



SARAH M. BROWN

Recalling happier times in the history of Southeast Los Angeles industrial area, cast members of "SELA" dance on stage to jazz music of *Con Safos* band.

Working Man's Drama

Play About Decline of Southeast Industrial Strength Looks for a Place to Perform

By RITA PYRILLIS, Times Staff Writer

Beneath a backdrop of photographs of industrial areas, five actors stand on a gray, sparse stage telling their stories of living and working in Southeast Los Angeles.

Their stories are about the Southeast area when it teemed with jobs for those willing to put in long, hard hours at the industrial plants in South Gate, Vernon, Maywood, Santa Fe Springs and Commerce. Their stories tell of the devastation when many of the plants closed in the late 1970s, leaving thousands jobless.

Using video, music and dance, producer Susan Franklin Tanner presents her vision of the people and culture of Southeast Los Angeles in "SELA," a performance piece by the Theatre Workers project, a group of workers and residents of the Southeast area.

Steel mills, blazing industrial furnaces and auto plant assembly lines might seem an unlikely subject matter for a play, much less a place to find poetry and beauty, but that is what Tanner said she found in the cluster of small blue-collar cities along the industrial belt of Los Angeles.

"Detroit had their auto plants, Pittsburgh had their steel mills, Akron had their rubber factories, but the Southeast had everything," Tanner said. "I fell in love with that community and I fell in love with the people. In 'Southeast Los Angeles,' we are trying to show the beauty of the culture and the strength and dignity of the people who live and work there."

Last month, the play completed a six-day run in Los Angeles as part of the Fringe Festival, but Tanner said she and Bell City Councilman George Cole are trying to bring the play to the Southeast area. What they lack is a sponsor and a place to perform.

"I think it's very important that people learn about their history, especially the young people," said Cole, a former steelworker who helped Tanner find actors for her first production. Called "Lady Beth," it tells how six steelworkers were affected by closure of the Bethlehem Steel plant in Vernon in 1982.

Like the actors in "Lady Beth," two of the actors in "SELA" are former steelworkers and the others have ties to the area.

Richard Carter and Frank Curtis were among 2,000 workers who lost their jobs when the Bethlehem plant closed; Ruben Guevara worked at paint factories in Maywood; Rebecca Cherkoss, the only teen-ager, is the daughter of a former steelworker who lives in Maywood, and Kevin Williams is a drifter who lost his job at a Chicago steel mill.

"Many of these workers have tremendous artistic and poetic skills," said Tanner, who formed the Theatre Worker's project in 1984 with the help of an artist-in-residence grant from the California Arts Council. "It was my aim to give these people an opportunity to tell their stories through the medium of theater."

During most of the fast-paced performance, the actors in "SELA," which was directed by Rena Down, are spread around the stage. There is little dialogue. Instead, they recite bits of history about the area and tell stories from their lives, including several about unsafe working conditions at the factories and bigotry against Latinos and blacks in such cities as South Gate that were once predominately white.

Playwright Rob Sullivan combined the stories with news events and research provided by Myrna Donohoe, a labor historian and Maywood resident. The actors deliver it in a fusillade of anecdotes and facts.

"At one time, Southeast Los Angeles was the second largest diversified industrial center in the world next to the Ruhr in Germany," one actor says.

Curtis, Tanner's husband and a former steelworker, tells of a friend's reaction when she first visited the Southeast.

"Let's say you made a left turn and then a right and ended up in this industrial hub," he says. "What is that smell? Where is all that smoke coming from? What happened to all those buildings? Where the hell am I?" "Southeast Los Angeles," the group choruses. "The underbelly of Los Angeles. Southeast Los Angeles . . . that great gray blank."

Williams tells about the chlorine gas cloud that floated from the Purex plant in South Gate past Tweedy

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Frank Curtis, left, and bandsman Ruben Guevara.



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Susan Franklin Tanner, right, creator and producer of "SELA," explains the concept of her play. With her at question session are cast members Rebecca Cherkoss, Richard Carter.

DRAMA: Play in Search of a Stage

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Elementary School last year, and Cherkoss tells of her reaction when she discovered that a friend did not have money to go to a movie because her father was unemployed.

Ruben Guevara, whose band, *Con Safos*, provided the music, tells the audience of cruising Whittier Boulevard and recalls the once-thriving jazz scene on Central Avenue.

In "SELA," the actors give an identity to the amorphous place where such cities as Maywood, Bell and Cudahy now seem to blend into the stark industrial parks that have

replaced the closed factories.

In its heyday during the 1960s, Donohoe says, the Southeast area thrived.

"We moved here from Pittsburgh in 1968," said Donohoe, whose husband, a former steelworker, is Bell's city mechanic. "When we saw all the jobs available, we called our friends back East and said, 'Come out here!'"

Thousands Out of Work

But foreign competition put an end to that steady stream of jobs.

Between 1975 and 1982, the Southeast area was hit by the closure of several large industrial

plants, including the General Motors factory in South Gate and the Uniroyal and B.F. Goodrich plants in Commerce, which left more than 12,000 workers unemployed. Minimum-wage positions took the place of top-paying industrial jobs.

In SELA, the workers are bitter about the changes.

In one scene, Cherkoss says: "Perhaps one day I too can work at an industrial park for \$3.35 an hour."

In a deliberately smarmy, high-pitched voice, Cherkoss, who is Donohoe's daughter, reads from a mayor's greeting in the Maywood newsletter:

"It's another new year, and I would like to join with the Maywood City Council and wish you and your family all the best in 1987. Maywood's future looks bright. . . . Soon the Maywood Plaza will be completed. This new commercial shopping center is located on the northeast corner of Atlantic Blvd. and Slauson Ave., where Wendy's restaurant is presently doing business."

Acting Out Frustrations

For some of the actors, such as Carter, who also appeared in "Lady Beth" with Curtis, performing lets him relive good memories and cope with the frustration of losing his job.

Performing "has helped me deal with a lot of things," Carter said. "It has opened up a whole new world for me."

On a recent visit to the Bethlehem site, Carter, who for 24 years was a crane operator there, gazed at the spot where he used to punch in every morning and talked about what he calls great times.

"I can almost hear the noise of the furnaces going and feel that incredible heat," Carter said. "It was hard work but good money. Those days are over."



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