
Letters, Etc.

Touchstone—How Radical Is Radical?

“Welded to the Ladle: Steelbound and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre” by Sara Brady (TDR 44, 3 [T167] Fall 2000) evoked a bunch of responses from those participating in the 1999 production in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. We are publishing a selection from those responses—and Brady’s answer to those who are protesting what she wrote. What surprises me is the intensity and coordinated quality of the responses. I am glad that something in TDR has stirred the pot a bit. And I would like to see more vigorous debate in our Letters section.

—Richard Schechner

To the Editor:

In “Welded to the Ladle” (*TDR* 44, 3:51–74) Sara Brady says that *Steelbound* was an opiate, passive and non-radical—that the community we created/gathered was contrived and that nothing was changed. Other *Steelbound* collaborators untangle Brady’s arguments below and document for *TDR* the true rationale and impulses behind the process of making *Steelbound*. (Brady’s poor fact checking should be an embarrassment to *TDR* and is quite puzzling coming from someone who participated in *Steelbound* “on several levels” and had “a six-year relationship with Touchstone” [52].)

For myself I’d like to relay a little story about a former steelworker/*Steelbound* cast member who, since the play, now volunteers regularly at Touchstone, trains with our apprentices and auditions for other local community theatres. As Brady points out: *Steelbound* did not get him his job back nor did it aggressively demand an apology from the execs who shut down his job. That’s not what he was looking for, but Brady would have us believe otherwise. He told me just yesterday: “You people lit a fire in me. All my life I had these thoughts, these ideas, and I didn’t know where to put them. Nobody would listen. You’ll never get rid of me now.” What we did was make a commitment to believing in and nurturing his creative ability. We cherished it. That was a radical experience for him, but that seems incomprehensible to Brady. She would de-value as sentimental his new enthusiasm to express himself—to create in a new way. The artists of the Steel Festival helped hundreds of people tap back into what I can only describe as an awe for and need to be a part of creation. Would Brady call that radical? Along with many of the Steel Festival artists, I would call it essential.

—Mark McKenna
Artistic Director and
Ensemble Member, Touchstone Theatre

To the Editor:

It is sad to see such a remarkable achievement as Touchstone's *Steelbound* find its sole representation in intellectual theatrical circles as reflected through the narrow prism of Sara Brady's twisted dialectic. [...]

The cast of *Steelbound* was comprised of over 60 folks from all walks of life, race, class. The event had an electric and deeply profound influence on the people in it and those who experienced it that their understanding of what theatre is, what the Steel was, and who "we" are as a community will never be the same. This is a fact.

Knowing it to be a fact, it is difficult to allow Sara's intelligent but strangely confused account of affairs to stand in public unchallenged. To state my understanding of Sara's argument in her article, she maintains that *Steelbound* refrained from "radicality" in order to curry favor with those in power—Bethlehem Steel. As a result of this, no, little, or not enough change took place in the community. In other words, we who were creating *Steelbound* copped out. Sara argues that she does not believe attempting to bring together opposing groups in a unified expression of their shared history can be a liberating experience. Those with the money and power invariably protect themselves from the painful truth. She states flatly: "I don't buy it" (67). It's difficult to argue with what is basically not an argument, even when the facts are in the face of the believer. Sara explains in her own article how the union workers in *Steelbound* and many who saw it were impressed with a piece that, almost amazingly, was not a "whitewash."

Still, I think Sara's concerns are legitimate. Whether arts organizations receive funding from individuals, groups, the State, the National Endowment—all represent possibly corrupting influences on the artistic process and the search for "truth." Community-based theatre is no less threatened by these concerns. If *Steelbound* were to be noted for any particular achievement, in my view, it would be how well it managed to walk that difficult line.

As founder of Touchstone, I know exactly what the principles were that inspired its creation. As the actor who played Prometheus in *Steelbound*, I am intimately connected to the "message" of the work. And, as an ensemble member of Touchstone I am aware of the creative history and process of the work. A number of Sara's comments were a touch insulting if not simply factually wrong.

First, let me say that *Steelbound* was not "messy" (52) in any negative sense. It was inspired, beautifully executed, and emotional. The only messy part was that which is usually associated with anything truly creative, and of course trying to cram 600 people a night into a venue we had (in our most optimistic projections) prepared for only 300. Perhaps Sara just chose her words poorly. Perhaps what she meant to say was that the production stirred people up; it did; it still does. Perhaps that's what change feels like.

Previously I maintained that *Steelbound* changed how many people thought about the art of theatre, the Steel itself, and what it meant to be a member of this small Pennsylvania community. I'm not sure what change Sara was looking for (the return of steel-making in Bethlehem?) that led her to ignore the significance of these other achievements. In this regard, I'd like to tell three stories.

I've been a theatre artist for 30 years or so, and the production certainly opened my eyes in any number of ways, but one story touched me particularly. My son, Sam, is in his junior year at Carnegie Mellon University studying acting. He has a friend in the department whose father did not approve of his son's choice of theatre as a profession—thought it was egotistical, useless, superfluous perhaps. His father had worked at the Steel. He attended the performance. His son told mine the resistance to his career choice disappeared. Now, his father said, he understood what theatre was for. Change.

I said that the production of *Steelbound* changed people's understanding of what the Steel was. I worked at the Combination Mill, night shift mostly, my

last year of college. I'd seen it close up and hated it—dirty, dangerous. I'd had my co-workers nudge me, telling me to “slow down, you're working too hard; you're setting a bad example.” Yet I'm sure it was those same workers that kept me from getting fired when I took off two, three days a week because I couldn't carry the weight of classes, evening rehearsals, and a full 40-hours-a-week night shift. Those guys got me through college. Yet, even if you worked at the Steel, you could only see a part of it, never the whole. *Steelbound* started dialogues and a culture of trust that created a picture of Steel, perhaps for the first time dramatically, as what it was—a patriarchal, dysfunctional, industrial family full of prejudice, argument, fighting, bravery, and enormous hard work, and ingenuity squandered in selfishness, narrow mindedness, and unfortunate and missed economic circumstances. But no one ever said, “it was beautiful.” That too is what *Steelbound* said and made people understand. Does radicality preclude the acknowledgement of beauty?

