



Morgan Dobersek and Manny Onate in *The Dairy Made-Right* by Ellen Struve at the Shelterbelt Theatre, Omaha. (Dan Wach)



by James Dearie

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A new play showing in Nebraska with a pro-immigrant message received backing from a Catholic university.

"The Dairy Maid-Right," by Omaha-based playwright Ellen Struve, has been running since July 7 at Omaha's Shelterbelt Theatre. The show features acting from students at Jesuit-run Creighton University.

"It's really about welcoming the stranger," Struve told NCR.

The play is a result of Struve's experiences and a reflection on the way Americans are dealing with immigration and a changing society. Struve received a grant from the [Creighton Global Initiative](#).

"The Dairy Maid-Right" is the story of Courtney and David, recent high school graduates from different backgrounds, who work at an ice cream shop called the Dairy Maid-Right in a small Nebraska town that represents "a nostalgic vision of a rural America that ... doesn't really exist anymore," Struve said.

When Courtney offers shelter at the ice cream shop to an unaccompanied Guatemalan girl named Mira, she uncovers the divergent and changing attitudes toward immigration and migrants in her hometown.

In the meantime, Courtney struggles with troubles in her family and her brother's addiction, while David and his mother deal with the fallout over their disagreement

about the direction his life should take.

Manny Onate, who helped workshop the play in the beginning stages and now portrays David in the production, told NCR he finds David's story to be "much like my story, and a lot of people I know ... a first generation Mexican-Nebraskan." David finds out during the course of the play that his mother is undocumented as the result of an immigration scam.

"I have plenty of friends and family who have had to deal with the similar issue of being scared to do anything about injustice done to them because of their documentary status," Onate said.

During her time working at the Nebraska Arts Council, Struve, who has also taught undocumented students, noticed that the Nebraska she had known was changing, as demographic shifts began to reshape the population, and small towns like the one in which the play is set were shrinking and disappearing. She began work on the play in 2014, the same year the U.S. dealt with a major immigration crisis, as tens of thousands of women and children began arriving in the U.S., fleeing violence in Central America.

"The response to the child migration in 2014 really troubled me," she said, as stories of the dehumanizing treatment the migrants were receiving upon entering the U.S. appeared in the news.

As Struve wrote the play, she invited some friends to an early reading, including Amy Lane, a previous collaborator and theater professor at Creighton University, who was in the process of developing a new class titled "Theater for Social Justice."

Lane was taken by the way Struve's play dealt with immigration, the treatment of migrants and Americans' reaction. "I thought this would be the perfect companion play and it would be cool to involve her in this class," she told NCR.

Around the same time, Creighton University introduced the Creighton Global Initiative, a project of then-new president Jesuit Fr. Daniel Hendrickson. According to its website, the initiative "creates resources that offer opportunities for faculty, staff and students to embrace global perspectives."

Hendrickson "was putting out a call for faculty of any discipline who were doing any kind of research or projects that involved global learning or a global perspective,"



Lane said, "especially if you were working on anything that had to do with immigration rights, with the refugee crises; anything like that was of particular interest to him."

Lane applied, and the class was among the first round of projects to receive funding from the initiative. Other projects that received funds included the expansion of Creighton's masters in ministry program into Spanish language offerings in 2016 and jumpstarting clean energy innovations in the Caribbean.

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Students in the "Theater for Social Justice" course were required to write reflections and complete volunteer hours, as well as "develop and perform a final project which will be assessed through a performance evaluation rubric and archived through film," the initiative said when [announcing the grant](#). The new funding allowed Struve to work with the class for the semester to develop the play.

At the end of the semester, the class toured around Omaha performing readings of the play. Eventually, they performed it at the 2017 Justice Conference at Seattle University.

Months later, the [Shelterbelt Theater in Omaha](#) chose to include "The Dairy Maid-Right" in its 25th season. "When I heard Shelterbelt was going to include it in their season, it was kind of a no brainer for me to get involved," Lane, who is currently directing the play, said.

The show opened July 7, and the cast performed to sellout crowds for three of its first four performances. Morgan Dobersek, who portrays Courtney, told NCR that the show has attracted a different audience from the earlier readings, which had a very sympathetic turnout.

"I was a little apprehensive at first," she said, worrying that the performance may be "preaching to the choir," but has found that the diversity of the crowd makes her hopeful that the play is touching hearts and changing minds.

"Through the play," Dobersek added, "you really feel for Mira, the migrant girl," as well as David's family and their struggles. "It's really important to put a face to that story, and not just see it on the news."

Some showings include a discussion; a panel on July 21 focused on family and legal services, and on Aug. 2, another panel will talk about the role Christian values and responsibility play in dealing with the issues raised in the show.

"The Dairy Maid-Right" runs until Aug. 6 on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., and Sundays at 6 p.m. Full lists of the [2016](#) and [2017](#) winners of the Creighton Global Initiative may be found on the initiative's webpage. The initiative is [still going strong](#), continuing to help fund globally-focused projects.

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