glad to see Cynthia, who seems angry that he is there. Brucie pleads with her for a chance to let him "talk to her." Cynthia refuses, and her friends insist that Brucie leave her alone. He persists, however, until Cynthia relents. She tells him that Chris was admitted at Albright, a local college, and urges him to call their son and congratulate him. He says he will, and she then tells him about the promotion for which she has applied. He then apologizes for his past behaviour and asks if he can stop by Cynthia's. She says no, but urges him to get clean and gives him a tender kiss. Tracey yells at him

to leave Cynthia alone, and Brucie becomes emotional and shouts back at her. Cynthia gets more upset, responding "no!" when Brucie pleads for another chance.

April 17, 2000: Tracey is smoking outside the bar when Oscar appears and asks her for a cigarette. She refuses, and the two bicker and swear at each other for a few moments. Then, Tracey gives Oscar a smoke and they start chatting more amiably. Oscar reveals that he too may soon work at Olstead's, after picking up their Spanish-language flier, inviting applications, at the



The cast. Costume design by Jenifer Darbellay. Photo by David Cooper

Latino Community Center. Tracey tells Oscar that it must be a mistake, as Olstead's is not hiring—and that if they were, they would only hire union members. He insists, and shows her the flier to prove it. She is in denial, and becomes angry at Oscar for being the bearer of bad news. She lashes out at him, and at the Latino community, for taking jobs that once belonged to families that had lived in Reading for generations.

May 5, 2000: Jessie is having a drink in the bar, waiting for the other ladies to show up to celebrate her birthday. As she waits, she tells Stan about Cynthia's promotion, noting a growing resentment towards Cynthia among the workers remaining on the floor. She mentions that Cynthia's race is believed by some to be the reason she was selected for the management position. Stan dismisses that idea; they change the subject. Stan cuts her cake for her and gives her a birthday kiss. Cynthia arrives late, seeming exasperated by her new role at work. Jason and Chris arrive, and join the party. Jessie talks about her younger, wilder days and expresses regret that she didn't end up doing much exploring before settling down at Olstead's. Finally, Tracey arrives. She is defensive when her friends chide her for being so late. There is palpable tension between Tracey and Cynthia. Later, it comes to a head and Tracey confronts Cynthia to find out what she knows about Oscar's flier. She has Oscar read it aloud, in English; everyone is stunned by this news.

July 4, 2000: Jason and Chris explain to Brucie, who is asking his son for money, that they are in a hurry because something is going on at the plant. Three of the mills were removed overnight, and they posted a list of names, of people to be laid off, on the door.

## ACT II

Oct 13, 2008: Chris arrives at Cynthia's house, revealing that he has been out of prison for six weeks already, without telling her. Things are a little strained between them. Cynthia says she is having trouble making ends meet, and now works several jobs. She also expresses anger towards Jason for getting Chris involved in the incident that landed them both in jail. Meanwhile, Jason is also visiting with his mother, Tracey. She does not seem happy to see him, and the two argue about money. Jason observes that Tracey is "strung out" on pain medication. She responds defensively, and after an argument Jason leaves.

July 17, 2000: At the bar, Olstead's workers confront Cynthia about growing evidence that the plant will be laying off more people. She tells them that she has tried her best to fight for them, but that there isn't much she can do. She advises them to accept Olstead's terms rather than strike.

August 4, 2000: Cynthia is alone at the bar. This time, it is her birthday, and she hopes her friends will show up despite the tense atmosphere at work. She tells Stan how much she regrets her decisions, but felt like she didn't have a choice in the matter. Tracey and Jessie enter, and Tracey mutters that Cynthia is a "traitor." She defends herself and again urges Tracey to take the "deal," while Tracey asks Cynthia to strike with them instead. Cynthia refuses, and tries to make Tracey understand how hard she's worked to get where she is. Tracey is not sympathetic, and Cynthia leaves.

September 28, 2000: Jason and Chris enter the bar to find Brucie stooped over a table. He is not in good shape and his family has been looking for him for a month.

Chris tells him that he has worried everyone, but Brucie reassures him that he's okay and changes the subject. They get to talking about work again, with Chris and Jason complaining about the temporary workers who are crossing the picket line to clock in at Olstead's. Brucie cautions them not to hold out too long, asking whether it's really worth it.

