

traffic

OF OUR STAGE

It is the world's fastest growing criminal enterprise and the hottest topic on the Fringe. Why, wonders Mark Fisher, is everyone talking about human trafficking?

A celebrity endorsement works wonders for your box office and all power to Shatterbox for getting Emma Thompson to put her name to its production of *Fair Trade*. But that show is only the most high profile in an unprecedented wave of Fringe productions dealing with the subject of human trafficking.

The theme is so prevalent, it has even spilled over into the comedy programme. Irish stand-up Keith Farnon has previously taken on the American death penalty and racism. Now he is discussing the 'value of women in society' in *Sex Traffic – How Much is that Woman in the Window?* which promises to see the funny side of the connection between trafficking and society's commodification of women.

From Cora Bissett, a leading light on the Scottish stage, *Roadkill* is an attempt to remind us how commonplace trafficking has become. By staging her play in an ordinary apartment to an audience of 12, she makes the point that a phenomenon that seems so alien could be taking place in the flat next door. 'It's not screaming out like a brothel, with a light outside, it could be happening on anybody's street, on your street, and you wouldn't know,' she told *The List* in June.

As well as the trade in women for sex, there is a lucrative market in trafficked children. That is an issue picked up by two youth theatres on the Fringe. In *All the Queen's Children*, the socially motivated Nothing to Declare company, working in association with Reading Youth Theatre, considers the movement of young people in all directions around the world. On the one hand are the child refugees, making perilous journeys into the UK before disappearing from care homes; on the other are the naïve gap-year students who find themselves groomed by traffickers abroad.

Meanwhile, in *Lost Boy* (formerly *Tunde*), students at Park View Academy in north London tell the story of former pupil Tunde Jaji who, as a child, was taken from his home in Nigeria and made to work as a domestic servant for a woman in Harringay. Now 24 and a gifted animator, Jaji has lived to tell the tale, but only after

years of trauma. You don't need to guess why, under 'political views' on his Facebook page, he has written: 'be as free as the clouds'.

So how to explain the upsurge in trafficking plays? Like the trade itself, it is related to our increasing ability to travel great distances and our awareness of inequalities of wealth, particularly since the collapse of the USSR. Playwrights cannot ignore the world's fastest growing criminal industry, one that, according to a 2004 United Nations report, generates between \$5b and \$9b a year.

That is a theme picked up by California's Belleherst Productions in *See Me! Hear Me!* The multimedia play is about an economics professor who sets out to write a book about global capitalism only to realise one of the prime generators of wealth is slavery. The story ventures to Poland, Berlin, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Dubai, Uganda, Haiti and New York in its attempt to make sense of an industry that claims 27m victims worldwide.

Another reason the issue has come into focus are the news reports about the proliferation of prostitution during international sporting events. 'In 2012 the Olympics are coming here and a lot of people are getting worried about how much trafficking is going to increase in this country,' says Anna Holbek, co-writer of *Fair Trade*, which is based on the stories of Elena and Samai, two women trafficked into Britain. 'Stats show that around the area of the Olympic arena, prostitution generally – and most likely trafficked women – has increased two-fold since last year. In South Africa they had a huge surge in trafficking with people coming over for the World Cup. We're trying to use theatre to raise awareness of that.'

Using a lively mix of theatre techniques – comic and serious – *Fair Trade* avoids hectoring the audience even as it raises awareness of a distressing issue. 'Emma Thompson came to the Q&A on the first night and she asked for a show of hands from people who felt they had learnt a new piece of information,' says Holbek. 'It was unanimous. The whole room came up with different things they were shocked about.'

Zoe Mavroudi, echoing the theme of Keith Farnon's stand-up show, argues that trafficking is related to attitudes towards women in general. Her play *Beauty is Prison Time* takes a wry – even farcical – look at the annual beauty contest in UF-91/9, a real-life Siberian female prison, and makes the connection between such pageants and a world that trades in women's looks.

'There's a tremendous irony, of course, in the premise of a beauty pageant in a prison, but also in the way Russia, of all the source countries of trafficking and prostitution, used to be an empire very recently,' says the New York actor and writer. 'The system collapses and the women start going away to their former enemies to work as strippers or whatever else. It's a sign that whole countries can use their women as a natural resource.'