According to Merriam Webster, “radical” means: marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional. It would be my argument that Sara's perspective of radicality is old-fashioned, a traditional understanding, not sufficiently radical. What radical is has changed. To be truly radical today, one must acknowledge that being right or wrong isn't as important as working together. But let's try and get beyond words, traditional concepts of how to move our culture forward. The important issue here is that Touchstone and Cornerstone made the play the way they wanted to, not because of money or influence of The Steel as Sara argues. Her logic doesn't hold. We also were equally desirous of having Steel Labor involved. Why did Sara not argue that such involvement compromised the play? Their presence was more important to us than money.

Finally, I'd said that *Steelbound* changed how folks thought of themselves as a community. A woman in the cast, whose husband was a professor at Lehigh University in religion told me that her husband, though having lived in the Valley for several years, never felt a part of it. But, on seeing the production, he finally was “let into the family.” He was finally a part. Change.

You know, what does Sara want? It seems her desire is to resurrect some battle, some family feud, and that if the production didn't get co-opted by this ideology of the Left, it had failed. We were “cowards” not to take advantage of the production as a means to “stick it in the eye” of management. This is so patently misguided that it is an insult to the extraordinary work that Touchstone, Cornerstone, and the people of the Steel and the Lehigh Valley Community achieved—including Sara herself in a terrific interpretation of the role of Penny.

There is no question that Sara's concerns about the negative influence of moneyed interests on art are well founded, but to use *Steelbound* as an example is not based on fact.

—Bill George
 Founder and Ensemble Member,
 Touchstone Theatre

To the Editor:

I functioned as movement director for *Steelbound*. I am also a Touchstone Theatre ensemble member since 1983. In 1994, I proposed an idea to Touchstone for a Steel Festival and was intimately involved in the five-year evolution of that idea which culminated in a festival, “STEEL: The Art of an Industry” and included the *Steelbound* production.

In the course of her article, Brady makes several false and misleading statements. Therefore, I feel compelled to set the record straight according to the history of the development of *Steelbound*, as well as the history of Touchstone

Theatre's relationship to various communities in Bethlehem.

Here are the corrections I wish to list:

Correction #1

The following statement is inaccurate. "[...] the City of Bethlehem invited Lecoq to tour the site of Bethlehem Steel—a privilege, I was told later, enjoyed by many visitors to the city but never by former steelworkers or their families" (53).

Jacques Lecoq was not invited to tour Bethlehem Steel. In the spring of 1994, Jacques Lecoq and his wife, Fay, were invited by CENTEC to tour the CENTEC steel-making operation. CENTEC (Centrifugal Technology) was a joint venture between Bethlehem Steel and Esinor Steel, the largest steel-making company in France. When CENTEC heard that the distinguished French theatre professor was in town, they invited him to tour their operation.

I accompanied the Lecoqs on this tour. We witnessed a pouring of molten metal. We watched the overhead cranes run across the ceiling of the building, which felt as big as a football field. We walked through a "welfare room" (locker room for steelworkers) in which an odd assortment of steelworker clothing and helmets were hung like mystical marionettes on metal hooks (welfare baskets) attached to chains, dangling above our heads.

The three of us were in awe of the space and the movement and the liquid fire. The original inspiration for the Steel Festival was not political. Our original impulse came from a deep desire to fill that space with the sound and movement of the art that is theatre, to fill it with "a chorus that sings," to make a drama of mythic proportions. "Il faut faire un coer qui chant" (Jacques Lecoq, 1994).

Much later, we found out that the CENTEC operation was a dwarf compared to Bethlehem Steel. The B.O.F. (Basic Oxygen Furnace) at Beth Steel bragged a much bigger ladle, and its steelworkers scoffed at the mere mention of CENTEC.

Five years later [...] we staged *Steelbound* in the Iron Foundry at Bethlehem Steel as a Touchstone-Cornerstone collaboration. [...] *Steelbound* involved four different Greek-like choruses. Mythic proportions! A dream come true.

Correction #2

The following statement includes an error: "When Touchstone board member Augustine Ripa suggested (according to the story, originally as a joke) that *Prometheus Bound* was a Greek tragedy that would speak to Bethlehem's circumstances, the company decided to hold a public reading of the script" (55).

Ripa suggested *Prometheus Bound* in the parking lot of Bethlehem Steel, after a tour of the Iron Foundry. We had just been shown a color-coded map of the scheduled demolition of the seven-mile-long plant. We were overwhelmed to experience the vastness of the plant and to be privy to its eminent, calculated destruction. Ripa's suggestion was not a joke. In fact, it was brilliant. The metaphor of Prometheus was perfect. The proportions of Aeschylus's tragedy and the dramatic structure of the play...perfect.

Correction #3

The following statement is misleading: "With titles like *Fish* (1995), *The Cabin on Chicken Legs* (1994), and *Don't Drop Grandma* (1994), empty seats were Touchstone's norm. [...] Even as they continued their less-than-popular original theatre work, members of Touchstone yearned for a closer relationship with the community" (54).

As director and co-writer of two of the above plays, I am proud to correct Brady. In 1994 at the Lecoq Festival, produced and hosted by Touchstone

Theatre with Lehigh University in Bethlehem, both *The Cabin on Chicken Legs* and *Don't Drop Grandma* sold out. For both productions, every seat was filled and audience members were crowded into every available corner of the house. Both original pieces received standing ovations. Believe it or not, these “original theatre works” touched many members of our community. The Lecoq Festival targeted a unique and essential Touchstone community, a community of theatre artists from around the world, who came to participate in workshops and inspire one another with performances.

