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Worlds collide in 'Bernice/Butterfly'

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What could a small-town Kansas waitress who's never gone further north than Topeka or south than Wichita and a learned but unstable professor possibly have in common?

Everything, according to Colorado playwright Nagle Jackson.

"Bernice at Bay," the first act of Jackson's bittersweet tragicomedy, "Bernice/Butterfly: A Two-Part Invention," follows Bernice, a waitress at the O-Kay Diner in a small, dying Kansas town.

Bernice is your typical small-town character. She was born and raised - and will likely die - in the same town. She dreams of traveling to the various places that she's read about in books and seen on TV but knows she'll never get there.

She enjoys engaging the passers-through that she meets waitressing at the diner in friendly banter and gossiping with the locals.

But through the course of a typical morning, Bernice mixes her usual over-the-counter banter with some revealing stories of her own.

At first she only hints at the losses she's faced, blithely referencing a fateful trip to Santa Fe - a trip the audience later learns changed her life forever.

But the more Bernice discloses, the more she comes undone.

To reveal more would ruin the twist that caps off this thoughtful first act, and to do that would be like enjoying a nice meal and good service at a restaurant and not leaving a tip.

Suffice it to say that the ending is an emotional punch in the gut that leaves you winded and rethinking everything that led up to it.

Bas Bleu regular Frances Burns inhabits the role of this career waitress from the lick of her pencil tip before taking your order right down to the hitch in her get-a-long from slinging plates all day. In the show's run at Bas Bleu, the role of Bernice is split between Burns and Parker actress Chip Winn Wells.

Stay seated for a few minutes during intermission to watch the set unfold from a greasy spoon into a lecture hall. Designed by Jeff Tish, both sets are strong but it is watching one transform into the other that is most impressive.

The second act "The Butterfly Effect" follows another character struggling with what might have been in Randall, a slightly off-balance professor.

Randall appears to be giving a lecture on the famous butterfly effect (Can a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil cause a tornado in Texas?) but eventually his speech unravels into an uneasy glimpse into his psyche.

Jackson's poetic diatribes slip off of actor Bruce Bergquist's tongue without a single tangle.

As cracks in Randall's façade begin to show, Bergquist transforms from a self-important lecturer to a hulk of a man, cowering in fear of himself.

And when Randall and Bernice's worlds collide the play's "aha" moment of revelation will stick with you all the way home.