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Most people - whether they've had theatrical experience or not - understand the concept of the Actor's Nightmare. You don't know your lines, you're not in costume, you don't even know what *play* you're in ... yet you somehow find yourself on stage, in front of an audience, and expected to perform. *Now* .

Nickel & Dimed, currently playing at Augustana College's Potter Hall, opens with the Server's Nightmare. In the span of five minutes, our protagonist, the newly employed Barbara (Christine Barnes), is briefly introduced to the eatery's wait staff, gets a quick tutorial on procedure, takes breakfast orders from her first (uncooperative) table, brings out their meals, and is immediately ordered to return them - the toast is wrong, the oatmeal is cold, and could I change my side dish to prunes?

At which point Barbara turns to the audience and says, with a frozen grin indicating barely concealed rage, "This is not my real life."

Anyone who's worked in the service industry will watch this scene with a shudder of recognition - who, on a particularly hellish workday, hasn't surveyed the madness around them and thought, "This is not my real life"? In Barbara's case, though, it's true; she's actually an author working "undercover," getting hands-on experience for a forthcoming book about the plight of lower-middle-class working women.

So begins this touching, funny, altogether marvelous production, directed by recent Augustana graduate Cori Veverka with sensitivity and great imagination. *Nickel & Dimed* has issues to

raise and injustices to bring to the fore, but it's in no way a tract; Joan Holden's adaptation of Barbara Ehrenreich's bestselling *Nickel & Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* manages to be both culturally significant *and* terrifically enjoyable. Don't make the mistake of thinking this debut presentation in the school's "Issues of Our Times" season is merely "good for you"; I had a *blast*.

And I *loved* Barnes' performance as Barbara, but I can't imagine who wouldn't. I'd seen Barnes in four previous Augustana efforts and had always enjoyed her work, yet her portrayal here is revelatory. She doesn't quite suggest her character's age of 55 (tough to criticize a student performer for *that*), but Barnes effortlessly exudes maturity and experience, she makes her character's experiences moving without telegraphing the poignancy, and, best of all, she's laugh-out-loud funny.

In fact, the most heartening thing about *Nickel & Dimed* is how often the show *allows* itself to be laugh-out-loud funny. Despite its dramatic leanings, Holden's adaptation firmly establishes Barbara as a figure worthy of some comedic scorn; from the outset, the audience is *hoping* to see her taken down a peg or two. (The peg count winds up more like four or five.) Barbara will often interrupt *Nickel & Dimed*'s narrative to address us directly, and the smartest move Holden made was to use these moments to underscore Barbara's ignorance at her inherent snobbery - during an early, computerized employment survey, she answers hypotheticals such as "Some employees perform better when they're a little bit high" with a resounding "Strongly disagree." (This after revealing that she's smoked pot for the better part of 30 years.) From the start, Barbara - who will take on a half-dozen low-wage jobs through the course of the play - insinuates, ever so subtly, that she's *better* than the women whose lives she's planning to study; the comedy - and understated heartbreak - of *Nickel & Dimed* comes from Barbara realizing that she's in no *way* "better."

Barbara's indoctrination into the world of the lower-middle class yields many memorable

moments, all of which Barnes performs with superlative skill; after a passionate tirade against an employer who doesn't care for the way Barbara washes windows, Barnes turns to us and says, with perfect deadpan, "I'm sorry. Was that *shrill*?" (On Friday night, her reading brought down the house.) The actress' role features a beautifully delineated dramatic arc, and Barnes plays it for all it's worth, and she has a great natural prop assisting her; as Barbara gets ever more flummoxed and exhausted, Barnes' perfectly controlled bangs take on a life of their own.

Six other cast members portray a whole world of Barbara's workmates, employers, and acquaintances, and as with Augustana's *The Laramie Project*, this convention gives the actors opportunities to make *several* distinct impressions. Sarah Larsen, Katie McCarthy, and Rachel Krein have the sextet's more low-key roles but make them all honest (and deliver some fine dialectical work), and Kyle Roggenbuck, Justin Schaller, and Brian Bengtson oftentimes pop like firecrackers. Roggenbuck is given the most varied material - she gets to play an ancient cleaning woman, a sweetly devout Minnesota mother, *and* a short-tempered cook named Hector - and is impressively vibrant in all three parts; Schaller is especially wonderful as a Czech dishwasher with minimal command of English; and Bengtson, yet again, manages to turn borderline cartoons into touchingly human figures, particularly in his turn as a comically earnest "Mall-Mart" suit. (The Wal-Mart jabs here are less penetrating but also less obnoxious than they were in the recent documentary *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices*.)

The production isn't perfect. There are times when characters *besides* Barbara address the audience, which is rather baffling - Bengtson's monologue in defense of that mega-store corporation feels like a caveat that was tacked on at Wal-Mart's urging - and although the end results are worth the wait, the numerous scene changes take an uncomfortably long time to accomplish. Yet *Nickel & Dimed* is a strong, invigorating piece, and it's filled with moments to make you cringe; when Barbara discusses a writing assignment with her editor, she stops mid-sentence when the server approaches to clear the table, and the lingering silence while the dishes are removed perfectly embodies day-to-day condescension toward the working class. *Nickel & Dimed* has important things to say. It's to Ehrenreich's, Holden's, and Augustana's credit - and the audience's *relief* - that it says them so entertainingly.

For tickets, call (309) 794-7306.