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A. Finkl & Sons, Chicago

How does a steel mill attain cult status? In Chicago, where 100,000 manufacturing jobs have disappeared since 1970, companies who still actually make things have been given sanctuary in “Planned Manufacturing Districts.” In one such district, the North Branch Industrial Corridor, A. Finkl & Sons’ steel mill has become part cutting-edge manufacturer and part amusement park attraction, an ongoing, theatrical revival of Chicago’s past. Family owned and operated on the same site since 1870, Finkl’s may hold over 100 U.S. patents, but as steel mills go, it is so small and specialized as to be quaint. Their specialty is the Vacuum Arc De-gassing Process, a way of making steel in a virtual vacuum pressurized to 1/15,000 of normal air pressure and heated to 2,800° Fahrenheit. The furnace allows molten steel to be held at perfect teeming temperature while its chemistry is adjusted, its impurities being literally sucked out by the vacuum process.

In recent years Finkl’s has found itself amidst the gentrification of nearby Clybourn Avenue, now boasting as neighbors the Bossa Nova Restaurant (latin dinner and dancing); Whiskey River (country

music and line dancing); Blockbuster Video (we have Forrest Gump!); Pet Care (50 lb. sacks of kitty litter); Kroch's and Brentano's (retail books); House of Teak (furniture and stuff); Pier One Imports (more stuff); Batter Up Arcade (restrooms for customers only); White Hen Pantry (24 hour ice cream and Oreos); Starbuck's (today's flavor: Guatemalan); and a Sony Octoplex (the same eight movies playing at the mall near you).

This story, of industry giving way to random shopping and miniature golf, could be told throughout America. What has distinguished Finkl's is its willingness to bond with its consumer-oriented neighbors, simultaneously discovering—perhaps unwittingly—its own entertainment value. Finkl's seems to have realized that the sheer novelty of its operation might benefit the company as much as the quality of its steel, and so, with the city's blessing, the mill closed off one block of Southport Avenue, constructed ten meter-high steel archways at each end like an amusement park, and installed park benches, fir trees and seasonal flowers. The promenade was officially inaugurated with an open house and barbecue that included live music, A. Finkl & Sons merchandise, and the unveiling of a retired six-ton steamhammer and rotary saw as monuments. Now after Die Hard III—Die Hard With a Vengeance lets out around midnight, and after the Riptide and the Blue Note close at 4 a.m., people go by Finkl's to see if the melting room is open or if any ingots are aglow in the cooling yard.

Certainly the initial appeal of Finkl's is that its melting room shares much with the chromatic range and machinery of action movies, the most appealing gimmick of the latter being human figures hurtling in slow motion from an exploding fire ball, their flailing bodies silhouetted against the bulging and expanding flames. The combination of passive inevitability (the body hurtling and falling to earth) and calculated success (the bomb has worked!) is compelling: you can identify with either or both. The melting room of Finkl's provides a similar fantasy, involving the look of danger (molten steel) and awe of precision (finished steel). Seeing those colors and that scale relaxes us into our cinema mode. It's cool, and entertaining, so we watch whether we know anything about steel manufacturing or not.

Finkl's process also shares a kind of mystery with the production of action movies. Part of the appeal of such cinematic bomb blasts and elevator shaft rescues is the filmmakers' ability to rehearse and edit these scenes to the point where they seem spontaneous. And just as Hollywood's harnesses and stunt booms are invisible to us, so are Finkl's controls. All we see through the vista of the melting room doors are silver-clad men against a cascade of molten metal and orange smoke, a scene which seems just as tantalizing as Backdraft or Terminator 2. The difference—and fascination—is that, however routine, Finkl Steel is spontaneous, and real.

Which is not to say that larger-than-life metal forging is heroic, merely that it is skilled. However visually stunning, steelmaking is most impressive when you are standing next to an orange-hot, coffin-sized cylinder of metal sizzling in the evening rain, its heat emanating through your clothes, its form made indistinct by the clash of the 1400° stainless steel and 40° night air. Ultimately Finkl's most profound attraction is that such obvious labor is utterly unfamiliar to we 100,000 artists, restaurant managers, and alternative rock bands who have replaced all those lost factory workers. To us, steelmaking seems no less contrived than a Civil War battle reenactment, no less anachronistic than colonial Williamsburg.

For us, Finkl's is as much theatre as it is manufacturing, a theme park based on the Modern era, one that, like the smithy at Williamsburg, Virginia, happens to sell what it turns out.

In the end, however, my fascination with A. Finkl & Sons isn't of much use since, like heroism, it is the product of ignorance. De Tocqueville speculated that "if men were ever to content themselves with material objects, it is probable that they would lose by degrees the art of producing them; and they would enjoy them in the end like the brutes, without discernment and without improvement." Fresh from the movies or the strip mall, with a copy of Red Desert on the front seat of the car and 50 points of kitty litter in the trunk, it makes no difference to me whether A. Finkl & Sons makes good steel or not.

Should it?