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Setting the Stage for Change

Alumni and students creatively worked side-by-side with IWU theatre faculty to create an indelible portrayal of the struggles of America's working poor.

Story by KIM HILL

It is a warm Friday evening in Chicago's affluent Lincoln Park neighborhood. Revelers spill out of trendy bars and restaurants. Fashionably dressed residents push toddlers in strollers or zip about on bikes retailing for more than the cost of a month's rent in the city's poorer neighborhoods just miles away.

Some of those Lincoln Park residents are now sauntering through the doors of the Greenhouse Theatre Center. The multi-stage facility serves as an "incubator" for small- to mid-sized theatre companies.

Soon after taking their seats in the auditorium and flipping through a *Playbill* that advertises Polynesian cruises and a capital investment firm, the audience will be transported to a world that exists all around them but which many of them barely know. As the provocative drama *Nickel and Dimed* unfolds, six actors portray the daily lives of the working poor, trying to preserve their dignity while surviving another day in a society where the American Dream seems to shrink before their eyes.

Nickel and Dimed is the inaugural production of the nonprofit TangleKnot Theatre, a new company created by Dani Snyder-Young, IWU assistant professor of theatre arts. The play by Joan Holder is based on the 2001 best-seller *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Chosen for IWU's Summer Reading Program for first-year students in 2006, the book gives journalist Barbara Ehrenreich's account of time she spent working undercover in a series of low-paying jobs (maid, waitress, retail worker). Holden's play focuses on Barbara's emotional journey as she witnesses and experiences firsthand the many barriers, injustices and dangers faced by low-wage workers who contribute far more to society than they are given credit for.

Nickel and Dimed received positive reviews and sold out several performances in its four-week run. Younger IWU theatre alumni who had already made their way onto Chicago's robust theatre scene held critical technical and design positions on the production. The play also gave current students a chance to work on a professional off-campus production. School of Theatre Arts Director Curtis C. Trout designed the set, Snyder-Young directed the play and the production's seed funding was provided by IWU in the form of an Artistic and Scholarly Development Grant.



On load-in day, even the show's director carries gear. IWU Theatre Professor Dani Snyder-Young's nonprofit company produced

"Nickel and Dimed" with seed funding from the University.

(Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)



IWU School of Theatre Arts faculty, alumni and students joined talents for the production. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

Snyder-Young chose *Nickel and Dimed* as TangleKnot's inaugural production, in part, because she saw so few theatre companies addressing sensitive topics like class, privilege or the lives of the working poor.

"It's so taboo to talk about class because to talk about class you have to talk about money, and it's not polite to talk about money," says Snyder-Young. Those taboos don't exist in courses she teaches at Illinois Wesleyan — from theatre history and theory to directing, playwriting and dramaturgy — where she invites students to "interrogate one another, and me," asking tough questions about "who we are as people and what our roles are in the world."

Snyder-Young is convinced many Americans would like to have the same frank discussions, but can find few sanctioned places for them to do so. Seeing the potential for theatres to provide such a space motivated her to write the book *Theatre of Good*

Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change, published this fall by Palgrave Macmillan.

"The book critiques the limits of theatre in making social change," says Snyder-Young. "I created TangleKnot because writing the book left me with questions about how audience members engage with theatre that has political and social goals."

In creating TangleKnot, she wanted to put what she had learned from her research into action, creating theatre that creatively engages issues like social class not just through performance but through conversations, workshops and talk-back discussions that turn passive audience members into active participants.

She likens the process to the summer-camp game where people form a circle and then reach across it willy-nilly to join hands. The goal is to figure out how to become untangled from this "human knot" to reunite a perfect circle. The late Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal dubbed the exercise "Tangle and Knot."

"Talking about tough questions in the world is messy," says Snyder-Young. "I took the name for the company from 'Tangle and Knot' because I wanted a name that invokes a sense of messiness but that also invoked a sense of hope that it was possible to untangle the knot.

"Part of why I make theatre," she adds, "is because I believe it is one of the best ways to get people in a room to have an extended mediation about something complicated."

The TangleKnot production even inspired theatre critics to depart from their traditional evaluations of performances and production to reflect on the tough questions being asked. In the *Chicago Theatre Review*, critic Eric Tengler reflected on the comments of one of the play's characters, a "goofily officious" megastore manager who "asks us to understand how a big retailer is able to offer us such low prices: since most of their costs are fixed, the only number left to squeeze is the cost of labor. Do you want low prices? Cheap labor makes them possible."

In his review, Tengler also noted that in "a surprising moment near the end of the first act, the entire ensemble breaks character and engages the audience in a discussion of fair pay for domestic workers."

Dissolving the façade between actors and audience in a moment of shared social consciousness is exactly the kind of opportunity Snyder-Young hoped to create in establishing TangleKnot.

