



## 'Lady Beth' dramatizes ex-steelworkers' plight

By J. Wynn Rousuck



**A** different kind of drama is touring the country: real life drama — by, about and starring unemployed steelworkers.

Six of the 2,000 workers left jobless by the 1982 closing of a Bethlehem Steel plant in Vernon, Calif., have created a play called "Lady Beth" to tell others about their plight.

"Lady Beth," touring under sponsorship initiated by rock star Bruce Springsteen, tomorrow plays the first of two performances in Washington, including an appearance on Capitol Hill. The show arrives in Baltimore Friday for a one-night engagement at St. John's United Methodist Church.

The show, in the form of a concert reading by the six steelworkers, followed by an audience discussion, was created by a Los Angeles actress and director, Susan Franklin Tanner, the wife of one of the ex-steelwork-

ers who appears in "Lady Beth."

Ms. Tanner, who spent six years with Arena Stage's Living Stage Theatre Company in Washington, said in a phone interview from "Lady Beth's" Chicago stop that she got the idea for the show after discovering "there was an industrial center that had collapsed in my own back yard. I decided this was a community that had a story to tell, and I wanted to use my skills as an artist to help them find a way to tell their own stories."

She won grants from the California Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts and founded the TheatreWorker's Project. However, the steelworkers, her husband included, were skeptical. Frank Curtis, Ms. Tanner's husband, told her he doubted "these guys would listen."

Richard Carter, who had worked for 24 years at Lady Beth, as the plant was affectionately called, said initially he regarded the

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project as "a little therapy for me. I never really even told my wife about how I felt about it. I didn't think anybody wanted to hear."

Ms. Tanner wanted to hear, though, and she was convinced other people would, too. She met with the men at the Steelworkers Oldtimers Foundation, which runs an emergency shelter and food bank out of the union hall of United Steelworkers, Local 1845, which represented the Lady Beth workers.

"We started out mostly by sitting around a table talking," she recalled. "The stories were just ready to pour out. They didn't take much coaxing. Once they started taking themselves seriously as creative artists, there was no stopping them."

The creative process involved compiling oral histories, interviews and poetry. At one point she took the men back into the empty mill, which was subsequently dynamited and the scrap sent to Japan to be melted down and made into new steel.

The TheatreWorker's Project began with a dozen men. "Some dropped out," Ms. Tanner said. "It was just too taxing to live through the experience again."

The "real turning point" came after Mr. Springsteen, who'd raised donations for the Oldtimers food bank, sat in on one of the "Lady Beth" workshops.

"He was instrumental because of the . . . mutual admiration that was present sitting around that table in this broken-down union hall with boxes of food all around," Ms. Tanner explained. "After he joined us for that workshop, nobody was afraid to be a poet anymore."

One month after "Lady Beth" had been running at the Ensemble Studio Theatre/L.A., Mr. Springsteen

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provided the seed money and created a support committee, including such entertainment figures as Ed Asner and Paul Winfield, to sponsor the current two-month, 16 city-tour, which includes stops in Mr. Springsteen's hometown of Freehold, N.J., as well as such industrial centers as Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Cleveland and Detroit.

The performance segment of "Lady Beth" — which starts off with a recording of Mr. Springsteen's ballad "My Hometown" — was fashioned into a script by writer Rob Sullivan and directed by Darrell Larson. However, Ms. Tanner said, "The post-performance discussion is often the most theatrical part of the play."

In California, Mr. Curtis recalled, a woman who had worked at Lady Beth was asked during the discussion, "How can you refer to this place as a lady, as someone you cared about?" Her answer was: "When I went there, there were very few women, and I was treated as one of the family. You were really with your co-workers more than your family. It was so much of our lives. We all lived in the same area. On our days off we would have sometimes 40 people over to a house for a barbecue."

Last week, when the tour stopped in Gary, Ind., Mr. Carter said a local steelworker stood up and reported that the mill where he worked is "making more steel now with less employees, but it's unsafe because the men are tired, forced to work

overtime. Men have gotten hurt."

When "Lady Beth" arrives in Washington tomorrow, it will be a type of homecoming for Ms. Tanner, a special performance for teen-agers sponsored by the Living Stage Theatre Company. At 6 p.m. on Wednesday "Lady Beth" will be performed in the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill and will include an update by Steelworkers union leaders on the lockout of 22,000 employees nationwide by the USX Corporation.

"Lady Beth's" Baltimore performance, Friday at St. John's, is under the joint local sponsorship of the National Rank and File Against Concessions and Art Meets Labor. Len Shindel, grievance committeeman for USWA Local Union 2609, and a spokesman for NRFAC, said he felt it was important that "Lady Beth" be seen in Baltimore because "the issue of plant closings and concessions by working people is an immediate issue faced by some workers in this area."

With that in mind, he has invited striking workers from Eastern Stainless Steel to give a statement and sent notices to strikers at Eastalco Aluminum Co.

Mr. Shindel, who is also a poet, draws a rather grim parallel between the TheatreWorker's Project and the conditions which created similar artist-and-labor collaborations during the Depression. However, he added, "We take pride in the fact that fellow steelworkers are us-



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ing drama to bring across to people what's going on."

Cast member Frank Curtis is especially looking forward to bringing that drama to government leaders in Washington. He has sent a Mailgram to President Reagan asking him, or one of his representatives, to attend the Capitol Hill performance. In it, Mr. Curtis explained, "I said I thought we had something to say — that we had seen the American dream disappear."

Tickets to the Baltimore performance of "Lady Beth" at 8 p.m. on Friday at St. John's Church, St. Paul and 27th streets, are \$5 in advance or \$6 at the door. To purchase tickets or for more information, call Scotty Stevenson at 669-8510.