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## Play brings back horror of El Monte sweatshop and slavery case

By Rebecca Kimitch, Staff Writer  
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Fifteen years ago, when Henry Ong read a news story about a squalid sweatshop in El Monte that enslaved 72 Thai women and men for years, he had a similar reaction to people around the world: shock.

Ong was born in Singapore and grew up in Malaysia. He had seen women exploited in slave-like labor situations many times, in restaurants, as servants, as nannies. But he thought it was something of his past, part of a different world.

"When I saw these women in El Monte, I felt like I knew them. I knew where they came from... To see them in my new home, the United States, was astounding," he said.

Ong did more than ponder the cruelties he saw and read about.

He decided to write a play about it.

That play, Fabric, is showing through Aug. 8 at the Company of Angels theater in downtown Los Angeles. It opened earlier this month to sold out audiences and positive reviews.



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Fabric attempts to bring to life the suffering of the sweatshop's victims, who were trapped behind razor wire and padlocked doors in an El Monte apartment complex, forced to crank out garments 17 hours a day and paid no more than \$1.60 an hour.

Jaidee(Jolene Kim) begs for her freedom from Auntie Suni (Dian Kobayashi\*) in a scene from playwright Henry Ong's play about the 1995 Thai garment workers slavery case. (Courtesy Photo)

They were brought here after being recruited in Bangkok with promises of work, good pay, and a path to the American Dream, complete with weekends off to go to Disneyland.

The play is part documentary, part story-telling dramatization, the result of years of interviews with the victims and federal officials.

Some

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of its dialogue comes straight from the mouth of captive garment worker Rotchana Cheunchujit, Ong said.

"She was able to tell me in her own words about being recruited: 'I went to see this person she said, so are you interested in go to America... where everyone rich. Where even poor are rich?' I thought gosh, as a playwright I can't write that," Ong said.

Once here, the Thai workers found a world far different from what they were promised. Their imprisonment was as much physical as psychological, Ong said.

Their passports were taken away and they were told if they escaped they would be raped by gangs and their families in Thailand would be killed, Ong said.

Some workers did escape. And eventually they told authorities about their captivity. But even after they came forward to authorities, the sweatshop was not immediately raided and shut down.

Though it was ultimately heralded as the first tried case of slavery since the Civil War, getting there was not easy, Ong said.

That is the focus of Fabric's second act.

Managers from the then Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were wary of investigating large sweatshop cases in the 1990s, according to Phil Bonner, a retired special agent with the agency.

"They would say, 'We do this case, it's going to take a year to do. In that time we could go after 500 illegal nanny cases.' And that is what boosts their stats," said Bonner, who provided information to Ong for the play.

When agents were allowed to investigate large cases, they couldn't convince federal prosecutors to file slavery charges, Bonner said.

"They would say, `No jury is going to convict anybody because some illegal aliens are having a hard time at their illegal jobs,'" Bonner said.

So prosecutors would charge them with smuggling or false imprisonment.

Even among the Thai community, many weren't anxious to bust the sweatshop, Ong said.

"A lot of people in the community thought it was airing dirty linens," he said.

But when the apartment complex-turned prison was finally raided and its realities were revealed, news spread across the country and world. It shocked Americans, eventually sparking new regulations, a Smithsonian exhibit and successful lawsuits on behalf of the workers for back wages.

That public outrage ultimately allowed the case to be tried as slavery, Bonner said. A few of the owners were eventually convicted of felonies related to the imprisonment and immigrant smuggling.

Chancee Martorell, executive director of the Thai Community Development Center, which is helping present Fabric, hopes the play helps bring back some of that outrage.

Slavery and forced labor cases continue across the United States, she said.

Indentured servitude situations, particularly involving poverty-stricken people from Thailand and other Asian countries, are "common practice," Bonner agreed.

"The waitress serving you that Thai meal may be an indentured servant. She never gets to go home; she lives with her employer; she doesn't get paid and works for a sort of debt bondage," Martorell said. "I hope (the play) is a call to action for future abolitionists."

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#### **If you go:**

**Shows:** Through Aug. 8 are Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 p.m. and Sundays at 4:30 p.m.

**Where:** Company of Angeles, Inside The Black Box at Alexandria Hotel, 501 S. Spring St., 3rd Floor

**Tickets:** \$ 20.00; Student/Seniors: \$12.00; Groups of ten or more: \$10.00, available at [www.companyofangels.org](http://www.companyofangels.org)

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