

Of tongue scrapers and lung trimmers

Outdoor multimedia performance focuses on the female workers of a Cedar Rapids meatpacking plant.

By: Marguerite Perret

As neighborhood factories close and the economy continues to move away from an industrial base toward the service and information-technology sectors, the histories of those industrial spaces and the people who worked in them begin to fade from memory. One such example is the Farmstead/Sinclair Meat Packing Plant, once the center of Oakhill neighborhood in Cedar Rapids. The plant now sits huge, mute and decrepit, a deposed giant from another time.

Artists Jane Gilmore of Cedar Rapids and BJ Krivanek of Chicago want to give voice to this important but uncelebrated narrative. Focusing on the accounts of female employees, the artists conducted interviews with former workers, consulted with local historians and archivists, and collaborated with members of community organizations and students from the nearby Metro High School. The culmination of all this research and cooperative effort was Work-Shift, a CSPS-sponsored outdoor multimedia performance held at the factory site on four evenings in July.

The meat processing industry has a long history in this community. The Sinclair Packing House dates back to 1871. It was acquired by Wilson & Company in the 1930's and became Farmstead Foods in 1984. Farmstead was once the source of high paying jobs and good benefits, but by the time the plant closed its doors in 1991, the employee pension plan had been exhausted and the majority of workers who stayed to the end, in hopes of a fair retirement settlement, receiving nothing. Today the site remains deserted as competing forces for profit and historical preservation debate in the city planning sessions and committees.

The audience was moved through the performance area, which extended along the length of the factory complex, on a specially modified flatbed truck. Ten segments or "screens" were presented at various locations along the exterior of the buildings, each depicting a different aspect of factory life. The "scenes" blended low and high tech elements of sound, projected image, video and performed movement in an often moving spectacle that portrayed harsh working conditions, strong personal bonds and bitter disappointment. Despite the large production crew and scale of the staging area, the presentation felt intimate, partly due to the small audience size (around 40) and largely because the performance took place after dark, to accommodate the projected imagery.

The most successful performance segments brought the industrial vernacular, architecture and personal narrative to the forefront, allowing these elements to stand on their own, without too much of a dramatic overlay. The introductory scene, "Getting in Line," made effective use of the performers interacting with the building structure. A voice-over narration, the same voice that was used throughout the performance as a unifying thread, discussed the opportunities the factory

offered young working-class women in the 1940's and 1950's, while fragments of projected text floated across the brick edifice. The words transitioned from a taxonomy of traditional domestic roles ("wife," "daughter," "helper" and "cook") to the functional titles of meat-processing industry ("ham cutter," "tongue scraper" and "ling trimmer"). Inside the building, identically dressed performers occupied a series of open window bays, moving to a rhythmic sound composition in a kind of mechanized factory dance that was suggestive of both automated work and a 1960's go-go-style floor show.

In another titled "Handskills," a looping video of hands sharpening boning knives was projected against a brick wall as five performers stood silently, holding small video monitors attached to poles, in front of their faces. A synchronized video of excerpts from the interviews with former plant workers appeared on the screens. The melding of the live performers into the identities of the video narrators proved the most powerful moment of the evening's presentation. It effectively blended past and present, documentary and metaphor, without diluting the authority of the first-person account.

A permanent web site for the *Work-Shift* is under construction (by the students of Metro High School), and will include documentation of the on-site project as well as additional research and interview material that was not part of the on-site performance. For more information, contact Legion Arts at CSPS, 364-1580.