

# STEEL BLUE

*SP shipbuilders  
play out tragedy  
of firm's decline*

By Bob James  
STAFF WRITER

**C**hances are Ralph Moore never saw "Macbeth." Clyde Flowers probably couldn't tell "Death of A Salesman" from "Hedda Gabbler" without a script. But on stage, the two former shipbuilders prove they recognize a great tragedy.

With help from a nationally-recognized production team, they and 13 others constructed a play equally as tragic as "Oedipus Tyrannus." It is the story of

the decline of Todd Shipyards in San Pedro and 15 laid-off Todd employees.

"Steel-Blue Water: The Shipbuilder's Play," playing Sunday at Shipbuilder's Union Local 9 headquarters in Wilmington, is the brainchild of Los Angeles producer Susan Franklin Tanner and her TheatreWorker's Project.

Through stage drama, Tanner documents the pride and pain of men who built their lives around the ships they assembled and then had their world fall apart as Todd edged ever closer to closure.

It is not the first time Tanner and TheatreWorker's delved into the despair of heavy industry workers. Her best known work, "Lady Beth: The Steelworker's Play," garnered national acclaim when it toured the country in 1987.

She also produced a play about life on the streets of Southeast Los Angeles and a video based on the stories of three unemployed mothers.

As with the other projects, the key to the production is the industrial workers

SHIPBUILDERS/A3

## Shipbuilders

FROM PAGE A1

themselves. Neither Moore or Flowers is an actor. They wear no costumes. The stories are their own.

At 49, Moore is looking at his fifth career change. A former Golden Glove boxing champion, he once shared fight cards with the late Sugar Ray Robinson. He then joined the Air Force and was stationed in South Dakota.

"They had never seen a black man," Moore says of the Dakotans during the play. "If we wanted to go to a nightclub, we had to take a 10-hour train ride all the way to Denver."

After the military, Moore followed his father's lead and became a plumber. Eleven years ago he joined Todd as a pipefitter and coppersmith. To his surprise, Moore said he found racism almost as pervasive at Todd as in the military.

But that's not all. During the play, Moore, Flowers and guest actor Ruben Guevara accuse shipyard management of favoritism, mismanagement, drug addiction and cronyism.

"When I came here, I didn't know what the play was going to say," Tanner said. "If they had said Todd was God and the union stinks, that's what the play would have been about."

Todd management is not taking the play in stride. The thought of TheatreWorker's muddying the shipyard's name in productions around Southern California clearly dismayed Assistant General Manager Tom O'Toole, who gave Tanner and her crew access to the yard.

"If I'd known it was going to be so negative, I'd have never let them in here all those times. No one told me it was going to be so bad," O'Toole said.

While Todd's local plant has clearly declined since its workforce of 6,000 more than 10 years ago, managers deny the yard is closing. Even with only 600 workers and the threat of future layoffs, Todd remains confident it will secure enough repair work to not only survive, but thrive.

Work began on the play last autumn when Tanner received several small funding grants. She passed out flyers, inviting shipbuilders to come to workshops where personal accounts were eventually turned into a script by the play's director, Rob Sullivan.



LUIS SINCO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Director Rob Sullivan coaches former Todd Shipyards employee Ralph Moore in a rehearsal for

the shipyard play while actor Ruben Guevara and former worker Clyde Flowers study their lines.

"The hardest part was selling the harbor workers on the project," Tanner said. "They're not just sharing their life stories, they're getting up in front of group of people and revealing themselves."

Eventually, a script was drafted from workshops involving 15 men. They rehearsed less than a half dozen times.

Flowers was one of the first to join the project. A former metal worker, he met Tanner at a "Lady Beth" performance in Lynwood.

For the former professional musician from Chicago who moved to California in the 1960's, the play was an opportunity to not only show the public what heavy industry workers are becoming in the United States, but also a way to vent his anger and frustration.

"It's my chance to complain about the people that moved industry out of this country. Someone made the decision, but I didn't have anything to say about it. No one asked me to vote. No one asked what I thought," Flowers said, admitting he is bitter about being laid off.

The production itself is simple.

Moore, Flowers and Guevara, whose character represents Todd's Hispanic workers, are joined on stage by only musical director and percussionist Tom Gonzalez. A large painting by May Sun serves as a set.

It begins with Moore's account of an accident that kept him out of work for two years.

In September 1986, he went below the decks of a ship to clean a waste tank. But he saw the tank was not vented and tried to flee the methane gases. Before he could escape, the gas ignited. "I heard a click and that's the last thing I remember. I was on fire," Moore said.

Last July he returned to Todd and confronted his fears in the chemical holding tank of another ship. "I had to face it again. I had to go down there."

The story weaves between the characters. Flowers recalls back injuries and Todd's heyday in the early '80s when payday meant buying stereos, drugs and women in the parking lot at lunch.

Guevara tells of bigotry aimed at Hispanics. To whites, "we're all

Mexicans," he said, noting nearly every Latin and South American country is represented at the plant. "It smells like the United Nations at lunch," he says during the show.

They talk about the hypocrisy of old drunks who sit around complaining about younger men smoking marijuana on the job. They speak of working in pain, of not knowing what they'll do if Todd closes. And in places, they talk of pride.

"I feel proud when I see that ship sail out," Moore says during the play.

"You put part of yourself into that ship. When it leaves it's like a tentacle spreading out around the world," Flowers joins in.

For many, layoffs from Todd means uncertainty and fear, the actors said. But for others, including, Moore and Flowers, the future is as clear as a ship's schematic.

"If you can read a blueprint you got the ticket," Flowers proclaims during the show. "Roll out a blueprint and I'll build it. If Todd closes, next week I'll be building a skyscraper."