

## ***Nickel and Dimed* by Joan Holden**

based on *Nickel and Dimed, On (NOT) Getting By in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich.

### **Director's thoughts**

**Nickel and Diming:** to expose to financial hardship or bankruptcy by the accumulation of small expenses, bills, etc.: We're being **nickel-and-dimed** to death by these small weekly expenses.

### **Lives Struggling to Exist on Bare Minimums**

A best seller, "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America" was written in 2001 and adapted into a play in 2002. Reactions to Ehrenreich's book were for the most part positive. Critics called her "somewhat pompous and self-involved." Even some closest to her questioned the validity of her findings. The main character Barbara, is able to stand up for the underdog only because she has the comfort of a fall back. We'll see how truly brave someone is when they fight for the underdog while having everything to lose. Ehrenreich's goal is to shed a light on the financial hardships of daily life facing millions of Americans everyday. How they manage to keep falling behind all while being surrounded by prosperity. They are the invisible workforce that fuels our everyday economy. Barbara is inevitably humbled by how hard and next to impossible the work actually is. She quickly learns that America's wages are too low and rents are too high.

During Covid, when millions of Americans are being evicted due to the loss of many of these types of jobs, makes this the perfect time for Theatre Midwest to do this play. What so many of us take for granted and hardly give a thought to (insurance, sick-leave, food security, day care, solid housing) is what is utmost on many people's/our minds. Worry and anxiety color their everyday existence. Will I make rent? Can I stretch what groceries we have to the end of the week? Will I get sick and not be able to work? There is no talk of the future past the week they are in. Long term planning ends up being the stuff of dreams and remains untenable.

## **Casting**

We will cast six women and one man. The challenge with casting is that each actor (except Actor #1-Barbara) needs to portray multiple characters- sometimes playing more than one in the same scene. Our challenge will be how do we differentiate each character? Something as simple as a hat or bandana? Do we put a name under each character?

When figuring the character schematic, the sheer number of characters is daunting. Many we only see once. Each is necessary and has a story of their own.

## **A Note on Barbara**

Joan Holden states that Barbara's near constant irony isn't anger but how she sublimates anger. What is this anger about? How hard this work actually is? What does she want to come out of this? Do we see her as a white savior? How does she think people will treat her when they find out? She is surprised at their anger. How are they not thankful for her sacrifice? Barbara at one point turns to the audience and says, "this is not my real life." What if it was? What would that kind of rage look like?

## **Scenes**

Nickel and Dimed is broken up into three acts with three to eight scenes in each. It also contains two interludes, a prologue and an epilogue. The first scene opens with the loud chaos of a busy mid-level diner. As this is a reading, what is the best way to convey this online?

The top of each scene is announced by a sign stating the job and the wage (see schematic.) How else can we differentiate each scene? Do we change actor's backgrounds? When we actually record the play, do we record the scenes as separate episodes then piece together?

We will be cutting the "optional breakout scene" on pages 43-44. This is geared toward audience participation which is not possible in our format.

## **Sound**

Sound for transitions and underscoring is important. Can ambient noise- in Kenny's or Mall-mart be used to help add to the chaos? Having a bit of music underscoring each card with job/wage will help with transitions.

## Covid protocols

The below section was written by Tom Woldt and I think sums up how we will approach the online performance:

“Needless to say, there is a whole other field of traps waiting for us in the technology of working in this platform. We’re all on a steep learning curve, exploring how each of our machines and gear can work best at the individual and, most importantly, communal levels. Further conversation will sort out what each of us has at hand in our plague-home-performing-spaces in terms of equipment and how we can maximize its efficiency or supplement its capacity. No matter how much ‘horse-power’ we are applying to the equation, however, here’s one thing we know going in: there is a built-in delay in the exchange of words. We will endeavor to find how best to slightly anticipate when to come in, without stepping on the intrinsic comedy/punchlines or strangling the sound electronically. As you likely know, when two or more people speak on top of each other in the digi world, both are typically squeezed by a mangled (unpleasant) growl or screech.

This project will also bring us into the evolving conversations about “what’s the difference between a ‘reading’ and a ‘production’, especially as presented online?” This is one of our FRESH PRODUCE Concert Readings, so... it’s a ‘reading.’ Were we doing this in-person, we would be using music stands, no props, down-stage focal point/s (as opposed to looking at the person standing beside one), and the \*suggestion\* of action, gesture, movement. Therefore we want to start with these protocols: focal point directly in the camera (downstage) with slight adjustments left or right or up/down if changing one’s focus from one character to another within a scene; camera framing from about top-of-shoulder with head/face in the middle of the frame, like a good headshot; suggestion of props. That said, we will also investigate: similar (probably neutral) backgrounds in each actor’s acting studio/abode; clothing and hair that ‘suggests’ the vibe;

This is the perfect play given Theatre Midwest’s mission. I look forward to answering and discovering everything above with you!

Ann Woldt