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Steelworkers' plight movie to be on KCET

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The plight of unemployed steelworkers as seen through the eyes of former Bethlehem Steel employees who toured the country in a play about the closing of the plant will be featured in an upcoming public television documentary.

The half-hour show, to air May 2 and 3 on KCET Channel 28, will trace the evolution of "Lady Beth: The Steelworkers' Play" from its beginnings in 1985 as a therapeutic workshop for laid-off workers through an acclaimed cross-country tour.

"It went a lot further than any of those guys thought it would go," said Peter Graumann, the documentary's producer who spent two years compiling footage for the broadcast.

"I first got interested when I heard about the workshops," he said.

The ensemble theater production won national attention last summer for the true-to-life story told through the words and acting of six men who lost their jobs when Bethlehem Steel shut down its Vernon plant near Los Angeles in 1982.

Before going on the road, it spent 10 weeks at the The Ensemble Studio Theater in Hollywood.

Besides snippets from the workshops and the performances, the documentary includes scenes shot during a public auction at the Vernon plant when the six steelworkers paid it one last visit.

"We were able to get them in their old workplaces talking about what they had done and some of their loss," Graumann said.

His crew also taped footage of the plant being razed.

The play gave the former workers a chance to share their anger and frustrations over their displacement.

"It's meaningful for them," Graumann said. "It's kind of poignant and it's unusual that people like that get to talk about themselves. They're usually just taken for granted."

"Lady Beth" was produced jointly by the Steelworkers Old-

timers Foundation, which is headquartered in Fontana, and TheatreWorker's Project.

The project's director, Susan Franklin Tanner, conceived the play and served as producer and narrator.

Two performances were presented in Fontana last June before the start of the cross-country tour.

The performances in 16 cities were underwritten by rock 'n' roll star Bruce Springsteen, whose song "My Hometown" is featured in the play, and other celebrities.

A special screening of the KCET documentary, "A Steel Life Drama," will be presented April 28 for guests, who will include former steelworkers and labor representatives.

Among those invited to the screening is Dino Papavero, president of the Steelworkers Oldtimers board and a former employee of Fontana's Kaiser Steel plant.

He expects the public broadcast to find a large audience in the West Valley.

"There are a lot of people out here who will be interested in it," he said.

The show will be broadcast at 7:30 p.m. on May 2 and the following night at 11 p.m.

The documentary airs at a time when thousands of former Kaiser workers have been upset by the loss of medical benefits and life insurance because of Kaiser Steel Corp.'s financial difficulties.

Facing huge debts, the once mighty steel company filed for protection from its creditors in February under Chapter 11 of the U.S. bankruptcy code.

Graumann drew a strong corollary between the Bethlehem and Kaiser workers.

"Clearly the plight of these guys is very similar to the plight of the Kaiser workers," he said, adding that the former Vernon plant employees are being threatened with a cutoff of their benefits, too.

"They are right now living in fear of the very same thing ... That would be a pretty cruel little epilogue to this show."