

Meatpacking plant as art:

C.R. performance tells story of women, work and impact of gender

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Cedar Rapids-On a walkway at the old Farmstead Foods meatpacking plant on Third St. SE, a group of female actors clad in white outfits and hard hats is bathed in an otherworldly glow.

They robotically act out motions involved in meatpacking by pulling, reaching and pushing imaginary hunks of meat. Words projected on the side of the building catalog their tasks: "brain-picker," "ear-cutter."

A solemn voice-over tells about low wages, supervisors who give unappealing work to women who won't date them, and other stories. Droning machine noise fills the air.

This scene took place Friday night as part of "Work-Shift," a multimedia art presentation at the abandoned plant.

Its creators are Jane Gilmor, and art professor at Mount Mercy College, and BJ Krivanek, artistic director at Community Architects, a non-profit arts organization based in Chicago and Los Angeles. Legion Arts, a Cedar Rapids-based non-profit artistic organization, also assisted.

Many of the actors and crew are current, or, as in Krivanek's case, former art students at Mount Mercy.

In putting together the performance, the artists also took the role of historical investigators. They visited a union hall and interviewed women who had worked at the plant.

They tapped the holdings at the Sates Historical Society, including historical film footage-some of which is projected onto a plant building during the performance.

They also met with students at nearby Metro High School and, late in the show; they project female students' words onto a building to contrast their goals and experiences with those of earlier generations of women who worked at the plant.

Audience members view all of this as they slowly move through the packing plant's grounds on a flatbed trailer.

Several of the 40 or so people who attended the Friday night show-cut short by a lightning storm-came away believing life in a meatpacking plant was tough. They also enthusiastically endorsed the performance.

Anna Jennerjohn, 20, a student at the University of Northern Iowa, said the event echoed some of her sociology classes, in which she learned capitalism “puts so many people at a disadvantage...It was very impressive.”

Afterward, Gilmor and Krivanek said politics were not central to their show. Instead, they said, they wanted to memorialize the contributions of an often forgotten segment of society and note the changing nature of women’s work, from physical, machine-dominated tasks to digital, computer-based ones.

“We didn’t really have an international political message,” Gilmor said.

Krivanek said he wants to find a way to inscribe the chimney or water tower at the plant, to further honor the workers.

“We are interested in permanent marks,” he said. “This performance is a first foray into reawakening the community memory.”

Performances of “Work-Shift” will be repeated Friday and Saturday nights at the packing plant, at Third St. SE and 14th Avenue SW. Tickets, \$6 each, must be purchased in advance by calling 364-1580; the 9 p.m. shows are sold out but some remain for the 10:30 p.m. performances.