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Walking in Someone Else's Shoes, Briefly

By NED MARTEL

Each month of transformation in the earnest, likable FX series "30 Days" might feel more like a year if not for Morgan Spurlock, the shaggy documentarian of "Super Size Me." His biker mustache and hound-dog demeanor play down his indie-film credentials: he could easily have turned into last year's pet for Sundance snobs. But Mr. Spurlock still displays middle-brow appetites and he infuses the weekly civics lessons of "30 Days" with his own brand of goodwill.

The first three episodes put Average Joes through role-playing exercises, with Mr. Spurlock participating as narrator or, sometimes, guinea pig. That was his role in "Super Size Me," when he ate a month of unhappy meals in an experimental fast-food-only diet. During that time his sunny demeanor turned overcast and his body turned into something subtly but profoundly different: pallid, sweaty, lethargic.

In his series's premiere tonight, he again adopts a life that wears him down in daily increments. He and his fiancée, Alexandra Jamieson, move to Columbus, Ohio, and commit to living on minimum wage. "I'm so bad with money," Mr. Spurlock says, and his sweetheart bitterly agrees. By the end of their month of slumming, they have survived financial squabbles, emergency room visits, menial jobs and a red-ant infestation.

Sometimes Mr. Spurlock states the obvious: "We're living check to check and that's a scary place to be." But mostly he is winningly empathetic. He can elicit genial, frank responses from people he meets, whether they are the focus of later episodes or simply person-on-the-street types with startling sound bites. Mr. Spurlock can also make his smallest behaviors seem telling, like when he pockets free pickles from a deli, hoping to stave off hunger during a day of pavement pound-



Randy Tepper/FX

Underpay me: Morgan Spurlock does menial work in "30 Days."

30 Days

Minimum Wage

FX, tonight at 10, Eastern and Pacific times; 9, Central time.

Morgan Spurlock, creator, executive producer and host; R. J. Cutler, Ben Silverman, H. T. Owens, executive producers; Jonathan Chinn, co-executive producer; John Landgraf, president and general manager, FX.

WITH: Morgan Spurlock and Alexandra Jamieson.

ing. His spirits shift but never plummet, while the sullen Alexandra's moods seem connected to the couple's cash flow.

If Mr. Spurlock were more overt, his left-leaning refrain would go like this: There's a system that erodes the national well-being, whether it's paying pennies to the poor or feeding trans-fats to the hungry. More often he lets his own corporal example speak for itself. Without his humility, the show could have felt like a version of "Wife Swap," larded with rhetoric from the Moveon.org Web site. (And when the show does make

some political points, someone should check facts: the narration hails Senator Edward M. Kennedy as the true champion of a higher minimum wage, and when mentioning Senator Kennedy's adversaries, there appears the image of a patrician-looking but anonymous Republican senator. The shot shows Slade Gorton, a former Republican from Washington State who was voted out of office more than four years ago.)

"30 Days" does not overuse its star, and the second and third episodes shrewdly employ Spurlock stand-ins. A Los Angeles traveling salesman and father of three gives up his fast-food habits to regain the swimmer's build of his college days. He visits a colorful doctor who advocates an "anti-aging protocol" of vitamins, human growth hormone and testosterone. The patient is basically impatient: he doesn't want to wait for the time-consuming regimens of diet and exercise to restore his eight-pack abs. When he begins the doctor's "longevity medication program," his health heads in the wrong direction.

The third episode takes another man of Mr. Spurlock's general age, size and background and transports him from the hollers of West Virginia to the mosques of Dearborn, Mich. This suspicious Christian confronts his bigotry by taking a crash course in the Koran, and then sorts through all-too-common misimpressions about Islam in the age of antiterrorist fervor. The visitor is rigid and fearful, until ignorance gives way to respect. Meanwhile, Mr. Spurlock polls average Americans about Islam, and the responses, though edited to sound one-note, are shockingly jingoistic.

The series uses an appealing patchwork of documentary formats. There's Mr. Spurlock as the ambling provocateur, staging events à la Michael Moore. Then we see monologues inside a makeshift confessional, an innovation from MTV's "Real World." A camera crew also follows some subjects without in-

terruption or narration and the series benefits from the executive producer R. J. Cutler's ear for the perfect oddball exchange. For instance, a Muslim couple in Dearborn bid their West Virginia houseguest goodbye and then give each other a look. "Did he just flip me off?" asks the husband, whose wife explains that the gesture had been half-wave, half-peace sign.

If "Super Size Me" seemed inspired by Eric Schlosser's "Fast Food Nation," then the premiere of "30 Days" could be considered the televised version of Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dime." And yet somehow Mr. Spurlock proves he has a gift for gimmickry, and his cheerful game-for-anything style makes his borrowings forgivable and even laudable.