Touchstone’s “original theatre work” also includes many plays written to tour the parks and playgrounds throughout Bethlehem, Allentown, and Easton as part of the Summer Street Theatre Program. Brady acted in one of these *popular* original theatre works and witnessed first-hand the enthusiastic response of the outdoor crowds.

The verb *to yearn* is an interesting choice on Brady’s part, “members of Touchstone yearned for a closer relationship to the community.” Yes, we *yearn* deeply at Touchstone. If we did not *yearn*, we probably would not need to create art that reaches out to audiences. We *yearn* for community. We *yearn* for closer relationships. We *yearn* to be part of a whole. But Brady seems to imply inaction, helplessness, lack of movement, and even impotence. We *yearn*. We also work. We work to build and rebuild relationships with individuals and groups in our community. These relationships are alive—living, breathing, and changing. These relationships are in constant need of attention, communication, re-evaluation, nurturing. Hard work!

Correction #4

The following statement misrepresents the truth: “Touchstone’s inability to connect with this surrounding community could be because their permanent company has never included a Latino/a member” (54).

Inability? Touchstone is *able*, and does, in fact, *connect* with the surrounding community. In particular, we are extremely conscious of connecting to, collaborating with, and serving the diverse Latino/a (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican, and many more) community in our neighborhood. In each season, Touchstone presents ensembles and individual artists, such as Diabolo Mundo, Teatro Espanol, Theatre Pregones, Sigfredo Aguilar, and Jose Torres Tama (two-week run of *Casino America*, November 2000). Touchstone collaborates to co-create with companies such as Teatro La Memoria (*Deadalus in the Belly of the Beast*, 1992), and individual artists, such as Angel Lohez (*Los Locos Del Pueblo*, 1997). Touchstone invites artists such as Raphael Conasares to teach Taino mask-making to local youth as part of Touchstone’s *Latino Drama Workshop*. Touchstone nurtures the development of young actors such as Stuart Ortiz, who has acted in several Touchstone productions and is currently training in the nine-month Touchstone Apprentice Class. Most recently, Touchstone collaborated with community organizer Guillermo Lopez of the local chapter of the National Coalition Building Institute, to create a piece exploring issues surrounding racial and ethnic prejudices (*Building Bridges: A Prejudice Reduction Workshop and Performance*, 2000). True, Touchstone does not have a full-time Latino/a company member. So, until we do, we will continue to *connect* with the diverse Latino/a community in our neighborhood.

Correction #5

The following statement is false: “The successful negotiations between artists and the Steel proved the most vital for the project and overshadowed the small-scale community connections developed by Touchstone over the years. With the Steel holding many cards, ties around town—to the Broughal Middle School, the Boys and Girls Club of Bethlehem, the Windish Church, the

Council of Spanish-Speaking Organizations, the Bridgeworks Restaurant, and all of the grassroots feelers sent out into the many entities of the community, crossing economic and ethnic lines—mattered little when Touchstone waited for a final word from the Steel” (60).

I was present at one crucial meeting between Bethlehem Steel and Touchstone concerning the commitment to stage an adaptation of *Prometheus Bound* in the Bethlehem Steel plant. At that point *Steelbound* had not been written, the collaboration between Touchstone and Cornerstone had not yet been established. The meeting was held in one of the upper rooms at Martin Towers, national executive headquarters of Bethlehem Steel. Present were myself; Mark McKenna, Touchstone’s artistic director; John Saraceno, Touchstone board member; Jim Kosticky, Bethlehem Steel executive; and Stephen Donches, Bethlehem Steel executive. At this meeting, Bethlehem Steel was clearly concerned about their image and how it would be portrayed in the play. We told them that we *would not* censor the art, that the play *would* express the anger of unemployed steelworkers, and that Bethlehem Steel would have to accept the risk involved, if they were going to be a partner by providing the performing venue.

During the course of the five-year development that led to the Steel Festival, Touchstone formed relationships with many organizations and individuals in the community, very strong “ties,” as Brady calls them. One of these individuals was a Bethlehem Steelworker, Larry Brandon, a union man who worked 18 years in the blast furnaces. Larry was interviewed first in 1996 by one of my students, as part of a storytelling project about the Steel. Larry was full of criticism of Beth Steel, outspoken and angry. Two years later, in 1998, I called him again to arrange two more interviews—with playwright Alison Carey of Cornerstone Theatre, and with storyteller Jay O’Callahan (*Pouring the Sun*, “STEEL: The Art of an Industry”). I listened to the interviews, as they were conducted at my kitchen table. Many of the words spoken by the character of Prometheus in *Steelbound* came directly from that interview. The voice of Prometheus rings of Larry Brandon—angry, proud, outspoken, and critical of Steel.

In 1999, Touchstone and Cornerstone called Larry again and asked him to audition for an acting role in *Steelbound*. He did. We wanted to cast him, but he declined, because of the time commitment. After watching one of the performances of *Steelbound*, Larry said to me, “You didn’t tell me it was going to be *that* good.” The implication was that, had he known, he would have been proud to act in the play.

I think Brady’s statement could be corrected to read as follows: “The small-scale community connections developed by Touchstone over the years proved the most vital for the project and were an integral part of negotiations between artists and the Steel. With Steel holding many cards, it is incredible that the corporation was willing to trust the artists, considering Touchstone’s clear commitment to the voice of the workers. Ties to the community, crossing economic and ethnic lines, meant everything when Touchstone waited for a final word from the Steel.”

—Jennie Gilrain
Movement Director, *Steelbound*
Ensemble Member, Touchstone Theatre

To the Editor:

I read with dismay and some sorrow Sara Brady’s “Welded to the Ladle.”

