

Lewis Hine Reader's TheatreIntroduction:

During the 19th century, thousands of immigrant families moved to the United States in search of a better life. They had been told that they could make good money working in American factories. Instead, they were paid just pennies an hour for backbreaking work.

Immigrant children were in great demand as workers because they could be paid even less than their parents. By the early 1900s, there were more than two million children in the U.S. working to help support their families.

Lewis Hine was a teacher and photographer whose pictures helped convince people that young children should be playing and learning—not working at dangerous jobs.

Characters: *Narrators (A, B, C, D) Lewis Hine Students (Katrina, Will, Eva)*
Owen Lovejoy (labor leader) Jacob Riis (journalist) Girl Man

SCENE ONE

Narrator A: It is 1908 in New York City. Lewis Hine, a school teacher, stands at the door of his classroom.

Lewis Hine: We have a new student in our class. Eva, please tell us about yourself.

Eva: I came here from Germany with my family. We traveled on a big ship where there was music and plenty of good food.

Hine: Why did your family come to America?

Eva: My uncle is a jeweler here. My father works with him now.

Hine: It sounds like you have a good life. Many children are not so lucky. They don't even go to school.

Will: I think school is boring.

Eva: So do I. But it's important. At least, that's what my father says.

Katrina: What do the children who don't go to school do all day, Mr. Hine?

Hine: Some work in coal mines. Here in New York, many young children work in cotton and silk mills.

Katrina: Why do their parents let them work at such a young age?

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Child Labor

Hine: Some families have no choice if they want to put food on the table. Many immigrants arrive here penniless.

Eva: The woman who cleans our house came to New York from Ireland. Her husband got sick on the way over and died. So she had to send Casey, her little girl, to work in a cotton mill.

Katrina: That's so sad!

Eva: Otherwise they would have starved to death.

Will: How old is Casey?

Eva: Seven or eight, I think. Last week, a spinning machine chopped off one of her fingers.

Will: My grandfather owns a silk factory. He hires children to work there because they don't mind earning less money.

Katrina: My father owns lots of factories. He says people are poor because they're lazy.

Eva: Casey's mother isn't lazy. She works harder than anyone I know. She just doesn't have any family here to help her. That's why Casey has to work.

Hine: Most immigrants came here so that their children would have a better future. It's sad that the children often have to work long hours at dangerous jobs. Kids who work can't go to school.

Katrina: Well, maybe my father's wrong. I feel sorry for Casey. I wonder if she ever has time to play.

Will: Not have time to play? That would be awful!

SCENE TWO

Narrator B: Hine has been teaching for seven years. About five years ago, he bought a camera.

Owen Lovejoy: These photographs are pretty good, Hine.

Narrator B: Hine has been documenting the lives of immigrant families on New York City's Lower East Side.

Hine: Someone has to tell the public about these poor people.

Narrator B: While Hine snaps photographs, journalists like Jacob Riis write about crowded, rundown apartment buildings, called tenements, where many immigrants live.

Jacob Riis: "... Up two flights of dark stairs ... whirring sewing machines behind closed doors betray what goes on within....[Inside] the floor is littered with half-sewn garments."

Narrator B: Riis reveals that young immigrant children are working feverishly to help support their families.

Jacob Riis: "A child works on the [sewing] machine ... twelve hours a day, turning out three dozen knee pants, for which he receives 42 cents a dozen."

Narrator B: President Theodore Roosevelt labels Riis, and other journalists who expose social injustice, "muckrakers." Roosevelt wants the journalists to write about what they see, but he also fears that they will exaggerate the truth.

SCENE THREE

Narrator C: Despite the *muckrakers'* efforts, most people either do not know or do not care about child workers. Labor leaders want to change that.

Lovejoy: Will you travel around the country and take pictures for us, Hine?

Hine: But I'm a teacher.

Lovejoy: Exactly. You'll help people understand the truth.

Hine: If it will help save these children, I'll do it.

Narrator C: In one 12-month period, Hine travels more than 12,000 miles. He speaks to countless audiences.

Hine: Perhaps you are weary of child labor pictures ...

Man in Audience: Hear! Hear!

Hine: Well, so am I.

Man: Then why keep taking them?

Hine: I want there to be pictures of child laborers in every city and town in America. That way, people will realize that a law must be passed to protect

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these children. Once there no more children doing dangerous work, there will be no more pictures.

Narrator C: Hine records boys hunched over coal chutes, fingers torn and bleeding. He photographs girls dwarfed by huge spinning machines.

Mill Girl: I've been looking at the loom so long the threads seem to be cutting into my eyes.

Narrator C: Many mill girls work all night long. Cruel bosses throw water in their faces to keep them awake.

Hine: I hope we can get laws passed to save you girls.

Mill Girl: Me, too, mister. But if I didn't work, my little brother would have nothin' to eat.

Hine: If you and your brother don't get an education, you'll be doomed to a life of poverty. Factory owners should be required to pay your parents a living wage so that you can go to school.

SCENE FOUR

Narrator D: People across the country see Hine's photographs in newspapers and magazines.

Lovejoy: These pictures speak for themselves, Hine. I think they prove, once and for all, that young children don't belong in dangerous jobs.

Narrator D: Eventually, Hine's photographs convince the public that something needs to be done.

Lovejoy: Without you, Hine, Congress wouldn't have passed this law.

Narrator D: The Keating-Owen Act, passed in 1916, puts restrictions on the employment of children under 14 in factories and shops. But two years later, the U.S. Supreme court declares the law unconstitutional.

Later laws do little good. It is not until 1938 that the Fair Labor Standards Act places effective limitations on child labor.

Postscript:

Lewis Hine continued to take photographs, but he never earned enough money to support himself. He died in poverty.