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Storyteller Recreates World of Bethlehem Steel Family

by K.D. Norris
(Editor, Enjoy entertainment magazine)

Many people see the story of “the steel” in terms of the mechanical process of steel-making, with even the steelworkers somehow reduced to simply part of some great machine instead of living, breathing beings.

Jay O’Callahan, a nationally-known storyteller, is in the Lehigh Valley this weekend as part of Steel Festival: The Art of an Industry, clearly sees the story in terms of the men and women who lived the life of “the steel” - real people who lived, and died, to the constant hammering heartbeat of the South Bethlehem steel-making world that now lies as cold and silent as the generations of workers now buried in South Bethlehem’s cemeteries.

O’Callahan’s original story, “Pouring the Sun,” which he will tell again at 3 p.m. today, at Lehigh University, shows us a vivid world of the life of a family of steelworkers.

Through his words, which fill more than an hour with only brief moments of lull, we laugh and cry with one family who lived in South Bethlehem from the 1920s to 1950s.

Based on the stories of John Waldony and his sister Mary Soltysiak, the story is told mostly through the eyes of their mother, Ludvika Waldony, who in the words of the children “kept us strong so we could work the steel.” Ludvika came to America from Poland in 1907 when she was just 18 years old and settled in South Bethlehem. The story of her family - a story of work and home and love and loss - is a story like a hundred stories of steelworkers, a thousand stories maybe.

And O’Callahan, who has a long list of credits and honors for his storytelling, clearly knows how to tell a story.

He stands on stage without costume and with only a chair as a prop, and smoothly flows from one vignette to another of the larger story. His voice rises and falls, and changes from the voice of Ludvika stirring her potato soup on her 65th birthday and remembering; to her husband, Fritz, agonizing of the loss of his ability to play the piano due to an industrial accident; to John, who clashes with his father over the need for a union at the Bethlehem Steel Corp. plant.

O’Callahan’s face and stature change and we see the different characters; his voice changes and we hear the different characters.

For those in the audience who have never seen a master storyteller at work, it is a stunning event.

For those who have seen such a performance, it is rare wine to be savored.

We get a glimpse of the end of “the steel” from O’Callahan through a little introductory story of how he came to learn of South Bethlehem and steel making. But the real story he tells is of Bethlehem Steel when it was alive and filled with living, breathing men and women.

And storytellers like O’Callahan telling the story, that is how it will be remembered.

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