Sorrow, not just to see this astonishing collaborative production receive such embittered (and often unsubstantiated) criticism, but that this attack in the guise of critical analysis should come from someone with whom I share certain values and ideas of theatre creation and community-based art.

As an ensemble member at Touchstone I was deeply involved in the development of *Steelbound*. While still at school in Paris (I was one of the Lecoq people who did NOT leave Touchstone because of a conflict with the community-based aspects of its work), I received a call from Mark McKenna asking me if I was interested in returning to my hometown to work with the company. One of the key projects that drew me back was the proposition for a production of *Prometheus Bound* onsite (somewhere) at the Bethlehem plant. The idea of the production and the festival had developed from first proposal to concrete possibility by March of 1996.

How could I *not* be a part of this event, having grown up under the gaze of those blast furnaces? My parents had not worked at “the Steel,” but it had shaped my life. My mother sent me articles in Paris from the Bethlehem paper and I wept for the disappearance of this way of life as I struggled to speak French and find my clown.

On my return to Bethlehem, the Steel Festival seemed small and far away. There were planning grants, but no final dates yet (to counter Brady’s assertion that once the idea was there “the festival was promptly slated for the autumn of 1999” [53]). Each stage of the development of the vision for the overall festival as well as for the specific production that became *Steelbound* happened over time and included listening to and responding to many voices within the community, our own among them. The process was as complex as the lives and relationships we sought to evoke in the final production.

We knew we wanted music. I thought of the a cappella singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock. I could imagine no group better to bring a musicality to such a production. Mark McKenna saw that Ysaye Barnwell from that group was in the area to do a workshop. He found a contact number and called her up. She was intrigued by the project. Eventually, after delicate negotiations about role, work, and money, she became one of our chief collaborators.

As Ms. Brady recounts, we first envisioned doing the play “straight”—that is to say, pure Greek. We were concerned with finding the right translation. Ms. Barnwell suggested a poet. We read his work. We looked at various translations. Then we did a reading of one of those translations for a group of steelworkers. Ms. Brady recounts this event in her article. The responses were varied, not the unanimous, pseudo-working-class, illiterate statement Ms. Brady proposes in her fabrication, “What the hell kind of play is that and what does it have to do with the umpteen years I worked my ass off in the Steel?” (55). Some family members were intrigued, others alienated, and still others bored. It was, however, clear that a strict translation was not the way to go.

And so Mark called on Cornerstone. The project seemed a perfect fit. They were a partner organization in the newly emerging Network of Ensemble Theatre (NET). They had a long history of adapting classics to examine the living dynamics of communities. They knew how to work with large casts of mostly nonactors. They had a long-standing interest in doing a play in a steel mill. Perfect. But it still took time and negotiations to find our way to work together as artists and as companies.

The point is that there were *many* negotiations of *all kinds* throughout the process of developing both the play and the festival. Ms. Brady seems to have identified the negotiation of the space as somehow the most critical and all consuming for Touchstone; that without the space the show would not have gone on.

In fact, I remember several conversations we had as a company about *where we would do the play if we could not use a site on Steel property*. There was never the thought that the play would not get done if a place on the Steel grounds would not be made available. The production was not a “sanctioned performance [...] that relied on a corporate invitation” (60). We made a request. (They certainly did not invite us!) We were involved in negotiations. Eventu-

ally, our request was approved and the Steel became a partner. But this partnership, though certainly important and complex, did not “overshadow the small-scale community connections developed by Touchstone over the years” (60) as Brady asserts. What good would the space have been without the people? What good would the production values have been without the words and actions that *were* the play? The baby ladle that became a chief set component was impressive. But it alone could not have told the story.

Entry into the space was in fact a victory, not just for us, but for the many families and others who had never been allowed on-site. We were not in a position to change Steel Company policy on an already closed plant. But we *did* enable families to step on the ground where their loved ones had worked and in some cases died. (One audience member’s father had died of a heart attack in the iron foundry where the play was staged. She had never been allowed in the building before coming to see *Steelbound*.)

There were many ways in which we developed intimate ties to members of the community. Through interviews, research, and readings we engaged community members in dialogue, storytelling, and debate. Above all, we listened. Sara herself makes reference to the exhaustive audition process. This process and the people who came out to participate in that process were responding both to Touchstone and to the tangible need that was felt by the community to come together around this major shift in our communal lives. There certainly was not less time or emphasis put into developing these relationships than into negotiations for the space. They were all part of the creation of the whole. But the play would have been done on or off Steel property. Perhaps it was this knowledge that in the end persuaded the Steel to become a partner.

The negotiations for space revolved around safety and availability (which buildings would still be standing in September 1999). Content of the play was not part of these discussions. One can hear clearly from Alison Carey (the author/adaptor of *Steelbound*) that she felt no need to censure [*sic*] herself to placate Bethlehem Steel Corporation. No one asked her to. If Bette Kovach was on hand to observe the process and protect the interests of her employer (Bethlehem Steel), she was also there as a rock solid member of the Women’s Chorus, thoroughly enjoying a chance to be in a play which, as an employee of the company for over 20 years, had meaning to her personally.

My background as a theatre artist includes a wide variety of experiences before my tenure at Touchstone. Among other things, I worked for several years with a small group of performers who used theatre as an instrument of social change. We created plays to support various union drives in the New York City area (Columbia University support staff; district 65 unionizing efforts). We did street theatre to support abortion rights in the first days of the uproar around the Hyde Amendment. In an even earlier incarnation I used clowning to support the United Electrical Workers organizing drive to unionize staff workers at my alma mater, Antioch College. I have been deeply engaged in what I sense the author of “Welded to the Ladle” wishes to be called “radical.”

I do not wish to see “radicality” limited to the work I did 20 some years ago. Much has gone on in the world since then. I am older. My interests have evolved and my understanding of the world has grown.

