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by Elika Roohi / News-Miner intern

UAF's 'Nickel and Dimed' delves into the reality of working for a living

It was more than 10 years ago when Barbara Ehrenreich quit her middle class life to work in a series of minimum wage jobs, just to see if she could make it on \$5.15 per hour. Sadly, it's still a relevant story, and one that's coming to UAF's stage this weekend.

Ehrenreich's non-fiction best seller, "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America" was adapted into a screenplay in 2002 by playwright Joan Holden. The play is centered around Ehrenreich's journey as a journalist who went undercover as a low-wage worker in three different states and the people she met along the way. Ehrenreich found herself doing everything from waitressing to housekeeping to working at Walmart, desperately trying to make ends meet in Florida, Maine and Minnesota.

"This play is gonna provoke thought — not just thought, but deep thought," said Nicole Cowans, a theater student at UAF and a cast member in the show.

Ehrenreich is played by Rachel Blackwell, who graduated from UAF with a theater degree in 2006. Most recently, Blackwell was in "The Odd Couple" and "Romeo and Juliet," but she's been involved with theater in Fairbanks for several years.

Blackwell spent a lot of time thinking about who Ehrenreich is, trying to grasp the differences and figure out how to represent the balance between her life as a journalist and her life working minimum wage jobs.

"There's one scene where she's with her editor, eating at a fancy restaurant, and then later she's living in a cabin in the woods," Blackwell said.

Every time you're performing a character, you try to imagine them as a real person, Blackwell said. This role is slightly different, in that Ehrenreich is already a real person.

"There really are people experiencing stuff like this. It's something that's going on in our economy and our country," Blackwell said.

The eight-person cast plays 41 different parts during the play. Blackwell plays the part of Ehrenreich the whole time, but you'll see the other cast members in a wide variety of parts during the show.

Cowans, who starred in "Speech and Debate" last spring, will be playing six different parts during the show, which is a new experience for her.

"When you have one character, it's easy to dive deep," Cowans said. "It's hard to give everybody a background and a life and a story when there are six characters."

Theater student Marley Horner plays several of the male characters in the play, mostly the roles of Ehrenreich's bosses at her various jobs. Horner has spent a lot of time working on portraying his characters as well-rounded, real people — not just bad guys.

"There aren't really bad guys in this play," Horner said. "They're just the other side."

The theater department picked the play because of the large number of female roles in the cast. There are a lot of women in the department, and director Brian Cook wanted to find a work that could play to that strength. He was also taken by the story of the play.

Even though the story comes from a non-fiction book, it's distinctly dramatic.

"We know this world," Cook said. "We go to diners and make small talk with our waitresses. We've worked in a minimum wage job at one point or another. The truth of the story, though over 10 years old, makes the play hit even closer to home."

According to Cook, the realness of the story that the cast is working with has made them all take it more seriously than they might have otherwise.

"We have a responsibility, because our stories are based in truth," Cook said.

Something that makes the play so striking is its continued relevance. When Ehrenreich was working on her book, minimum wage was \$5.15 per hour. It has been raised three times since then — to \$5.85 in 2007, \$6.55 in 2008 and \$7.25 in 2009.

"She could do that same experiment now and have the same experience," Cook said.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Nickel and Dimed"
 WHERE: Lee H. Salisbury Theatre in the Fine Arts Complex on the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus
 WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; Oct. 25-Nov. 3
 COST: \$14 adults; \$11 seniors and military; \$7 students online/\$2 more at door
 FYI: The play is based on Barbara Ehrenreich's best selling non-fiction book.

Cast and Crew

Rachel Blackwell as Barbara
 Melissa Buchta as Woman, Daughter, Customer, Carlie, Marge, Patient 3, Lady Daniels as Gail, Maddy, Patient 4, Mom
 Nicole Cowans as Nita, Server 1, Hector, Rich Lady, Patient 1, Melissa
 Ian Hendren as George, Man, Boyfriend, Stock-boy, Pete, Timid Man
 Marley Horner as Editor, Philip, Customer, Ted, Howard
 Katrina Kuharich as Server 2, Joan, Holly, Social Worker, Sari
 Nancy Nguyen as Teenager, Manager, Cashier, Customer, Nan, Patient 2, Kim
 Director: Brian EG Cook
 Set, Lighting and Sound Designer: Kade Mendelowitz
 Costume Designer: Bethany Marx
 Assistant Director: Mary Ludolph



From left, Rachel Blackwell, Daniels Calvin, Nicole Cowans, Katrina Kuharich, Ian Hendren, Marley Horner and Nancy Nguyen star in "Nickel & Dimed," the fall mainstage production put on by Theatre UAF. Photo courtesy Kade Mendelowitz