



# VARIETY



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## BLUES TURNAROUND

### Steelworkers Mold Tough Times Into Legit Show In KCET Docu

By KATHLEEN O'STEEN

The 1982 closure of the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Vernon, California, has provided both theater and television a thought-provoking artistic piece performed by former steel workers.

Titled "Lady Beth: The Steelworkers Play," this theater piece has been made into a documentary that will air on KCET Saturday, May 2, at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, May 3, at 11 p.m.

The idea began three years ago when actress-director Susan Franklin Tanner decided to turn an arts grant into a dramatic presentation about the escalating problem of unemployment in this country.

Tanner had become peripherally involved with a group of steelworkers through her dealings on a legislative committee for SAG, and thus learned about the appalling conditions forced upon them.

"I never knew before that Los Angeles County was the largest diversified industrial base outside of West Germany," Tanner said. "And now most of those factories are shut down."

The steel mill trade has been especially hard hit, with too much competition overseas and antiquated facilities that have all but pushed most American companies out of business.

"You know, you read the paper and see all these statistics, but you never knew who the people were," Tanner said. "I decided to create a theater piece to educate people about what's going on."

Tanner took a group of six unemployed steelworkers from the Bethlehem plant, five of whom had never seen a play before, and involved them in an intensive series of acting workshops and think-tank sessions to evolve their own stories into a viable theater presentation.

The men involved are Lloyd R. Andres, Richard Carter, Frank H. Curtis, Tony C. Garcia, Cruz G. Montemayor and Hermes Paiz.

Along the way, Tanner got other artists involved, notably Rob Sullivan, who took the mens' stories and wrote a play, and Darrell Larson, who directed the stage piece.

In 1985, the play was put on at the Ensemble Studio Theater and subsequently went on a 16-city tour (boosted by a major donation from Bruce Springsteen).

#### 'Burning Desire'

"I really had a burning desire to let the rest of the world know what had happened to these men," Tanner said. "I guess that's how I pulled it together."

Of the six men, five were forced into early retirement for lack of other jobs available while the sixth went to work as a telephone repairman.

But over the three-year period of the project, the men have become increasingly involved in this stage piece, evolving from clumsy script readers to impassioned speakers.

The evolution of this amazing piece also brought it to the attention of people at KCET, most notably Peter Grauman, who has since made it into a documentary.

"Peter has actually been involved for a long time," Tanner said. "He was the first person from the industry to call."

Grauman, who said he had to bend KCET rules and film this docu in bits and pieces over a two-year period, first aired a seven-minute

videolog of the theater group in 1985.

Now fleshed out into a half-hour program, the show follows the closure of the mill, the subsequent grouping of the theater ensemble from its very beginning and the group's national tour.

"The message of this documentary has been that these people took a negative experience and turned it into a positive, creatively expressed idea," Grauman said.

Which is not to say that much has changed jobwise for the group. In fact, Grauman said, the five who are living on pensions now face the threat that Bethlehem will file for Chapter 11, which could ultimately result in them losing their health plans and even their pensions.

Tanner, though, looks more toward the positive, saying that she is hoping the ensemble can go on another tour through the South, to perform in Texas, Georgia, and Alabama cities that have been ravaged by unemployment.

As for their sporadic performances, Tanner said the men equally split a \$1000-per-performance fee and are optimistic about continuing to work together.

"In fact we are working on a new theater project as a collaborative effort with other artists about the whole history of the East Los Angeles area," Tanner said. "That will be performed during the Fringe Festival in September."