Ms. Brady is concerned with the role of community-based artist as mediator of the community voice. “Interpretation of community stories [...] complicates the purity of such performance” (64). She implies that works such as *Steelbound* and events such as Georgia’s *Swamp Gravy* [see *TDR* 40, 2 (T150)] in the end sully the community’s story with the intervention of professional artists. I would like to remind Ms. Brady of two things: first, *without* the presence of the professional artists, the stories may never have been told (the artists as catalyst); and second, in any public event there is a mediator. Someone,

named or not, selects the performers, the venue, the theme; arranges the order, creates a context. It may be a group of “community leaders” or a single person with a particular agenda. At least we as community-based artists sign our names to our work. We count ourselves as members of the community and understand that as artists we have something particular to offer.

Are there distinctions to be made between “theatre for healing” and “theatre for social change” (72)? Undoubtedly. Is one more important or more politically necessary than the other? I doubt it. Are they mutually exclusive? I don’t think so. Dialogue around these questions can perhaps be useful. However, to create an antagonism between these two related forms is not only counter-productive but harmful. They do not work in opposition to each other, but in tandem. We should not create enemies where we have potential partners.

Steelbound was never centered on an agenda of re-opening the gates or of company disclosure. The time for that had already passed. As we found our way through the process of developing *Steelbound* and the Steel Festival, we found the metaphor of “funeral” and “wake” to be the most suitable. Not because that is the only role that theatre can or should play, but because that seemed organically what *was possible*, what *was needed* and what we, as a theatre, *could provide*. In this sense, I feel we as a group were (to parallel Ms. Brady’s words) very “clear-sighted about what (our) work was capable of and, in the end, what it managed to accomplish” (72).

Our eyes were open and our sight was clear. I think it was Ms. Brady’s vision that was blurred. [...]

—Cora Hook
Ensemble Member, Touchstone Theatre

To the Editor:

[...] I was: 1. A member of *Steelbound*’s women’s chorus; 2. A member of Touchstone Theatre’s board of directors serving as the liaison between the theatre and Bethlehem Steel; and 3. Bethlehem Steel’s director of media relations.

Sara’s often whiny recollection of the process of creating *Steelbound* is somewhat different than mine. Although she painted me as a “mole,” a role, quite frankly, that I accepted and nurtured, her reporting of key events and reasons for staging the play and festival smack of “sour grapes.” If she is in a position to publish or perish, then maybe she should find another axe to grind.

I am not a “theatre person.” I “experience” theatre as a spectator, with my 12-year-old daughter, as an enriching, fun experience. My time on the stage has been few and far between. I am not an actress, don’t want to be one, and would never make it anyway, despite my dabbling in theatre as a child and adolescent. Being part of a theatre as a young person was a great growth experience and a pleasant memory that I have carried through my life.

The *Steelbound* experience, however, was a life event—not only for me, but for the thousands of people who saw it and certainly for the cast. We came together as people who lived our lives either within the plant’s gates or in the shadows of the plant’s gates. Our motives, I believe, were pure: be part of something that meant a lot—financially, physically, psychologically, and paternally—to an entire community.

I could dissect Sara’s writing and find a thousand flaws. But I won’t. Instead, I will speak of the tremendous joy and sorrow that the cast and audience experienced in seeing a play that spoke volumes of their lives—and my life. No one wanted the plant to close, but it did, amidst pain, sorrow, frustration, and longing. *Steelbound* was designed to help the community move to higher ground and toward a new future.

Sara's *very loose* quoting of my remarks was done without the courtesy of informing the interviewee (me) that she was recording for the purposes of publishing. Her attacks on the principals of the creation of *Steelbound*—Cornerstone, Touchstone, Ysaye Barnwell, the cast, and others—were unprovoked. If Sara found her role so unsavory, then why didn't she just leave the project? Instead, she stayed as if to become a "mole" to develop a flawed thesis on what community theatre "shouldn't be" in her logic—but what it "should be" to the community in which it was developed.

I spent nine months rehearsing for a play that spoke to my heart. I made friends and committed myself to a project that cluttered an already cluttered life. Professionally, I remember the days when the plant was dying as my most fulfilling career experience of managing communications for that facility that built, defended, and transported America. We had 22 different news organizations from all over the world that came to see it in its final hours. And we have had scores of news organizations from all over the world visit to see its transformation (<www.bethlehemworks.com>).

Sara's whining of what wasn't quite right is meaningless. What is meaningful is that Touchstone, in collaboration with Cornerstone, brought all parties to the table, created a story that made vice presidents and laborers alike think about their lives and their future, and helped a community heal from the terror of having its heart ripped out. Mine was ripped out too, and I have recovered, in large part, because of *Steelbound*.

—Bette Kovach
Women's Chorus, *Steelbound*
Director, Media Relations, Bethlehem Steel

To the Editor:

[...] First of all, I want to express my genuine respect for Sara Brady's point of view and the time and careful thought that she committed to expressing it. Her comments form the most detailed and explicit articulation of a general criticism that has been leveled at Cornerstone's work from time to time over the company's 15-year life: because Cornerstone strives to be inclusive, the work is somehow non-political or politically conservative. I am grateful for the opportunity this article has given us to reflect on the issues she raises and to respond in writing. Don't get me wrong, however; the article also angered and saddened me.

It's telling that the only community voice Brady quotes at length to bolster her critical point of view is Timothy McNally, a former steelworker whose letter to the editor of a local paper ran before the play opened. Any comments he might have about the play's fairness and accuracy after he had seen it (if in fact he did) would be more germane to Brady's thesis about what the project did or did not accomplish as a truly community-based work of art. The fact is that in this article Brady has edited her version of reality as selectively as she claims the producing theatre companies did with *Steelbound*.

