Nickel and Dimed (review)

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Investigative journalist and author Barbara Ehrenreich’s non-fiction best-seller about the impossibility of surviving on low-wage service jobs appeared in bookstores just as the U.S. boom economy went bust; her timely account of the three months she spent in three different states struggling to survive as a member of that exhausted and often invisible workforce has brought renewed attention to the problems of low-wage workers in America. Upon hearing an interview with Ehrenreich on National Public Radio, artistic director Bartlett Sher of Seattle’s Intiman Theatre secured the rights to create and produce a dramatic version of her odyssey, and he hired Joan Holden, principal playwright of the San Francisco Mime Troupe for thirty years, to write the script. Nickel and Dimed, the Intiman’s first commissioned world premiere since 1988, opened for a month-long run in July 2002; before the run had concluded, the company received an invitation to take the production to Los Angeles, where it opened the 2002–2003 season at the Mark Taper Forum. While Sher envisioned an opportunity to focus his audience’s attention on working-class community members whose labors, in Ehrenreich’s conclusion, subsidize the lives of the middle and upper classes, he was also attracted by the proven dramatic device embedded in the story: a character, disguised as someone else, embarks on an adventure in strange territory and ends up learning more about herself and about society.

In her book, Ehrenreich reports on grueling seven-day weeks in which she and her co-workers toil, underpaid and undervalued, at demanding and exhausting jobs, and exposes the uncertainty that comes with insufficient training, the indignity of management surveillance and the danger posed by chemical cleaners and unsafe working conditions. But she peppers it with a wit that Holden mixes with her own broad comic style to create a dramatic work that utilizes both satire and slapstick to make its points. To shape the book’s episodic structure into a more focused narrative, Holden combines characters, embellishes details and in-
vents an epilogue in which workers report on how they have fared since Ehrenreich returned to her middle-class life. The play uses selected bits of research from the book as characters quote relevant statistics in frequent asides, and Ehrenreich’s careful reporting of rent prices and hourly wages become numeric projections on the walls flanking the stage. The recitation and projection of numbers that don’t add up to a living wage reveal the absurdity of the worker’s quest to make ends meet, as *Nickel and Dimed* is transformed into a performance text whose irony delivers an eye-opening dramatic punch. The script’s confrontational style provokes giggling discomfort in the audience during a key exchange in the second act when cast member Kristin Flanders halts the action and steps out of character to challenge actors and spectators about their own reliance on cleaning services; the sequence proposes actor and audience culpability while also suggesting that actors may see both sides, for some of them have had to supplement financially uncertain acting careers with low-paying service jobs.

To emphasize the fictionalizing that has occurred in the process of transforming the work from journalism to drama, the author becomes just “Barbara,” and Sharon Lockwood, a core member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe for many years, skillfully portrays her as earnest and exasperated. The supporting cast of Sanchez and four other ensemble players, Kristin Flanders, Cristine McMurdo-Wallis, Cynthia Jones and Jason Cottle move deftly from one role to another as they represent workers and management, their transformations facilitated by efficient onstage costume changes. Rose Pederson’s designs include appropriately styleless service uniforms accessorized with hairnets and rubber gloves, while John Arnone’s sets use wood paneling, nondescript office furniture and florescent lighting to provide flexibility for the frequent location changes and to convey a psychologically desolate mood for the characters’ working and living environments. A revolving stage contributes to the show’s well-paced energy, and in the first act, the restaurant’s circular pattern of in and out doors and a brief series of scenes performed on almost constant stage rotations convey the frantic and repetitive routines in which Barbara and her fellow workers are trapped. A series of dances lighten the mood in the third act as actors pirouette with steel “Mall-Mart” racks, gliding their artificial partners into place accompanied by the original instrumental music of composer/performer Michael McQuilken. Visible on stage throughout the performance, McQuilken and his one-man-band complete with drums, keyboard, guitar and various sound devices provide another example of the economy and precise execution that marks each aspect of this production. His sharp and lively rifts rely on vaudevillian rhythm and timing to provide astute musical commentary that highlights the comic irony of the speeches and the situations.

Beyond the laughter, however, serious issues emerge, and to generate further thought and discussion on wage issues in America, the Intiman organized a full range of public activities in conjunction with the production. Besides making discount tickets available to local low-wage earners, the theatre hosted a free public conversation with Ehrenreich and Holden, displayed photographs of low-income working women in the theatre lobby, held informal discussions after every show and conducted a series of post-play forums about Seattle’s working poor.

Although Sher envisioned the work as an adventure story in which the protagonist discovers important truths about herself and society, Barbara reveals in the opening scenes that she already knows more than most people about the struggle that low-wage earners face. Left with only minor discoveries to make along the way, her character does not change much, and what changes occur are recited rather than dramatized. Nonetheless, recitations of recognition occasionally hit the mark, as when Barbara realizes that only her father’s escape from the mining town in which he was raised stands between her and the kind of poverty she briefly experiences in her investigative foray. Herein lies the work’s power, for even middle-class audience members who are several generations removed from the unskilled labor market may recognize, in the troubled economic times of 2002, that the comfortable distance between them and the maids, the waitresses and the “Mall-Mart” associates, appears to have shrunk.

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**HARLEM SONG.** By George C. Wolfe; original music, arrangements, and music supervision by Zane Mark and Daryl Waters. Apollo Theater, New York. 9 September 2002.

Heady civic ambitions are behind Wolfe’s newest theatrical enterprise. The musical extravaganza *Harlem Song* looks to catalyze an ongoing economic revitalization by luring investments, resources, and