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>> STAGE

Giant Causeway

A brand-new performance series raises awareness about human trafficking.

by [Leo Beletsky](#)



Getting a grip: Reactionaries dancers Bethany Formica and Mark O'Maley will perform their movement piece Dying to Leave.

Of those of us who actually tuned in to the president's last State of the Union address, few probably caught or remember George W. Bush's references to the malady of modern slavery and human trafficking. Though we've had our differences, the president and I agree on the evil of modern slavery. With 27 million slaves worldwide (80 percent of whom are women and children), and anywhere from 14,500 to 17,500 people being brought into the United States each year and held against their will, modern slavery is a hidden humanitarian crisis.

Descriptions of modern slavery generally include forced labor, fraud, exploitation and abuse. Women and men trafficked through the international sex trade, migrant workers and domestic laborers are some of the most frequently cited modern slaves. Because people held against their will generally lack a public voice and political capital, their plight has remained largely unexposed. But thanks to the work of some gutsy journalists and concerted advocacy efforts, the issue has made headlines in recent years-and in the process has made strange bedfellows of labor activists, left-wing feminist groups and evangelical Christians (hence our president's concern).

An especially powerful investigative piece about human trafficking in a January 2004 *New York Times Magazine* grabbed the attention of one of Philadelphia's most controversial producer/directors, Madi Distefano. (The theater company Distefano founded-Brat Productions-made headlines of its own this September, when industry lawyers shut down its rendition of *Grease* on the eve of the premiere. Its crime? An all-female cast, apparently unanticipated by the original authors.)

Haunted by the article's images of women being smuggled between the U.S. and Mexico for commercial sex work, Distefano began researching the topic. It was at that point-and in an effort to shake off her sense of powerlessness-that she came up with the idea for Causeway, a performance series that links arts and activism by challenging artists to create new work that makes meaningful statements.

For the inaugural event of what's meant to become an annual installation focusing on a single social justice topic, the theme is modern slavery. Mark O'Maley is transforming the Christ Church Annex in Old City for the series, and Jody Sweitzer has adapted her recent interactive video and sound installation for the legendary space.

Heading up the Causeway production effort is Deborah Block, one of the founders and, until recently, program director of the Philadelphia Live Arts and Philly Fringe festivals. In the interdisciplinary tradition of the Fringe, Block has compiled two multitextured, fast-paced



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programs. The first week of the series presents Yellow Rage, the tight spoken-word duo Michelle Myers and Catzie Vilayphonh, who've made appearances on HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, in a piece on child slavery; 2005 Live Arts favorites Bethany Formica and Mark O'Maley with their performance collective Reactionaries in *Dying to Leave*, a "get your knees dirty" movement piece inspired by documentary images by Fringe legend Jacques-Jean Tiziou; and Tribe of Fools, an ensemble of Dell'Arte School practitioners who explore the mutual dependency of slave and master in a work they've dubbed *The Slightly Brown Girl*.

Week two presents the playwright and poet Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon, whose piece *Whose Body Am I, Anyway* looks at the political economy of human trafficking. Subcircle, a collaboration of performer Niki Cousineau and designer Jorge Cousineau, presents *Selective Sight*, about our ability to ignore suffering. Ed Shockley, long a dominant figure in theater locally and nationally, presents a new movement-based play *The Sacred Space*, drawn from actual case histories of slavery.

Brat Productions is presenting the series in association with Free the Slaves, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit leading efforts to abolish contemporary slavery. The producers will donate a portion of ticket receipts-and all proceeds from the sale of the series' commemorative carabiners-to support the group's work.

Causeway: Modern Slavery

Through March 19. \$15-\$35. Christ Church Annex, 20 N. American St. 215.627.2577.

www.bratproductions.org

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