**Stuart Rockoff Sits Down and Talks with Sweat Director Francine Thomas Reynolds and Dramaturg Dr. Elissa Sartwell, Part 2**

Stuart Rockoff: In some ways, this play felt a little old-fashioned to me in the sense that the story of strikes and picket lines, is really the story of the deindustrialization of America. It seems particularly timely in our current political and economic context. Were those contemporary resonances in your mind as you were working on the play? How does this relate to the political moment we are in?

Francine Thomas Reynolds: The play asks the question, “Is the American dream still alive?” If it’s alive, who has access to it; who has the right to pursue the American dream? Doesn’t everybody? But that doesn’t seem to be the case. Also, why is it that our generation had parents that expected and thought that our lives would be better than theirs? That’s not the case anymore. That’s not laid out specifically in the play, but it’s certainly addressed when one of the characters says his father picked his last bale of cotton in 1952, moved, started a job at a low level and moved up to become a union rep. The son, who is now 49 years old, has discovered that he hasn’t had the same experience that his father had. His father retired and is taking a cruise around the world. That opportunity isn’t there for the son. Pensions went away when contracts were renegotiated; pensions keep going away.

SR: The economic arc of the character of Cynthia, best reflects that. She starts as a worker, then she’s part of management, then she moves in to part-time home health care worker. Someone who worked hard and worked up the ladder and then that ladder is sort of gone. Do you think about the political implications of this play? Are audiences here going to be upset by them?

Elissa Sartwell: Politics are there obviously, but she’s not taking a side.

FTR: Neither are the people. They are too busy. They are too busy working to get involved in politics. They say that, “I’m not going to vote!” because it doesn’t matter in their community.

ES: “It doesn’t matter who it is because they are going to sh\*t on us.” So, you’ve got this sense that the system itself is distrusted, the same with NAFTA, the same with unions. I don’t think she’s saying that side over there is the problem, or that policy is the problem, it’s very much all of these things are the problem.

SR: It’s focused on the human relationships of the people involved.

FTR: It’s also talking about things like NAFTA; people don’t always comprehend what that means, the people who are working in this play don’t have time to think “what does that mean for me.” It shows the distrust of the people who are supposed to be maintaining government and public policy, have been letting people down. I think it shows the distrust and asking the question, “Is it pro-union or anti-union?”

SR: The unions are sort of collateral damage in these economic changes; the unions were strong and they benefitted the workers but at this point unions are powerless.

FTR: Someone in the cast asked about unions because they didn’t have any experience with them; the unions were really important in history for the laborers.

SR: One of the ways that unions were negatively portrayed in this play, is that they were exclusionary to some extent. There was a time when African Americans were excluded from unions, and now that fact was used to bring in strike breakers. In this play, it’s Oscar who was unable to get in on the ground floor because the union wouldn’t take him as a member because of his race and then he becomes the person who breaks the strike once the workers are locked out.

FTR: Because he’s perceived as “other” because he’s Hispanic.

SR: Even though he’s born in America, its assumed that he wasn’t. That certainly brings up a lot of resonance with contemporary politics.

ES: The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 fueled an animus toward the Chinese people, “the other;” the threat is “they are stealing their jobs.” That is often the case; there’s this economic shift, landscape shift, economically motivated or caused that somehow people, who were coworkers before, maybe could be tolerant of one other, but suddenly that’s gone and a latent animus or racism or selfishness comes to the surface.

SR: The most haunting part of the play, is in reading the first scene when it describes Jason and his facial white supremacy tattoo. You see that in the first scene, and you think it’s about the rise of a white supremacist; but in fact, what you see throughout the play is his really close friendship with an African American family. And so, it seems Nottage is trying to say something about how there’s been this retreat into tribalism in response to this economic dislocation.

FTR: Exactly, and the polarization. What causes and what caused our current polarization.

SR: So, its class that is primary, and certainly one could say that ‘to the left’ critique of Trumpism—using this tribalism as a way of pushing forward a certain economic and political agenda.

FTR: It’s the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots.’ And the ‘have nots’ think that the other ‘have nots’ are the reason they don’t have anything. When truthfully there is a small percentage of society that has a lot of power, resources, and income. And the rest of society doesn’t.

SR: There are no characters in this play that are not working class, so you don’t see what’s going on at the university and beyond that. There has been a lot of interesting books written about Wall Street and the use of leveraged buy outs, capital, and high financial activities happening in elite spaces. These things have very significant ramifications on towns like Reading and places in Ohio, etc. These folks are like pawns in these economic changes that are going on and not really understanding what’s happening.