

THEATER REVIEW

“The True Philanthropists,”

“Nickel and Dimed” the play

A Theatrical Adaptation of Barbara Ehrenreich’s book *Nickel and Dimed, On (Not) Getting By in America* commissioned by the Intiman Theater, Seattle

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The workers are the stars.

Joan Holden’s brilliant theatrical adaptation of *Nickel and Dimed* makes that clear.

We already know the story: Barbara Ehrenreich, PhD. Sociologist, decided to live on a minimum wage in order to discover what it’s really like beyond all the windy rhetoric of government administrators who are cutting funding for welfare. For three months, in Florida, Maine, and Minnesota, she discovered that it is backbreaking, but that the people who live on low wages are powerful survivors in jobs that often don’t even give them time to pee.

Holden employed theatrical devices that perfectly presented the many sides of the story. She flashed the low wages of each job on a wall, she utilized clothing racks and neon lighting as a means of harassment, she interrupted the action with oddball choreography that served as a fleeting fantasy in the midst of the hard realities of the play.

At the beginning, Barbara (convincingly played by Sharon Lockwood) is pushed out onto the stage and bangs against closed doors while talking non-stop about the anxieties of losing her identity. Holden’s use of a rotating stage that flips, near the beginning, from a high volume all-American restaurant to a snooty Manhattan café is the perfect device for setting up the class differences that run through the center of the story. It also rotates between two sequential jobs, which, we are told, is the only way to make ends meet.

In her first job at a food chain restaurant, Barbara immediately discovers that she can barely manage the many complex details and the physically and emotionally draining work. The regulars teach her to carry a tray, set a table, charge up meals on a computer and a myriad of other acts that eventually become so internalized that they are a complex choreography (the pace doesn’t allow time to think). She manages to survive to return for a second day, a humble triumph. But when the going gets really rough she simply leaves, she walks out of the job and out of that chapter of the story, almost like Dorothy who opts for Oz (which is what Barbara’s middle class life seems like) over the realities of Kansas.

Barbara frequently addresses the audience directly with various insights, philosophical tidbits and witty asides, but, as seen in her exit from the restaurant, she is never the star of this show. She is the middle class woman, who is stumbling over her own privileges all the time (like her high dollar Reeboks) and admits to her weaknesses and mistakes as she is confronted by the difficulties of “getting by.” That phrase translates into a place to sleep, something to eat, and enough employment to pay for it.

It is her fellow workers, presented by only five talented actors (Jason Cottle, Kristin Flanders, Cynthia Jones, Cristine McMurdo-Wallis, and Olga Sanchez) each playing multiple parts, who are the heroes, as they deal with housing, bills, oppressive regulations, employer harassment, domestic abuse, and health problems, but still get up to work another day, help out fellow employees, and even crack jokes. It all comes through with wit and pathos in this fast paced show.

Holden shaped some wonderful characters from the people in the book. One of the most memorable was the tough fiftyish waitress at the chain restaurant, who was still waiting for her health benefits and had a dicey home environment, with an abusive partner, but was always able to find ten seconds to talk cheerfully to customers.

Another was the pregnant young house cleaner who wouldn't ask for time off after she fell down the stairs. Barbara grabbed the phone and tried to make her employer cover a trip to the hospital. That interference was obviously a major lapse and Holden conveys that by giving us her co-workers desperate thoughts of their own vulnerable conditions as they return to base. Union rights? Workers Compensation? Pregnancy Leave? These don't figure in this minimum wage world.

The various scenes, focusing on different jobs, nursing home, Wal-mart, hotel room cleaning, maid service, as well as food service, are also laced with many other issues, particularly the punishing abuse of the body in low wage work, the lack of time to actually do anything other than work, the unnecessarily petty requirements of working environments, the abuse of women, the gap of housing costs and wages, and the impossibility of finding any type of housing at all.

About half way through the play Barbara brags, as she does in the book, that she herself has never hired a maid. Holden interrupts the action as the actors rush out onto the stage and perform a survey of the audience on how many of us have maids and what we pay them. This disruption of the illusion that this is a play about someone else hits home. Well-off upper middle class theater goers as well as middle class intellectuals (even including the actors themselves, as they declare) sit at the center of the issues, as we make decisions about consumption, child-care, and house cleaning. We are beneficiaries of the fact that "the working poor are the major philanthropists of our society."

The play is accompanied by information on various organizations that are trying to address some of these problems, an opportunity to send a post card to President Bush, as well as an exhibition of photographs by Suzie Fitzhugh of people in Seattle who are scraping to make ends meet. Again what comes through is as Fitzhugh puts it "the power of love and hope for the future." Fitzhugh combines her photographs (selected by the participants) with brief narratives of their lives, and a few questions. The subjects include a farm worker, a vegetable packer, a child care worker, a resident of Tent City, a Home Care Assistant, a security worker and a clerical worker who is going to night school. Children figure prominently in these stories, although they are barely referenced in the play ,except for one single mother trying to keep track of her children by phone.

At a time when the economy is moving down, and the benefits from the government are being even further cut because of the war on terrorism, this play, as well as Ehrenreich's book, couldn't be more timely and important. In Holden's adaptation, we never lose sight of the issues even as we laugh and cry with these memorable characters.