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'Stone' Renders a Vermont City's Origins in Grit and Granite

By KATIE ZEZIMA

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MONTPELIER, Vt., July 3 — The men and their families came to Vermont from Canada, Scotland, Italy, Spain and Ireland at the turn of the last century for one reason: to work in the granite quarries.



A scene from "Stone," a play based on the words of Barre, Vt., quarrymen in the 1930's, written and directed by Kim Bent.

Karen Pike for The New York Times

Some blasted out rock from beneath the Green Mountains, while others meticulously shaped the white slabs into works of art. They also transformed Barre, a once-sleepy central

Vermont town, into a bustling, blue-collar melting pot where pride in the declining

industry, and an ability to spot bad granite, still run deep.

Now the words of the men and women who were lured here by the promise of quarry work are heard again in "Stone," a docudrama written and directed by Kim Bent and performed by the Lost Nation Theater here, eight miles west of Barre.

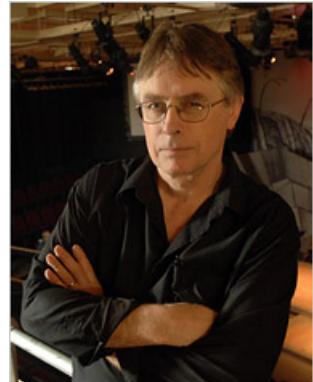
"Stone" is based on the book "Men Against Granite," a compilation of interviews that Mari Tomasi and Roaldus Richmond did in the 1930's with granite workers and their families. The conversations, part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers Project, sought to chronicle life across the country.

Mr. Bent had long wanted to do a production about the granite industry, to explore both its local roots and the connection he believed it had to theater.

"I was attracted to the idea of the relationship between the stone worker and his heart, and the fact that something was going on in there," Mr. Bent said. "Like theater, it is a collaborative art form. It takes so many people coming together to make it happen."

"Stone" first ran last summer, and was so successful that Mr. Bent brought it back. It runs through Sunday. The characters are, for the most part, composites of the people who were interviewed rather than mirror images of them.

Elia Corti, a granite worker who was shot during a political rally in 1903, is the narrator. Almost all of the dialogue is text from the interviews, which Mr. Bent copied and shaped into scenes and characters. The play also relies heavily on traditional Irish, Italian and French-Canadian music to serve as a bridge between characters.



Kim Bent
Karen Pike for The New York Times

This year Mr. Bent tweaked the show, choosing to explore further the tension that has seemed to have a grip on Barre since its name, according to the play, was chosen by the winner of a fistfight between a man from Barre, Mass., and a man from Holden, Mass., in 1793.

This strain comes through in the play in abundant drinking, ethnic jokes that are thrown around in bars and lead to altercations, and the cries of widows trying to support families. Mr. Bent chronicles it through generations, from the first immigrants who struggled with assimilation to their children and grandchildren, who grappled with working in such a dangerous environment.

"Stone" depicts an industry built on both pride and sorrow, work that allowed men to make their mark through stonecutting but in many cases ultimately killed them. One scene shows men boasting of their quality work and ability to do just about anything in a quarry. Afterward, a group of widows whose husbands have died of lung disease or in accidents appear onstage, speaking of their struggle to make ends meet by crocheting, cooking and selling bootleg liquor while rearing fatherless children.

"Many times I wished he used to keep painting rather than work in granite," one Spanish widow who sells crochet work says. "It is very lucky for me I learned how to do this work. How else would I support myself and my three children?" Mr. Bent said his characters had simply come together from the interviews. "The initial work was done so well in how it captured the voices of these people," he said. He and cast members, who mostly hail from the area, said working on "Stone" had given them a different view of the granite industry, cemeteries and the notion of memorializing oneself.

"When I carve a name on a memorial, I make a memory of that life," one stonemason says in the play. Mr. Bent said: "It makes you realize that it is not necessarily a selfish thing to want to memorialize oneself. It gives people who do this work a chance to be remembered."

The show, the actors said, also reflects the chasm between Montpelier, the state capital, which is filled with coffeehouses and boutiques, and Barre, where pizza places and chain restaurants are the norm. Some are upset that the play is not being performed there. But audiences are still coming, including a group of older people from Barre who had never been to Montpelier and the theater. Last week an elderly man who provided the model for a character played by Mark Roberts took his family. They stayed after, and said the story the character tells during the play is one he has been regaling his family with for years.

"They said it was wonderful," Mr. Roberts said. "But it does give you pause to think you might be portraying someone whose family is in the audience." Other cast members said they had seen older women crying in their seats and men solemnly nodding their heads at depictions of the mine. People whose fathers died of lung disease or who are friends of people portrayed in the show have stopped to speak to cast members.

"There are nights when there is an older person in the audience who leans over and says, 'I remember that,'" said John D. Alexander, another actor in the production.

The show, the actors said, allows people to remember heady days in a city now beset by financial problems and an industry that is on the decline. "It brings back memories people haven't felt in a long time," said Mary Wheeler, who lives in a Barre home with granite steps. Carol Dawes, who plays a Syrian immigrant peddler in the play and sits on the Barre City Council, thinks the play is a lesson for her home. "We can't pass a budget, and eight miles down the road, we're singing and dancing about Barre," she said. "It's all the things we seem to have lost touch with in Barre."