According to Brady, "none of McNally's questions found answers in the text of *Steelbound*" (65). This is blatantly untrue. The title character was a laid-off steelworker who is anger incarnate. His anger at those who led to the plant's demise was the constant implicit, and often explicit, content of the play. As Brady herself quotes, one of Prometheus' first lines was "This [the closing] is the shame of greed and bad planning." He rails at a former manager (played by an actual former manager) about the privileges enjoyed by management when the plant was open and how the workers suffered. He speaks with love about the making of steel, but he has nothing but contempt for those

who led to the home plant's demise. The production's emotional high point for many was a funereal ritual in which cast members placed tools into a pile to the slow banging of a metal pipe on a sign from the abandoned plant.

Bette Kovach, the director of media relations for the Steel and a cast member, was certainly open about her motivation in joining the cast: as Brady states, in part it was "to keep an eye on things." A week before opening, Kovach shared with me her concern that the play was like "a funeral" and needed to be changed to be more upbeat. We talked, but nothing was changed. And in the end, Kovach knew why that was and respected the need to let it be. The play was about acknowledging a death, and a funeral was an appropriate ritual.

Brady quotes me as saying "I wouldn't change a thing" (67) with what reads to me as barely concealed contempt for my naivete. I meant those words. The nature of the event would have changed had we been on the street outside the gates, to be sure, instead of on the grounds where men gave up their lives to earn a paycheck. But never once did the playwright change a line or I change a staging or acting choice because we feared censorship from the Steel. What was the worst the Steel could do to us? Kick us out. And then we would have told the same story on the streets, and no one would suffer but the corporation for its obvious display of fear. I think Kovach's quote in the article that Touchstone turned the tables to say to Bethlehem Steel, "[...] you're going to be on our side of how we want to do this" (60) is quite telling. But not as evidence of "non-radicality."

I would also posit that the fact that the C.E.O. of Bethlehem Steel Corporation and the former head of the union both saw the play, and both cited it being "painful to watch but fair," reflects the truly radical nature of the event. Rather than preaching to the converted, to only the segment of the population with like-minded political views, Cornerstone is committed to involving representatives of all sides of an issue in making art on the issue at hand. For Brady, this translates to automatic watering-down and selling out. For others, it is evidence of courage and risk-taking on the parts of the professional artists and especially their community collaborators to welcome a true diversity of voices, even unwanted voices. It's harder, to be sure, but hell, it's just plain more interesting. And accurate. And leads to a deeper, more textured work of art.

I appreciate Brady's point that shorthand language can blur the complexity of reality, and in fact we in Cornerstone talk about this constantly. Press release buzz words about "celebration," "healing," and "closure" are dangerous; equally vague and dangerous are buzz words Brady employs, including "protest," "community-based," and "social change." All these phrases express important concepts about the work but are sometimes used to mask more complex realities.

And absolutely, in this project and in all of Cornerstone's work, the professional artists are the mediators, and even the final arbiters...but not, as Brady implies, of content. Judy Baca, the pioneering mural-maker and founder of Social and Public Art Resource Center in Los Angeles, cites the difference between community members as final arbiters of content, and artists as final arbiters of aesthetics. I find Baca's distinction both provocative and helpful. The multiple points of view in *Steelbound* came directly from community members themselves, reflecting a diversity of views on what the shared tragedy of the closing of the Steel meant to this community. These multiple points of view were never, as Brady implies, a result of artists' fear of censorship from a corporation or a government funder. (What funding agenda drove *Steelbound*? "[...G]overnment [...] suck[ing]-up" (65)? The notion is as odd as the sometimes-held misperception that Cornerstone collaborates with largely low-income communities, and raises 90 percent of its operating budget through contributed sources, in order to get grants.)

I also welcome Brady's critique of "inclusive casting." It's true: a cast of 56, no matter how racially or age diverse, does not mean the "whole community" is represented. Nevertheless, Brady is wrong when she characterizes the *Steelbound* cast as consisting largely of "community leaders." She herself admits the auditioning process was tireless and successful in its efforts to reach people who would otherwise never think of acting in a play, including dozens of former steelworkers and people of all economic backgrounds. Yes, auditions were not held in a Latino/a public housing project (although they were held in a Latino church, and Latinos/as played featured roles throughout the production). If only Brady had voiced that venue absence during the audition process itself, we might have had a cast that represented an even stronger diversity of voices. Which leads me to my last point.

I find it most unfortunate of all, given the passion she expressed in this article, that Brady did not raise a single one of these concerns to me during the process of creating *Steelbound*. (During the project, she was a Touchstone representative, a paid actor in a major role, and co-head of the project's legacy program.) In fact, I only learned about the article itself when Touchstone colleagues sent me a copy, months after it had been published. I find it a tragedy, if not of Promethean proportions, that if she felt these concerns at the time, Brady did not feel the safety nor find the courage to articulate them to her colleagues before and during the creative process. One can only imagine the healthy dialogue that might have arisen, and the real social change within our theatres and communities that might have followed, had Sara Brady lived up to her responsibility as a collaborating professional artist and voiced these important questions during the making of the artwork.

"*Steelbound* was ultimately conservative," states Brady (67). I would suggest that what's really conservative in this situation is a particular academic point of view about what is permitted to be defined as radical.

—Bill Rauch
Artistic Director, Cornerstone Theater
Director, *Steelbound*

To the Editor:

As the author of *Steelbound*, I was very interested to read Sara Brady's "Welded to the Ladle." But as I read it, my interest turned to confusion, occasionally to anger, and then to the kind of uncomfortable, scientific curiosity one feels around passages in history books that describe grotesque symptoms of the diseases of past generations. It's quite obvious that she put a lot of work into it. I believe she really believed what she wrote. But ultimately, she attempted to critique a process she was only incidentally involved in, seems to know almost nothing about, and which she made no effort to learn about. She has no basis for her conclusions except what she made up. The piece was journalistically lazy and intellectually sloppy and she should be ashamed of herself.