'The prison beauty contest was a good setting for a theme about how women historically have been seen as available for sale because they are desirable. I'm not comparing myself with women who are going through these things, but it is true of all women, in our lives and the way we are portrayed in the media, that beauty is a form of imprisonment. That mentality fuels the more legitimate aspects of the entertainment industry, the porn industry and the sex trade. I do think there is a connection between all of these things and my play does walk that contentious line.'

All the Queen's Children, C Aquila, 0845 260 1234, 7–14 Aug, 4.50pm, £8.50–£9.50 (£7.50–£8.50); Beauty is Prison Time, theSpaces @ Surgeons' Hall, 0845 508 8515, 6–29 Aug (not 9, 16, 23), 12.55pm, £7 (£5); Emma Thompson Presents: Fair Trade, Pleasance Dome, 556 6550, 7–30 Aug (not 16, 23), 3.30pm, £9–£10 (£7.50–£9). Previews until 6 Aug, £6; Roadkill, Traverse, 228 1404, 11–29 Aug (not 9, 16, 23), times vary, £17–£19 (£12–£13). Previews 7 & 8, 10 Aug, £12 (£6); See Me! Hear Me!, Quaker Meeting House, 220 6109, 16–28 Aug (not 22), times vary, £8 (£6.50).

Roadkill

Beauty is
Prison Time

SPARKLING COMEDY

US actor and Fringe veteran David Calvito tells Steve Cramer why he's not quite ready for retirement yet

'It certainly gets into the blood. I've performed in ten of the last 11 festivals and this will be my 14th show in those ten years,' says US actor David Calvito of his return to the Edinburgh Fringe. 'While others have been preparing for their retirement, I've been rehearsing one or two (and one year, three) festival shows per year for a decade. I keep saying this will be my last, but I'm probably full of crap.'

The affable, silver-haired Calvito will be performing a new play by Brian Parks, author of such past Fringe hits as *Wolverine Dreams* and *Goner*. These acidic satires focusing on the violence, ignorance and rapaciousness of contemporary American life have led some critics to interpret Parks' works as political, but Calvito maintains that this isn't necessarily the case. 'He's just a very intelligent writer with a brilliant and original sense of humour who takes himself and his subject matter much less seriously than others often do,' he says. 'Here he's delving into new territory with a play that includes music and songs. *Imperial Fizz* is his take on the particular genre of Hollywood films of the 30s which featured fast talking high society people in broadly comic situations.'

Imperial Fizz promises much for those who admire such films as *Bringing Up Baby*, *His Girl Friday* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and Parks' fast moving, quick-quipping dialogue feels like the natural inheritor of this American comic tradition. The piece is set in a posh household, where a husband and wife await an important dinner guest for rather darker purposes than we might at first

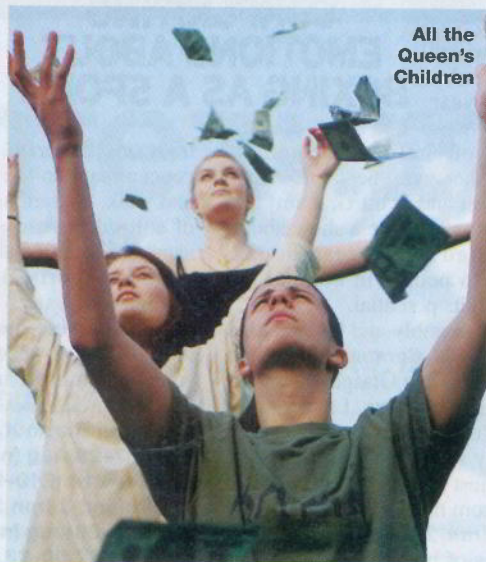


PHOTO: ROBERT WORMAN

'WHOLE COUNTRIES CAN USE THEIR WOMEN AS A NATURAL RESOURCE'



See Me! Hear Me!



All the Queen's Children

PHOTO: WES OAKLAND

imagine. British director Sophie Fletcher, despite her youth, already has a Fringe hit behind her in the much acclaimed *Aruba* and is likely to add a physical comedy dimension to what looks likely to be one of the most entertaining shows at this year's Fringe. Cheers!

■ *Imperial Fizz*, Assembly Rooms, 623 3030, 6-30 Aug (not 17, 24), 5.25pm, £12-£13 (£10-£11), Preview 5 Aug, £5.