Actor pours out heart in show

The Steel Festival's one-man production tells the story of making steel.

By PAUL WILLSTEIN
Arts Editor

It comes down to this: one man alone on a stage, telling the story of steel.

If you see only one event at the Steel Festival, see this: "Pouring the Sun," storyteller Jay O'Callahan's powerfully vivid one-man show.

To call it a show reduces O'Callahan, who Time magazine justifiably called a genius, to entertainment. Surely his "Pouring the Sun" — a steelmaking metaphor — is much more. This is the art of storytelling refined like the steel made by the South Bethlehem plant that inspired the festival.

"Pouring the Sun" is really a one-family show. O'Callahan unfolds the story of an 18-year-old girl, Ludwika Wadowhny, who leaves Poland for America. She meets Fritz, her future husband, a steel machinist. They raise their children in a Ridge Street house overlooking the plant.

Thursday night not 10 feet in front of O'Callahan, in the Diamond Theater at Lehigh University's Zoellner Arts Center, sat Mary Soltysiak, Ludwika's daughter, who is among those honored in the one-hour monologue.

To call it a monologue doesn't give enough credit to O'Callahan, who on the black stage uses not a prop except a plain wooden chair, yet captivates 100 people who braved the remnants of Floyd to come to the show. Lehigh director of outreach Deb Sacarakiis said, after all, it was "a good night for storytelling."

And what storytelling. O'Callahan, the tall, gray-bearded Massachusetts resident, who performs all over the world and has authored a series of books and recorded numerous tapes, plays all the parts.

He is Ludwika in her kitchen, peeling potatoes. He is Fritz drinking beer with buddies at the Polish Hall. He is thousands of strikers at the Emory Street gate. He is the "angry-face" steel and coal policeman astride his horse, raised club ready to crash down.

In his introduction, O'Callahan noted he was asked by Touchstone Theatre co-founder Bridget George to create a dramatic work. Lehigh's Zoellner joined with the Steel Fest to present O'Callahan, who was preceded by Lehigh student pianists Katie Fay and Martin Uteras, playing Chopin.

Fritz liked to play Chopin — until he lost three fingers in a mill accident and was reduced to playing one-handed organ. Tonight, Courtney Yelovich will play Chopin, too. Fritz, her great-grandfather, would have liked that.

"Pouring the Sun," 8 p.m. today and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, Diamond Theater, Lehigh University's Zoellner Arts Center, 420 E. Packer Ave., Bethlehem. Tickets: $10, $20, $30. 1-877-STEELFEST. The exhibit, "Joe Elliott, End of an Era" continues in Zoellner gallery through Oct. 31.