

# thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Unknown

## Empty Vessels

by Whitney Weinstein

The Oven is a Baltimore-based theater company committed to developing and performing socially relevant work. Their 2016 Fringe show, *COMMODITIES*, tackles the difficult subject of sex slavery bolstered with substantial academic and experiential research.

The Oven's actors embody trauma in ways that educate us as viewers. Their work highlights the bond we can share as people fighting psycho-emotional disturbances. *COMMODITIES* is an intimate hour of storytelling and emotional vulnerability that humanized otherwise stereotypical images of men and women labeled as prostitutes.

The set, which consisted of five rectangular panels, framed each seated actor within a corridor of isolation. The five actors muttered softly, voicing internal monologues which gradually built in intensity and volume. They posed erotically – and stared absently. At times, they retreated from their sexualized roles into slumped postures with crossed arms.

The actors created deeply compelling character portraits by combining the histories of trafficking victims and their own personal traumas. Locking eyes with one performer, I felt a profound connection – a connection that triggered a real sense of responsibility to the people caught up in this horrific circumstance.

As *COMMODITIES* neared its end, the character LaDawn stripped out of her heels, her dress, her cross necklace. She sat limply with a trash bag over her head, knees knocked, in a hot pink nightgown. The other characters created a cacophony of sound with their echoing cries as LaDawn sat motionless: Just a body. Waiting.

As an ensemble, The Oven explores trauma that lives in the body. They moved with a vocabulary that expressed the fear, desperation and longing of the trafficking victims.

The characters spoke to themselves again, this time murmuring consolation that their bodies may be used for the benefit of someone else, but their minds remain their own. I wondered silently while they muttered aloud. Had their minds indeed been appropriated, just as their bodies had?

COMMODITIES, The Oven, Asian Arts Initiative, September 13, 23-24, <http://fringearts.com/event/commodities-7/>

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