Jay O’Callahan’s “Pouring the Sun”

by Shira J. Boss
Special to the Christian Science Monitor

For generations, the heart of Bethlehem, Pa., was steel. When the blue flame went out at the last steel factory five years ago, the town wanted to commemorate its steelworkers by leaving behind more than just factory silhouettes. So they brought storyteller Jay O’Callahan to town.

Making several trips from his home base in Marshfield, Mass., Mr. O’Callahan talked with steelworkers, men at the union hall, women in the Slovak church, relatives, and Bethlehem Steel Corp. management.

For three years, he took tours, leafed through photo albums, sat in kitchens, and stood in backyards overlooking the steel works. Acting as part investigator and part novelist, he gradually came to understand what the community calls The Steel. And through one immigrant family’s story, he wove the steel into a yarn.

In September, O’Callahan returned to Bethlehem for the Steel Festival and gave the townsfolk back their story, “Pouring the Sun.”

“The whole thing, the whole struggle was there, and in such a moving way that everyone could connect to it,” says Bridget George, the theater producer who had initially invited O’Callahan to create the story.

Contemporary storytellers give voice to a community’s past and bring together a new generation of listeners.
“He captured the essence of the lives of people who lived on the south side of Bethlehem -- the physical description of the neighborhood was laced into the story. You could see Hayes Street and see the church spires,” says Deborah Sacarakis, director of programs at Zoellner Arts Center at Lehigh University, which commissioned the story.

O’Callahan has more than two decades of storytelling experience. While vacationing in Nova Scotia, he listened to residents describing life during World War II. He absorbed their stories and wove one of his own.

Since then, O’Callahan has been approached by other groups wanting him to preserve their pasts in a performance. He has told stories on the stages of New York’s Lincoln Center and London’s National Theatre, and his pieces have been aired on National Public Radio.

A commissioned story costs from $2,000 to $30,000 and takes from one month to three years to produce, depending on the length and scope. Stories can celebrate an event, a time, a city, or a single family member. These differ from family tales, which usually come out as snippets. With a crafted story, he says, “You get a fuller story, not as an anecdote but a sense of "Who is this man, and why?"

O’Callahan’s presence in Bethlehem led him to more than just the creation of “Pouring the Sun”: “In pockets across the Lehigh Valley, wherever Jay went, even after he left, people would keep sharing their stories,” Ms. Sacarakis says. “The same thing happened at the performances -- people would say how many memories it triggered, and would tell them.”

O’Callahan initially found scores of stories he could have focused on. After two years of interviews, he settled on his central character, an immigrant woman who was no longer living but whose husband and son had worked in the industry. O’Callahan tells the story as Ludvika Waldony, sitting at the kitchen table at her 65th birthday party and sharing the events of her life.

For more than an hour, the audience travels with 18-year-old Ludvika from Poland to Bethlehem and walks alongside her as she meets Fritz, who will become her husband, and builds a new life with him and her children. They build a big house and take in boarders. The Depression hits, and the matriarch feeds the family from the garden she creates in the backyard. Fritz, who adores playing Chopin on the piano, gets three fingers cut off in a factory accident. His devastation melts into alcoholism.

Tragedies strike the family: Ludvika’s youngest son becomes a union activist and during a strike is clubbed by a policeman. While home from college, the eldest son takes a one-day job and is killed in a truck accident.

“I wanted someone to represent the immigrant journey as well as the steel,” O’Callahan says. “They are the people who built the country, and we say that, but we don’t know it. If we have stories where we meet them and see them, then for the first time we have a sense of who built the country and on whose shoulders we stand.

O’Callahan will be performing “Pouring the Sun” at the Three Apples Storytelling Festival and the National Storytelling Festival, as well as other venues.

For details, visit his website, www.ocallahan.com or call 800-626-5356

The story honored their neighborhood and their contribution as steelworkers.