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Steelworkers turn actors in sad tale of death of 'Lady Beth'

By Peter B. King

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RICHARD CARTER JR. left Pittsburgh a steelworker; he returned last night an actor. Carter and five of his mill-working colleagues took the stage at the Pittsburgh Public Theater to tell the story of the death of the Los Angeles mill they called "Lady Beth."

As one might expect, it was a sad story. For although the mill gave off smoke that could smother and heat that could ignite workers' boots, it paid the bills and then some. And in the course of providing, it worked its way into the men's blood. When it died, they mourned.

"Lady Beth: The Steelworkers' Play," is the first production of the Los Angeles-based TheatreWorker's Project, which is designed to give voice to blue-collar workers and the unemployed. On a bare stage, the workers told their stories in their own words, which have been edited into a script by playwright Rob Sullivan.

Funded by organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, "Lady Beth" hit the road thanks to donations by Bruce Springsteen and other musicians, writers, actors and filmmakers. Springsteen's song "My Hometown," which he suggested for the play, opened and closed the first act.

Susan Franklin Tanner, TheatreWorker's Project founder and the play's narrator, dedicated last night's performance to Carter's father, who worked at J&L in Pittsburgh for 42 years. In the hourlong first act, Carter recalled how he often met his father at the plant gate and was given a sandwich that was "real flat and real hot," but still "the best sandwich I ever had."

Carter eventually worked beside his father for four years. After the 116-day, industrywide steel strike of 1959, Carter moved his mother, father and wife to Los Angeles, where he found work at the Bethlehem Steel Plant in Vernon — "Lady Beth." (He last visited Pittsburgh five years ago.)

The men told of how the plant gave them not only money, but pride — they compared themselves to wrenches, torches and cranes when they were working.

Carter spoke of his loyalty to the plant. "I missed my only child's baptism because they called me to work that Sunday. I regret it. I know my son regretted it. But at the time, I felt I owed it to the company."

The sense of worth and responsibility turned into a sick feeling when, on Dec. 9, 1982, the doors to Lady Beth closed forever. The men grieved as if Lady Beth were really a person: John Coinman, a guitarist-singer who punctuated the workers' recollections with music, sang, "Well I'd love to hug you, but why are you so cold?"



Andy Starnes/The Pittsburgh Press

"Lady Beth" director Susan Tanner performed role of narrator during dress rehearsal.

The workers remember their last task: tearing down parts of the plant for auction.

"We all felt anger, sadness and bitterness we could not express," said one of the men. Carter compared the closing to a house you've lived in that's condemned. While you watch it fall, you are haunted by memories.

Much of the plant was sold for scrap metal to another steelmaker — a Japanese steelmaker.

But the men did not brand the Japanese or any other foreign producer as the

major source of their troubles. In the play itself and in a discussion with the audience that comprised the second act, several blamed American steel-makers for not using their profits to modernize, for farming out labor to other countries and for abandoning steel in favor of investments in other products.

Hermes Paiz summed up the situation in one word: "greed."

The plant closing left the men in various states of financial disarray. Four are on pensions of between \$570 and roughly \$800 per month. Frank H. Curtis is the only employed member; he's with Pacific Bell. Lloyd R. Andres was laid off eight months short of his pension. He's unemployed.

Carter, now 52, says he could be doing worse. He put some of his mill earnings into real estate, he explains, when he saw how things were going.

The discussion afterward was almost as emotional as the play itself. Jim Dolson, a former machinist now with the Tri-State Conference on Steel, said "the total message you're giving stinks. You're looking at the problem as individuals — each with his own little sorry tale to tell." Because steelworkers didn't act as a group, he said, they had themselves to blame for plant closings.

Curtis countered that workers never had the power to make decisions on plant closings; the owners did. "That's our fault?" he asked. "I don't agree with it."

Daniel Rosenblum, a graduate student at Carnegie-Mellon University, said the government should reorder its priorities from arms to jobs.

Bill Ruffner of Mt. Lebanon, a former purchasing agent at a steel company, said it wasn't all management's fault. He observed workers sleeping on the job or talking about how fat a raise they could get in their next contract. His point, he said, was that no one — blue collar or white collar — could bring himself to believe the good times would ever really end.

Mel Packer of Hazelwood felt that worker ownership of plants, as well as unions that encouraged more participation, would help steelworkers.

Carter, asked by an audience member how he felt being back in Pittsburgh, said, "I feel very sad about it, the way the mills have closed down. But I feel very glad that I came back to tell my story. I drove down by J&L today and it's all torn down. I drove by the gate where my dad gave me that sandwich."

Later he said, "I figure that by telling my story, I'm telling parts of my dad's story, too."

Carter hopes "Lady Beth: The Steelworkers' Play," eventually will be made into a documentary film that will reach much greater numbers and "enlighten people that this could happen to them."

The play is described as "A Theatre Piece in Three Acts." Ms. Tanner explained to the audience that the third act consists of their actions after they have left the theater.