October 20, 2000: In the bar, Stan tells Oscar that he knows he "crossed the line" (i.e., the picket line) to begin working at Olstead's. Stan then tells him to be careful, since this will earn him the ire of many, including regular customers at the bar. Oscar responds that personal success matters more to him than the opinions of people who are not his friends or family. He then puts on his apron to begin work, ending the conversation. Tracey enters, looking disheveled. She tells Stan that she is still striking, receiving a small, unlivable wage from the union. He informs her that she can no longer keep a tab going, and must now pay for her drinks up front. Tracey complains until Stan offers to buy one for her. Oscar enters and Tracey is instantly aggressive toward him. Stan tries to get them to be civil, but Tracey tries to lunge at Oscar. Stan holds her back.

November 3, 2000: Jason and Chris are at the bar, describing a fight that broke out between them and some of the temporary Olstead's workers. Stan discourages this, and tells them that they are young and shouldn't waste all their time on this kind of conflict. They discuss some of their future options and start to feel more optimistic. Tracey emerges from the bathroom and asks her son to buy her a drink. Chris offers, instead. Oscar arrives to pick up his things, and Jessie (who has been sitting at her own table) calls him a "scab." Oscar heads into the back room to get his stuff. While he's gone, Jason calls him a racial slur; he and Tracey complain

about what they see as Latino workers taking over jobs owed to them. Stan asks them to stop blaming Oscar, but they continue to egg each other on. Chris manages to briefly calm down his friend, only to have Tracey get him worked up again. Oscar tries to leave, but Jason blocks his way. Stan and Chris try to convince Jason to back down, but instead he shoves Oscar. A fight breaks out. At first, Stan and Chris try to break up Jason and Oscar, but soon things devolve and Oscar head-butts Chris. Provoked by this, Chris begins punching Oscar. Then Jason gets a baseball bat and uses it to beat Oscar. Stan tries to stop him, resulting in him getting hit in the head with the bat. The scene closes with both Oscar and Stan bloody and unconscious. Jason and Chris flee, while Tracey cradles Stan in grief.

October 15, 2008: Evan alternately talks to Jason and Chris, and both men explain that they are having a hard time moving past the incident in the bar. Evan tells them they need to let go of their shame, or else it will dictate the trajectory of their lives.

October 18, 2008: Chris is at the bar, which Oscar now manages. At first, the two don't speak much to one another, but gradually they begin to open up. It seems like Chris is about to apologize, when Jason enters. Jason seems like he may turn and leave, until he notices Stan: he is severely disabled now and has difficulty moving. Chris says hello, but Oscar tells them that Stan's hearing is poor. It's clear that Oscar helps take care of Stan, which Chris commends him for. Oscar replies that it's "how it ought to be." Jason and Chris clearly want to make amends, but for now remain unable to say anything.



# Characters

## **Evan**

An African-American corrections officer, overseeing the cases of Jason and Chris.

## **Jason**

A Caucasian man, 21 years old in 2000, 29 in 2008; son of Tracey.

## **Chris**

An African-American man, 21 years old in 2000, 29 in 2008; son of Cynthia and Brucie.

## **Stan**

A Caucasian man in his fifties; bartender at the bar frequented by workers from the local factory, Olstead's, where Stan himself used to work on an assembly line before suffering a serious injury.

## **Oscar**

A Colombian-American man, 22 in 2000, 30 in 2008; employed as an assistant at the same bar as Stan.

## **Tracey**

A Caucasian woman, 45 in 2000, 53 in 2008; a long-time line-worker at Olstead's; mother of Jason.

## **Cynthia**

An African-American woman, 45 in 2000, 53 in 2008; a long-time line-worker at Olstead's, later promoted to a management position; mother of Chris; in a tumultuous, on-again/off-again relationship with Chris's father, Brucie.

## **Jessie**

An Italian-American woman in her forties, also employed at Olstead's.

## **Brucie**

An African-American man in his forties; a textile-mill worker, active in the labour union but often out of work due to strike actions; father of Chris.

# About the Playwright



Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1964, Lynn Nottage is one of the most celebrated American playwrights of her generation. Nottage attended Brown University and the Yale School of Drama. Her plays include *Intimate Apparel*, *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine*, *Ruined* (for which she won her first Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2009), *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, and *Sweat* (for which she won her second Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2017). In addition to her work as a playwright, Nottage teaches at Columbia University and recently served as a writer and producer for the Netflix series *She's Gotta Have It*, a TV adaptation of Spike Lee's film. For more on Nottage's life and career, see "Brooklyn and Beyond: The Work of Lynn Nottage" on page 14 of this guide.

