



DANIEL A. ANDERSON/The Sun

'Lady Beth' narrator Susan Franklin Tanner speaks as other cast members listen.

A play with steel nerves

*They're closing down the textile mills across
The railroad tracks
The foreman says: These jobs are goin', boys, and
they ain't
Comin' back to your hometown.*
— "My Hometown," Bruce Springsteen

By OWEN SHEERAN
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FONTANA — Some days the smoke was so thick you couldn't even see your co-workers. The heat was so intense, it could ignite your shoes.

The work was hard and dangerous. For those who worked the graveyard shift, trying to sleep during the day was impossible. It was hard to get used to, but you had to get used to it.

The furnaces at Bethlehem Steel's Vernon plant, near Los Angeles, are gone now. There is no more smoke to blind or heat to sear. The scrap metal that once produced American-made steel was eventually sold to Japan, melted down and used to make new steel. Imported steel.

These are not simply the 3½-year-old memories of unemployed workers, but the chilling heart of a play about the plight of unemployed steelworkers called "Lady Beth." The play, which features real-life stories told by real-life workers, was presented in matinee and evening performances Saturday at the Loyal Order of Moose Lodge in Fontana — a city with its own steel heritage.

Produced jointly by the Steelworkers Oldtimers Foundation and the Theatrewokers Project, "Lady Beth" focuses on the plans, dreams and hopes of the American worker, represented by the Vernon workers. But the play also presents a much darker side — of fear, frustration and anger.

"You are about to see an American tragedy," Dino Papavero, president of the Steelworkers Oldtimers Foundation, told Saturday's small matinee audience. "Many of you have lived through it. Today Kaiser Steel is not operating. How were employees effected, their families and their community? Many wanted to express their feelings but they didn't know how."

But the six Vernon workers in the play do express their feelings when they talk about Lady



John Coinman portrays auctioneer.

Beth, as the Vernon plant was called, said Susan Franklin Tanner, director of Theatrewokers' Project and the play's producer and narrator.

The cast of six steelworkers speak simply about their lives, where they were born, how they grew up, how they got their jobs at Lady Beth and how eventually they were laid off when the plant closed in December 1982.

Musician John Coinman sets the tone of "Lady Beth" by singing Bruce Springsteen's poignant and haunting "My Hometown," a song of closing mills and factories, lost jobs and dreams, and unraveling futures. (Springsteen, a supporter of the

production, personally chose "My Hometown" for use in the play).

The six steelworkers introduce themselves by name, their job at Lady Beth and badge number, and sit on chairs on the stage. The workers' stories alternate quickly between the six. There are memories of growing up, first jobs, marriage and children.

One by one they find jobs at Lady Beth. Richard Carter, a crane operator, said he couldn't see the floor sometimes because the mill was so filled with smoke. The heat could range as high as 180 degrees, working around the molten steel, said Tony Garcia.

The lines the steelworkers speak were written by themselves, with the help of playwright Rob Sullivan, Tanner and others, and reflect a fierce pride in their work and in themselves. "We knew how to run that place. We knew how to run Lady Beth."

Coinman's blue-collar songs throughout the production reflect the same pride, in the product and in the worker: "The mills were made of marble/ The machines were made of gold/ Nobody ever got tired/ Nobody ever got old."

But as the play tells it, Lady Beth was doomed. Cheap, imported steel and the need for higher profits in the steel industry took its toll on mills and plants throughout the country. In June 1967, close to 2.5 million workers were laid off. In June 1982, another 1.2 million lost their jobs — 100,000 in Los Angeles County. On Dec. 9, 1982, Lady Beth closed and 2,000 workers lost their jobs.

"Even though we knew, it was still a shock." "Imports hurt because too much steel was coming into the country." "They tried to squeeze all the profits out and what good did it do?" "It's like a person who passes away. You hate to see it, but you have to put up with it, like a slow death."

In the play, the closing of the plant is followed by the auction of tools and materials, with musician Coinman acting as auctioneer. "It was a pitiful sight to see our plant on the block," says Cruz Montemayor. "All that remained was a used, rusty shell that used to be the bread and butter of 2,000 men."

The play's second act is a discussion between

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Steel: Audience participation encouraged

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The steelworkers and the audience. "We want you to share your views, your experiences, your feelings," Tanner said.

One audience member asked who was to blame and one of the performers simply replied, "Greed."

There is a third act to the play, Tanner said, and that's for the au-

dience to go out into their communities and talk about the problems of unemployment and displaced workers and raise the public's awareness of the issue. "It's what people do when they leave this room that's important."

Directed by Darrell Larsen, "Lady Beth" originally opened in Los Angeles in March at the Ensemble Studio Theater. The play begins a national tour in Pitts-

burgh on Labor Day. The play will also travel to Chicago; Washington, D.C.; New York City; Gary, Ind.; Youngstown, Ohio, and Freehold, N.J. Four performances are scheduled in each city. The play will be performed in union halls, churches, community centers and high schools.

Entertainment industry musicians, actors, directors, writers and others are strong supporters of the production and about \$20,000 has been donated for the

national tour, Tanner said. Key supporters include Springsteen, Ed Asner, Jeff Corey, Mike Farrell, Shelly Fabares, Ed Harris and Stuart Margolin.

Groups and organizations interested in booking the play can call (213) 221-7672 for further information.

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