As a former union employee, a current union member, and the proud daughter of two union parents, I was heartbroken at her assertion that *Steelbound* was created at the behest of and in furtherance of Bethlehem Steel's corporate interests. She says that the choice to perform the show on the grounds of the mill "limited the content of the play" (60) and she refers to "intense negotiations" (60) between Touchstone and Bethlehem Steel management as inevitably effecting what eventually appeared on the stage.

There may have been intense negotiations, but I was not involved with them nor did I even know much about them. The processes of venue selection and play creation were separate. I did interview and get input on drafts from managers as well as workers, but at no point did Bethlehem Steel deter-

mine what was on the page, nor did they try to. After all, why should they? I could have immolated myself on the desk of the president of the company and it would not change the fact that Bethlehem Steel already got what it wanted: the mill was long closed once the show was opened, most of it torn down for scrap. If the show were created before or as the mill was closing, it would have been a very different thing. But it wasn't.

The pernicious result of Ms. Brady's fantasy about Beth Steel's oversight of content is what she concludes from it regarding the validity of what the play actually presented. She says Bethlehem Steel's presence "precluded a performance in protest of the mill's closing and of the Steel's failure to modernize and adapt to the changing economy of steel" (60) as if this were the only possible legitimate artistic result of creating a play with members of this community. She bases this, I guess, on a single letter to the editor from former steelworker James McNally posing questions about the reasons behind specific events in the unraveling of the mill. She asserts that "former Steelworkers wanted information, facts from the past, present, and future" (65), and that *Steelbound* didn't give it to them.

I hope Mr. McNally found the answers to his questions and, if not, I can point him to lots of resources that might have some answers. In the years since the mill closed, there have been scores of different analyses of why and how it happened in newspapers, books, documentaries, and oral history projects, and there are questions and accusations enough to keep the conversation alive for decades. I appreciate the validity of Ms. Brady's edited version of Mr. McNally's concerns, but the people I spoke to did not want to see the issues rehashed in detail, they did not want protest alone. Again and again and again, people asked to see and hear something they felt they had not gotten yet: a record of what it felt like to live the steel life and a recognition of their relationship with the place and the work that they spoke of in almost religious terms.

I admit I didn't speak to everyone in Bethlehem, but I spoke to over 200 people, which isn't nobody. (And not just community leaders, either, as Ms. Brady rather loopily asserts were the only sorts of people who would want to be involved.) I cannot fathom how Ms. Brady would justify my ignoring what those people told me.

She might remind me, as she does in the article, that of course I am only a mediator for community stories, and that my mediation has the potential to warp what they were *really* saying. Hey, any idiot who does this work for more than 15 minutes knows that to mediate peoples voices is a big task, and carries with it many dangers. I know that I am an outsider, I know that I am a professional artist, and I know I edit what I hear into a theatrical narrative. It takes what I do out of the realm of pure "grassroots," as Ms. Brady points out (65). But so what? Mediating stories is my job. It doesn't invalidate the art. And if she wants to see my notes, if she wants to go back and talk to the people I spoke with to see if I presented the essence of what they said to me, she is more than welcome to.

Ms. Brady refuses to accept the possibility that the play existed as it did because lots and lots of people—people with no greater vested interest than making sense of their lives—wanted it to be that way. And, I suppose, why should she? Ms. Brady did not live through what the people I spoke to did. She never worked at the mill, she never got pink-slipped, she hasn't spent hours at the local café talking about what happened, she didn't read local and national news analyses daily as things were happening, she hasn't read the books available on the subject, she didn't get called to the doctor for a lung asbestos check after she was already fired, she didn't look for new work in the area, she never tried to explain to her family what the Steel was and what she had to do with it.

In any case, the notion that the play did not portray the struggle of workers or protest Bethlehem Steel's actions is just balderdash. She quotes Mr. McNally's letter, "Why did they take a productive combination mill and turn it into a non-productive mill?" (70) and then goes on to say about a character in the play "Heffy doesn't dare provoke Prometheus with such a demand" (70). Well, Heffy doesn't bring it up there because Prometheus already outlined the reasons for the mill's closing on page 8. Ms. Brady also says "He [Heffy] doesn't remind him about the mills in the States still making steel" (70). True enough, but as Prometheus is a steelworker and not a potted plant, it's safe to assume he already knows this. If Ms. Brady is using this to suggest the Beth Steel closing is some isolated, whimsical act of corporate cruelty with absolutely no potential justification is to tragically misapprehend the history and physical realities of the mill and what is happening in the American economy and American society as a whole, especially in terms of its industrial base. Ms. Brady's misreadings of the play are astounding. Maybe *TDR* would like to publish it in its entirety and let the readers decide for themselves.

Ms. Brady writes that, "In the case of *Steelbound*, the art of community-based theatre became an opiate for the masses [...]" (70). If acknowledging people's emotional journeys, if respecting people's artistic impulses, if creating a piece of art that brings solace and respect to people's lives is giving them an opiate, then I say double the dose. Why are the poor masses the only ones who are supposed to be denied a little opiating every once in a while? As anyone who's ever had surgery knows, opiates can go a long way to helping you heal, to become stronger and more able to face the challenges of your life.

But Ms. Brady assumes that "theatre for social healing" (72) (which she thinks *Steelbound* was) is automatically in opposition to "theatre for social change" (which she thinks *Steelbound* was not). Why? Why is catharsis the enemy of the struggle for social change? Why are pride, hope, and acceptance of what has already happened not ingredients of the building of a better future? I would argue they are, and that Ms. Brady's division of theatre of social change and theatre of social healing is incomprehensibly nihilistic and condescending to the people she performed with and for (and whom I'm sure would have a thing or two to say about being called "the masses"). And what exactly is the social change Ms. Brady would have the play call for? She never says. Does she think that if I had written the scathing, single-minded indictment of corporate behavior at the expense of everything else the community voiced, Bethlehem Steel would be so chagrined that it would rebuild the plant? Does she know or care whether this would be a good thing?