# A Brief History of NAFTA

In a year 2000-set scene in Lynn Nottage’s play, Stan the bartender observes, “You could wake up tomorrow and all your jobs are in Mexico, whatever, it’s this NAFTA bulls—t.” To which Tracey responds: “What the f—k is NAFTA? Sounds like a laxative.” It is probable that by 2008—after her long-time employer shuttered its local plant and relocated elsewhere—Tracey would have gained a greater familiarity with the North American Free Trade Agreement, and its purported consequences for communities like hers. Yet, some who are now accustomed to hearing politicians argue for or against NAFTA may nonetheless remain somewhat unfamiliar with what exactly NAFTA is and what it was intended to do. This essay will provide a brief history of NAFTA, its origins, effects, and the controversies that it continues to generate.

The original impetus for what would become NAFTA can be traced back to Ronald Reagan’s first presidential campaign. Running in 1979 against the Democratic incumbent James (Jimmy) Carter, Reagan put forth the idea of a North American free-trade zone, highlighting in particular what he perceived as the significant benefits of more liberalized trade between Mexico and the U.S. Mexico, though, did not factor into the initial antecedent to NAFTA: The Canada–United States Free Trade Agreement was signed into effect on January 2,

1988, late in Reagan’s second term as president. This agreement was intended to “eliminate barriers” in the flow of goods and services between the two countries, as well as to “liberalize,” or de-regulate, cross-border financial investments.

In Canada, there was significant opposition to the planned agreement: during the 1988 federal election campaign, the Liberal Party of Canada and New Democratic Party challengers to then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney focused much of their criticisms on Mulroney’s support for free trade with the U.S. Americans, by contrast, were generally supportive of the agreement—or else unaware of it, with some polls showing that, in 1988, around four in ten Americans did not know such an agreement with Canada had been signed. In the years that followed, trade between the U.S. and Canada, which had been robust throughout the twentieth century, increased significantly. Prior to the agreement, exports had usually made up around 25% of the Canadian GDP; after 1990, they reached 40% and by 2000 around 50% of the GDP. Canada’s economy, long closely connected to America’s, had become virtually inextricable from it.

When the Liberal Party took over government in 1993, the newly elected prime minister, Jean Chrétien, promised to renegotiate the agreement. Canada’s House of Commons approved the plan negotiated by Chrétien’s government on May 27, 1993. The new U.S. president, Bill Clinton, likewise advocated for NAFTA and this agreement was backed by Congress, passing the U.S. House of Representatives by a 234–200 vote—receiving greater support from House Republicans than from Democrats.

Clinton, however, had to defend the NAFTA agreement against both labour leaders, who believed that North American free trade would lead to the demise of American industry, and right-wing businessman turned Independent presidential candidate H. Ross Perot, who particularly objected to Mexico's inclusion in the agreement, arguing that many U.S. jobs would be outsourced to Mexico. Other critics were specifically concerned with the potential environmental consequences of NAFTA, given that Mexico lacked many of the environmental regulations on industrial activity that then existed in Canada and the U.S.

Despite such criticisms, the new agreement, including Mexico, was signed by Clinton on December 8, 1993, and implemented on January 1, 1994. The NAFTA agreement eliminated tariffs on many products exported from Mexico to the U.S. and Canada, as well as on products moving south from the northern countries. While initially around one-third of exports were exempted from tariffs, the agreement stipulated that over a ten-year period more goods would gradually be classified as exempt until ultimately all products—notably, save for some agricultural exports—would eventually move tariff-free among the three countries.

Views among economists regarding the success and importance of NAFTA remain divided. There seems to be the greatest consensus regarding NAFTA's benefits for the U.S. One recent study, for example, argued that, despite some American jobs outsourced to Mexico, NAFTA critically helped the U.S. weather global competition from an economically ascendant China in the 1990s and early 2000s. While Canada, too, initially experienced losses in manufacturing jobs, the national employment rate has for the most part steadily improved since the turn of the twenty-first century.

There is perhaps less agreement concerning NAFTA's impact on Mexico. Some economists have held that NAFTA was responsible for the creation of a substantial Mexican middle class, and that free trade significantly improved the quality of life in areas with the closest links to the larger intracontinental economy. Others have emphasized that living conditions for Mexico's rural lower classes have only grown worse, due to the under-developed infrastructure preventing these groups from productively participating in the North American agricultural trade.

Criticisms of NAFTA, in the U.S. especially, have persisted in the decades since its implementation. Its most vocal opponents have included those in areas (like Reading, PA in *Sweat*) that were once home to many manufacturing jobs that have since been lost or much diminished, as well as environmental groups and leftist critics of neoliberal “free trade” and “globalization.”

The movement of people over national borders has also been a major concern, perhaps especially in America. Some of those concerns were addressed in a 2006 meeting in Mexico, attended by U.S. President George W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and Mexican President Vincente Fox. From this meeting, it was determined that Canadian citizens would be required to show passports or equivalent documents to enter the U.S., while stricter measures were put into effect to limit the number of Mexican migrants coming north.

