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Theater review: ‘Fabric’ at Company of Angels

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Auntie Suni (played with oily malevolence by standout Dian Kobayashi).

Think slavery in the U.S. ended with the Civil War? Playwright Henry Ong urges you to reconsider.

“Fabric,” Ong’s new drama, undermines complacency with the unsettling events surrounding a 1995 raid on a sweatshop in an El Monte apartment complex. A multi-agency task force freed 72 undocumented Thai garment workers held in captivity there — some for up to seven years. Co-produced by [Company of Angels Theatre](#) and the Thai Community Development Center, a hard-hitting staging by Marlene Forte commemorates the 15th anniversary of the case and seeks to raise awareness about a continuing crisis.

The show’s priorities and principal strengths are primarily socio-political and its message can be ponderous at times. Still, Ong’s extensively researched storytelling is often moving and always compelling in its specificity. In the more intimate and dramatically rigorous first act, a trio of naive, uneducated rural peasants in Thailand are lured into indentured servitude with promises of wealth and opportunity. Transported to America under false passports, they’re delivered into the clutches of merciless clothing wholesaler

The show’s second half becomes more of a police procedural, tracing the efforts of law enforcement and civilian personnel who defy systemic racism and corruption to bring the first slavery prosecution since abolition. Characters and plot threads abound, but in trying to cover so many aspects of the case some focus and momentum are sacrificed.

The story still resonates, particularly with respect to the worldwide blight of human trafficking and the immigration debate in this country. (The moral quandary over what to do with the “liberated” undocumented factory slaves — asylum or deportation? — figures prominently). A pointed closing challenge asks the audience to consider the source of the clothes we’re wearing as we watch.

– Philip Brandes

“Fabric,” Black Box at the Alexandria Hotel, 501 S. Spring St., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 4:30 p.m. Sundays. Ends Aug. 8. \$20. (213) 489-3703 or www.companyofangels.org. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

Photo: Jolene Kim and Dian Kobayashi. Credit: Kila Kitu.