

# “Sweat” Theatre Review: A gritty glimpse into the life of factory workers

“Sweat” is the epitome of working-class theatre, offering a gritty and raw look at the lives of factory workers struggling to stay afloat in an uncertain economy.

But, as explained by **Rachel Walshe**, who is directing the Lynn Nottage play at The Gamm now, “the great tragedy of ‘Sweat’ is not the collapse of the economy but rather the collapse of community.”

In 2000, several generations of factory workers in Reading, PA, are sufficiently employed and enjoy blowing off steam and celebrating birthdays together at the local bar, run by a man who was injured at the factory and left with a limp. They laugh, they support each other through marital stresses and addiction, and they get by.

But changes in the economy trigger shifts in their social pecking order that suddenly pick the characters up, shake them fiercely and toss them down. The fractures in this community deepen, and anger, hurt, and racism bubble. This continues as the barback at the local bar takes a factory job when union workers are let go, simply to improve his life, and one of a trio of female friends is promoted to management.

That’s when Nottage brings her audience to such a shockingly brutal climax that the silence is deafening in the room, and ensuing scenes in which one of the characters is so obviously disfigured and damaged by the incident prove heart-wrenching and gutting.

Walshe’s mastery in the director’s chair can be felt throughout this 2.5-hour production of “Sweat.” She ensures that the setting is so bland that it could be right outside the theatre door, and she coaxes powerful and compelling performances from a cast that balances Gamm veterans and talented newcomers.

Most importantly, the show deals with race, class, identity, poverty, and addiction in such even-handed, thoughtful, honest ways that no one issue is overpowering or underdeveloped. A hate crime in the second act brings the tension to a nasty head, but the production deftly sidesteps preaching at its audience. The message is clear enough in the action.



*Photo by Cat Laine. Left to Right: Conor Delaney as Jason, Erik Robles as Chris.*

“Sweat” features a long-overdue return of **Casey Seymour Kim** to the Gamm stage. As Tracey, she skillfully takes the audience on a tragic trajectory fueled by latent racist beliefs, loneliness, and economic frustration. She quickly turns on her friend, Cynthia, after the woman is promoted to manager, musing that she was chosen because she is Black. The vitriol, which fuels the life-altering climax, is ugly and Seymour Kim believably spews it.

**Steve Kidd** plays Stan, the crippled bartender, with a hearty dose of grit and resignation. **Jason Quinn**, who plays Cynthia’s estranged husband, gives a startlingly realistic portrayal of addiction and the conniving tactics addicts will employ to fool those close to them.

Other notable performances come from **Kym Gomes** as a hopeful, yet beleaguered, Cynthia. The reaction of her friends to her promotion weighs on her visibly, and her frustration with her husband is the right mix of love and disgust. And, **Erik Robles** turns in a sweet take on her misguided son, a man who finds himself paying for one stupid, hate-fueled mistake.

The show continues at Gamm through November 27. For more information, go to [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org).