There is a quote from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986, James Currey Ltd.) that comes to mind:

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's beliefs in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces that would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended responses are despair, despondency, and a collective death-wish. (3)

When economically imperialistic corporations claim the achievements of their workers as their own, it is a cultural bomb, one that *Steelbound* countered. When culturally imperialistic critics, praying at the altar of theoretical and over-simplified radicality, disallow human beings the right to see onstage what they say they want because it goes against the critic's reductive, knee-jerk, uninformed, and appallingly patronizing pre-conceived notion of what they need, that's an attempt at a cultural bomb, too. And that's where the true shame of Ms. Brady's piece lies.

Ms. Brady writes that *Steelbound* "in the end was nothing more than a chance for some to let off some steam" (67). Let me quote a letter I received after the show from a retired captain of the Bethlehem Steel Fire Department who had sent me some information about the work his firefighters did. (I believe a version of this letter was also published in the *Morning Call*, Bethlehem's local paper.)

I did go to see *Steelbound*. I must say I was a little apprehensive. I was totally overwhelmed by the play. You captured the very essence of the steelworkers. I am a Vietnam veteran so to me there were many parallels between the two. I guess I can best describe your play as the "Wall" for steelworkers. May I congratulate you on a job well done. Thanks again for helping some of us find closure for a lifetime of work. (1999)

The Wall is not a detailed analysis of the Vietnam War, it is not an overt call to end war, it is not any of the things Ms. Brady seems to want in art. But that does not negate the value of the Wall, nor diminish its power. I am deeply proud I had the opportunity to be a part of something that one man who bled steel for decades to give our country abundance would describe in those terms.

—Alison Carey
Author, *Steelbound*

Sara Brady responds:

I would like to thank those Steel Festival artists who took the time to respond to my article "Welded to the Ladle." Their words indicate the magnitude of the Steel Festival's impact on those involved, including myself. As a writer, I welcome criticism of my work; as an academic, I am delighted to be involved in such an interesting and important debate.

That said, I stand by my article and its arguments. The letters compiled in this issue of *TDR* seem a concentrated and well-planned effort to de-bunk my critique of the project. I have been called a liar, a whiner, a mole, and "journalistically irresponsible."

I'm not going to respond to all of the criticisms point-by-point, but there are two instances where my words were misrepresented. First, Bill George writes that I characterize the production as messy; I wrote: "*Steelbound* was messy: it messed with people's lives, schedules, hopes, dreams, and, of course, their politics." And it is clear from the need for brackets and ellipses that Bill Rauch took my words out of context. He asks, "What funding agenda drove *Steelbound*?" and quotes my alleged response: "[...G]overnment [...] suck[ing]-up?" My actual words as published: "The coalition that made *Steelbound* possible combines grassroots, person-to-person interaction with corporate and government (both local and national) funding and approval. This issue of patronage, how the 'grassroots' must suck-up to the authorities if a project is to be produced, has been cited by other scholars as to why works like *Steelbound* include very little radicality or actions demanding social change" (65).

In response to the accusation that I wrote lies: if writing the story of one's experience from one's own perspective is lying, then perhaps I'm lying; I rather think we could debate for eons about what I consider a fact and what the letter-writers consider a lie. As for being a mole, if driving 90 miles each way once a week for over a year to work for the Steel Festival for little more than gas money is the behavior of a mole, then so be it. It felt to me more like dedication. I actually see my article as a continuation of that dedication—a dedication to honestly evaluating my artistic work and experience. Finally, as for the journalism issue: I am not nor have I ever claimed to be a “journalist,” but rather a scholar. My article did not appear in the *New York Times*, but in *TDR: The Drama Review*, an academic journal offering a scholarly forum.

Still, there are some fundamental assumptions upon which we clearly disagree: the underlying ideas that are the basis for my attitude toward *Steelbound*, which apparently conflict with those of the letter-writers. The most important of these is radicality—that elastic word so easily tossed around. To one person, getting out of a seat, walking onto the stage, and uttering a line embodies, indeed *is* radicality. Perhaps.

What I wanted to consider was, what would happen if community-based theatre released itself from socially therapeutic crutches? What if the field had to dig deeper? What if we had to ask ourselves if our work has any implications or potential for contesting the status quo? In the case of *Steelbound*, such protest would ask directly *why* the mill closed down, *why* people lost jobs, and *how* this situation could have been avoided or dealt with in a more socially responsible way. I posited that in working so closely with Bethlehem Steel Corp., the *Steelbound* artists eradicated all possibility for such a contest. The play was a funeral, asking any steelworkers who still had a fight in them to give up on getting compensation—to mourn, then forget, and finally move on.

In a clipping from the Bethlehem area newspaper that I saved from my research, a *Steelbound* cast member sits on top of the I-beam that fronts the steelworkers' union office in Bethlehem. He sat there in protest for the union. Looking at this image again, I see more radicality in this one man's action than in the entire process of the Steel Festival project. That is the radicality that I was talking about in my article; it differs greatly from the belief that just making theatre is inherently radical.

My article was not written in the spirit of trashing the work of professional and community artists—to me *that* would be a lie, a false accusation. I wrote with the intention of stirring up the pot of the pat-on-the-back field of community-based theatre. I was asking for those who do it and write about it to stop “supporting” each other every five minutes and start offering some constructive criticism. This objective, again, doesn't come from the position of the “mole,” it comes from the position of someone who'd like to see the field grow and change.

Interestingly, despite Alison Carey's advice, I am not “ashamed” of myself in the least. I am proud that I wrote something that has stirred so much response, and, despite what respondents might believe, I suspect that I must have, somewhere, hit upon some element of truth to elicit such heartfelt responses.