However, these modifications did little to silence NAFTA's critics. During the 2016 U.S. election season, NAFTA became a ubiquitous topic of debate, as then-candidate Donald Trump's denouncing of

the agreement as unfair to blue-collar American workers helped him to win many votes among this demographic. By narrow margins, Trump won the crucial electoral votes of states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, which had been reliably Democratic in recent decades' presidential contests. Statistical studies of the 2016 election results have shown that it was the "white working-class vote"—a demographic that had historically, predictably backed Democratic candidates, perceived as more supportive of unionized labour than were Republicans—that tipped the scales for Trump in these states. Trump's insistence that NAFTA had to be renegotiated, or else scrapped, appealed to voters in the areas hit hardest by deindustrialization and the consequent loss of jobs.

Although some economists have persistently argued that the U.S.'s movement away from large industrial and resource-extraction sectors would have occurred with or without NAFTA (as it has in highly developed states around the world), "NAFTA" had become over time a short-hand, politically expedient explanation for the millennial shift in America's economy and job-stock. (Present-day critics of the agreement might well feel that Tracey's connotation of NAFTA, as a kind of laxative, wasn't far off the mark.) It remains to be seen whether NAFTA, in anything like its current form, will survive the years ahead; and if not, how its termination might impact the economies and political relations of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

# Brooklyn and Beyond: The Work of Lynn Nottage

In 2017, Lynn Nottage became the first female playwright to win a second Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play for which she won this award, *Sweat*, was widely recognized as “the first theatrical landmark of the Trump era.” Although it is set in 2000 and 2008 (moving back and forth in time) and premiered in 2015, well before Trump’s election, reviewers recognized Nottage’s sharp eye in observing the deep anxieties among the residents of America’s “Rust Belt.” The play’s setting of Reading, Pennsylvania—recently rated as the “poorest” American city of its size—was, seemingly, a world away from Nottage’s native Brooklyn, New York. *Sweat* was not her first excursion into *terra incognita*: *Ruined* (2008), Nottage’s first Pulitzer Prize winner, detailed the struggle of women in a small village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In both of these instances, Nottage was able to render the unfamiliar more readily understandable. Surveying Nottage’s remarkable career to date, this essay will chart the development of her keen powers of observation and intimate, empathetic storytelling.

Nottage was born in Brooklyn in 1964. Her mother worked as a schoolteacher and her father as a child psychologist. From a very early age, Nottage was interested in theatre, reportedly having written her first play at just eight years old. After attending St. Ann’s School in Brooklyn, Nottage transferred to the Harlem High School of Music and Art, a magnet secondary school for talented youths. Whilst there, Nottage penned a play entitled *A Darker Side of Verona*, centering on an African-American theatre company performing Shakespeare’s work. Nottage next pursued a Bachelor’s degree at Brown University, graduating in 1986, and a Master of Fine Arts degree at the Yale University School of Drama, completed in 1989. After this, Nottage spent four years working for Amnesty International, from which she gained a deeper awareness of global human and women’s rights issues; this experience would later inform her work as a playwright, as Nottage has often acknowledged.

By the mid-1990s, Nottage had established herself as an emerging dramatic talent, though not without some prominent detractors. Her short play *Poof!* was performed at the Actors Theater in Louisville, Kentucky, where it won the Heideman award, a cash prize presented for the best ten-minute play. Nottage followed this early success with *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*. Set in Brooklyn in the 1950s, this full-length work premiered Off-Broadway at Manhattan’s Second Stage Theatre in 1995. Although it received a somewhat dismissive review—accusing Nottage of a “studied imitativeness” in search of her “mature voice”—from Ben Brantley of the *New York Times*, most reviewers were more appreciative, and the play enjoyed subsequent runs in Costa Mesa, California, Chicago, and Baltimore. 1995 also saw the premiere of another brief work, *Por’knockers*, which Brantley called “a short,