More than revealing the lives of the struggling working poor, Snyder-Young says she hoped the production encouraged people to think more about their own responsibility in creating an equitable society. Thanks in part to the Occupy Wall Street movement, more people are aware of the widening gap in income disparity in which the richest 1 percent earn almost 20 percent of all American household income.

While this "99 percent vs. 1 percent" dichotomy might seem like a force of unity between the middle class and working poor, "it can also mask a real privilege" held by middle-income earners, says Snyder-Young. "It's as though those of us in this lot can say, 'I'm not the 1 percent, so what responsibility do I have?'"

Snyder-Young is the first to admit there are no easy answers to such questions, but feels it is her responsibility to create the opportunity for her students and audiences to discuss them.

Antonio M. Gracias '12 recalls classroom discussions his senior year when Snyder-Young first floated the idea of starting a nonprofit theatre company centered on social commentary.

"We were all really excited about maybe being a part of a company that was trying to get people thinking about how the world is now," says Gracias. "To me, that is what theatre is supposed to do in the first place."

Managing production of sound design, Gracias was one of several young alumni who Snyder-Young recruited to work on *Nickel and Dime*. Others included Britnee Ruscitti '10 (assistant director), Zez W. Ready '11 (marketing consultant), Tristan Meredith '12 (lighting designer) Celeste V. Kelley '13 (costume designer), and art major Renee Schade '12, who created the show's



One topic raised by the play was whether low prices offered by mega-stores like the one depicted above were a fair exchange for low wages paid to employees.

publicity poster.

Snyder-Young says the alumni group represents “a very diverse class, with a wide array of interests, including a number of designers and a number of students who were interested in management.”

Zeze Ready is one of those future managers. Ready worked as operations manager for the Wilmette Theatre on Chicago’s North Shore, so he knew how to use his media contacts to get reviewers for *Nickel and Dimed*, though it wasn’t easy. “It’s really difficult when you are a new, no-name company in a city where there are 280 registered nonprofits alone, not to mention the large companies with multi-million dollar budgets,” says Ready, who double majored in marketing and theatre arts. He describes his job with TangleKnot and other companies as “taking care of the business to keep us afloat and in the black so the artists can focus on making their art.”

The production was also assisted by several current students, including Chloe Bluml ’14 (run crew and wardrobe assistant), Sarah Menke ’15 (assistant stage manager and audience-outreach associate) and Aimee Patterson ’14 (assistant lighting designer).



School of Theatre Arts Director Curtis Trout, who designed the set, described working with students and alumni as “a blast.” (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

Snyder-Young says creating a collaborative team among the alumni, current students and faculty involved in *Nickel and Dimed* was notably smooth. “The Class of 2012 started college my first year as a faculty member,” she says. “As a teacher, it is a tremendous privilege to get to work with them as adults. I had collaborators who already spoke my language.”

Still, the switch from working with Snyder-Young and Trout as peers instead of teachers required some adjustments, especially for the students.

“Dani made it very clear from the beginning that, in this setting, she was our director and our artistic counterpart, not our professor,” says Menke, who received an Eckley Summer Scholar fellowship to work on the production.

Trout counts among his proudest achievements the number of IWU design and technical theatre graduates who have moved fluidly from graduation into internship and staff positions at well-regarded theatres and other professional groups across the country. To actually work side-by-side with some of those alumni “was a real privilege,” he says.

“It was just a blast to have this opportunity to work with the young alums who were only a year or two out of school, who have already found their path in Chicago to the point of recruiting their own assistants if they needed them,” says Trout.

James Sikora also enjoyed his experience interacting with Wesleyan alumni through TangleKnot’s *Nickel and Dimed* production. The longtime IWU sociology professor and Action Research Center co-developer led a post-play discussion as part

of a sold-out event for Wesleyan alumni in July.

Sikora says he didn't come in with a set agenda for the discussion, but as he led an examination of issues raised by the play with alumni, faculty and others, he was moved by the emotions that were expressed.

"It was almost a plea, as people asked, 'What can we do?' There was certainly an empathy in the audience as they watched the plight of these people on the stage struggling through their lives," Sikora says. "I told the audience I didn't know how to fix it. If I were smarter and knew how, I'd be out working policy."

In the discussion, some in the audience also expressed gratitude and admiration for the characters portrayed in the play. As Ehrenreich wrote in her book: "When someone works for less pay than she can live on — when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently — then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. ... To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else."



Sociology Professor James Sikora led the post-play discussion.

From the perspective of both Sikora and Snyder-Young, the point of bringing into sharp dramatic focus the lives of a mostly invisible class of workers was not to inspire guilt for being privileged. Rather, it is to inspire us, the fortunate, to ask ourselves what responsibility we bear for those who are less fortunate but no less deserving of their dignity and our respect.

"I'm a great believer in taking your gift, whatever that may be, and applying it, using it, to allow other people to grow," says Sikora. "It's not really about saving the world; just a little part of it, by being a human being who treats people equitably."