

**Theater review:**

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by Scott McCrea

'Nickel and Dimed' makes it on more than a daily wage

At the end of Theatre UAF's production of "Nickel and Dimed" a character named Carlie, played by Melissa Buchta, tells the audience about a new job she has as an in-home caregiver for an elderly woman. It's not a bad gig, she explains, compared to her last job as a maid at the Comfort Inn. "Always got cigarettes. I don't need to steal 'em, she offer 'em," she says. "I got my own room, with a TV."

"I got it made," she admits, then, with a tired pause — "For now."

"For now" describes the plight of almost all of the characters in the stage adaptation of Barbara Ehrenreich's bestseller exploring the world of minimum wage jobs in America and the people who toil at them. These are people who do not necessarily live for tomorrow or look ahead to a bright future. It is about the present and getting by however possible, working long shifts at sometimes more than one job to pay rent that is past due and put food on the table for their family that night. "For now" is the world they live in, where the next day could have in store a layoff or electricity being shut off due to non-payment.

Directed by Brian Cook, "Nickel and Dimed" is a thought provoking play that is quite effective at delivering its message and maintaining a balance of social commentary and entertainment value without coming across as in your face political theater. If anyone has

ever worked at any point in any of the jobs depicted in the play you will discover recognizable characters, performed by a talented cast that bring to life a microcosm of today's low wage work world.

The play is largely told through the narration of Ehrenreich, effectively played by Rachel Blackwell. Ehrenreich, a writer, leaves behind her safety net of a well-paid job, a husband and a nice home to experience first hand the world of minimum wage jobs. The play chronicles her experience working in different parts of America as a coffee shop waitress, a housecleaner, a box store clerk (at the imaginary "Mall Mart"), and in a senior home. We meet her impoverished and compassionate co-workers and hostile and oppressive managers. We plunge straight into the world she experiences and become intertwined ourselves with people, who, like so many, are simply just trying to get by.

Blackwell does a marvelous job in her portrayal of Ehrenreich, taking her character down the road from her well-to-do life into one where every day is a struggle. The problems she experiences are just as real as the people she meets.

The seven supporting performers who make up the rest of the play juggle multiple roles with remarkable efficiency and clear separations from one character to another. It's a shame the program didn't provide a

list of each character played by each performer. Billed as ensemble actors, what they brought to the stage carried a large bulk of the store, introducing us to very compelling and at times, very colorful, characters. The aforementioned Buchta stole the show with her excellent portrayal of a dogged and tired maid as well as a stereotypical but hilarious depiction of an average Mall Mart shopper. I also liked Ian Hendren as the immigrant bus boy George, Daniels Calvin's Joan, a sympathetic co-worker of Ehrenreich's at the diner, Marley Horner as a by-the-numbers associate manager of Mall Mart, Nicole Cowans as the short-order cook Hector, and Karina Kuharich as Holly, a young housekeeper working through some tremendous odds.

The play boasts a fantastic set, with scene design by Kade Mendelowitz. The transitions from one scene and business to another is absolutely flawless in its execution.

General admission ticket price for the show is \$14 for adults. Better put, that's about two to three hours worth of wages for the average character in the play. They put a lot into earning that \$14 — all we have to do is sit back and watch something that is well worth our money and time — down to the last dime.

"Nickel and Dimed" runs through this weekend with performances at 7:30 p.m Friday and Saturday night and a Sunday matinee at 2 p.m.