ambitious, and very muddled new play.” Of her 2002 period comedy, *Las Meninas*, Variety’s Dennis Harvey wrote, “A lightly amusing, semi-burlesque costumier, [the play] doesn’t penetrate deeply into the hidden chapters of Euro-African colonization, but it does provide an entertaining two hours’ historical exotica.” Yet, with her next major work, Nottage was widely recognized as coming into her own as a distinctive voice among American playwrights. Set in New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Intimate Apparel* centers on a young African-American woman working as a seamstress. After premiering at Baltimore’s Center Stage in 2003, *Intimate Apparel* opened Off-Broadway at the Roundabout Theatre in 2004 with Viola Davis in the lead role, and it continues to receive regional productions throughout the country. For this widely lauded work, Nottage won the Steinberg New Play Award from the American Theatre Critics Association and the award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play from the Outer Critics Circle; Davis took home Best Actress honours from both the Drama Desk Awards and Obie Awards. 2004’s *Fabulation*, or *the Re-Education of Undine*—centering on an African-American publicist in Manhattan who, due to marital troubles, has to move back in with her parents in Brooklyn—continued this successful run, winning Nottage an Obie Award for Playwriting and earning a more admiring notice from the New York Times’ Brantley, who wrote that *Fabulation* “subverts its comic and sentimental glibness with punchy social insights and the firecracker snap of unexpected humor.”

**Nottage was widely recognized as coming into her own as a distinctive voice among American playwrights.**

Still, despite the considerable success of these plays, few would have predicted Nottage’s next act. Where most of Nottage’s previous plays had been set in her native New York City (albeit some in eras before her birth), *Ruined* took Nottage’s vision to the Democratic Republic of the Congo amidst the brutal civil war of the 1990s. Nottage had visited Africa in 2004 and whilst there interviewed women about their personal struggles during the war, including rape, genital mutilation, and public humiliation. For this project, Nottage’s earlier experience with Amnesty International combined with her strengths as a storyteller, creating a powerful play (loosely inspired by Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage*) that shows the terrible costs of such a war for the women living through it. After premiering at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre in 2008, *Ruined* began its Off-Broadway run at the Manhattan Theatre Club’s

New York City Center in 2009. This play received outstanding reviews; won top honours from the Drama Desk Awards, Obie Awards, and Outer Critics Circle Awards; and earned Nottage her first Pulitzer Prize for Drama. She followed this triumph

with 2011’s *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, a play about an African-American maid who becomes a New York theatre star. Intended partly as an homage to the screwball film comedies of the 1930s, this work was decidedly lighter than *Ruined*, but it was also well-received by critics and awards groups.

Nottage ventured beyond New York for the setting of *Sweat*. Although the relatively small (ca. 88,000),

formerly industrial city of Reading, Pennsylvania may seem rather less distant than the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nottage again—as she had for *Ruined*—conducted interviews with local people in order to better understand a culture that was significantly different from her own. This research provided her with more immediate insight into the concerns and fears of Americans living through a period of great change (the rapid-paced “globalization” of the early twenty-first century) and economic turmoil (culminating in the financial crisis of 2008) in an area of the country that was hit especially hard by these larger events.

*Sweat* had been commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and premiered in Ashland, Oregon in 2015 before moving on to Washington, D.C.’s Arena Stage and the Off-Broadway Public Theater in 2016. In 2017, it transferred to Studio 54, thus marking Nottage’s Broadway debut, and was nominated for three Tony awards, including Best Play. Upon awarding Nottage her historic second Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Pulitzer committee called *Sweat* “a nuanced yet powerful drama that reminds audiences of the stacked deck still facing workers searching for the American dream.”

Reviewers agreed, and particularly emphasized the play’s urgent relevance in the wake of Donald Trump’s election. Pundits scrambled to explain why upper-midwestern and northeastern states (like Pennsylvania), assumed by conventional wisdom to be Democratic Party strongholds, had shifted over to the populist Republican Trump. Nottage held a perceptive lens up to the blue-collar residents of these states, struggling to find and keep work, suspicious of foreign labour and free-trade agreements that resulted in the outsourcing of the jobs that once reliably paid their bills. Although the play is set between 2000 and 2008,

*Sweat* also captured the simmering racial tensions that would boil over during the Obama years, resulting in the deeply polarized election of 2016.

As a follow-up to the success of *Sweat*, building on the interviews that she had conducted, Nottage launched *This Is Reading*, described in the *Village Voice* as “a large-scale multimedia installation with live performances featuring local artists...an unabashed work of artistic activism.” Rather than New York (on or off Broadway), this work, intended as an addendum to *Sweat*, premiered at an old train station in downtown Reading, staged for three summer weekends in 2017.

While teaching at New York’s Columbia University and collaborating on film and TV projects, Nottage seems energized from her experience with *Sweat* and *This Is Reading* to produce more groundbreaking work for the theatre. If her latest play, 2018’s *Mlima’s Tale*—an examination of the African ivory trade that draws its formal inspiration from Arthur Schnitzler’s controversial sexual morality play *La Ronde* (1900)—is any indication, Nottage will continue to challenge and surprise audiences and critics, venturing to new settings and telling provocative, humane stories about the people who reside in those places.