

# Breaking the cycle

**Clean Break** has attracted much praise for its efforts working with vulnerable women. Jo Caird chats to them about their debut Fringe play, *Dream Pill*, which tackles the thorny issue of sex trafficking in the UK



Sheila Burnett

“In a way, the formula is simple: you get some extraordinary writers, you ask them to write something extraordinary, and you’ll get extraordinary work.” This, according to director Tessa Walker, is the secret behind the critical and popular success of Clean Break, the theatre, education and new writing company making its Fringe debut this year with *Dream Pill*.

The show tells the story of Bola and Tunde, two nine-year-old Nigerian girls sex trafficked to an unnamed UK city. It first appeared at the Soho Theatre in London last year as part of *Charged*, a series of six short plays commissioned by Clean Break to address issues around women and the criminal justice system, both matters at the heart of the company’s work.

*Dream Pill* is the product of months of in-depth research by Critics’ Circle Award-winning playwright Rebecca Prichard. This included conversations with the former head of the Metropolitan Police’s now disbanded Human Trafficking Team, the trafficking charity ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes) and the Poppy Project, an organisation which provides accommodation and support to trafficked women.

Having become “very concerned about trafficking” during research on a project about violence against women, Prichard began to look into how young girls were also being turned into victims of sex trafficking. “I was quite shocked by some of the things I read”, she says. “The cliché about trafficking being the modern slavery of our times and all of that, it just feels like we are living with a reality that is unacceptable. So that was really the motive behind the play.”

Theatre, continues the playwright, “is one of a few places where we still collectively gather as a community. I know it’s a bit cheesy to say that, but it is - where we sit side-by-side and agree to think about something. As a writer you can’t waste that and you just have to write about what you feel is most urgent for people to think about”.

There’s always a danger that a work which seeks to tackle a specific issue



# "You just see them as children and then suddenly you remember why they're there"

will come across as preachy and heavy-handed. This is something that Prichard was very much aware of as *Dream Pill* was in development. "You can dehumanise the whole issue by saying, 'isn't it so grim,'" she says. "But I think if you're really earnest and say how awful it is in the acting or in the directing, you don't let the audience experience how awful it is".

For its director Walker, the reason the play had such an impact on audiences in London ("sometimes people couldn't move afterwards") was that Prichard's "research sits in the background", allowing the human elements of the story room to breathe.

"There's a lot of humour in it and a lot of light as well, which makes the tragedy of it much more powerful," explains Walker. "But the reason it is so moving is that for a lot of it you're invited to laugh with the girls because they're so characterful and they're so human. And sometimes you forget—I think

**Left**  
Samantha Pearl as Tunde, and Danielle Vitals as Bola

that's one of the brilliant things about the play—it lets you forget they're trafficked children. You just see them as children and then suddenly you remember why they're there and I think that's why it's so powerful."

This lightness of touch, as well as the emphasis on storytelling, is key to the dialogue between Clean Break's new writing work and the company's other strand; delivering arts education and training to women in prisons, ex-offenders and those at risk of offending due to drug, alcohol or mental health problems.

"Because Clean Break works with women on a daily basis," explains the company's artistic programmer, Lucy Morrison, "we have a responsibility to tell stories that are really difficult and relevant—even if it's in a metaphorical sense—to their lives.

"Sex trafficking is a very particular theme, but actually a lot of the women who work with us have the feeling that they didn't get to have a childhood," she adds. "When they come to us they start to reflect on that stuff and there's quite a big grieving process about childhood."

But for the stories the company tells to truly reflect the lives of the women it works with, there can be no compromise, no pandering to audience's preconceptions about challenging subjects. Absolute sincerity is

essential. "You can't use tricks and you can't lie and that's the root of it for me really," says Morrison. "We're creating the work to tell stories and to give a voice to people who don't have a voice."

Walker has worked with Clean Break on a number of projects and is unequivocal about the positive effect of the company's education and training programme on those who take part: "It genuinely changes the lives of those women who are involved in it. There should be no mistake about that." But the director is also keen not to understate the potential of "just getting stuff out there."

She says, "By telling stories about trafficking or abuse of women or girl gangs—these were the kind of topics that were dealt with in the *Charged* season—it does do something to our collective understanding of the world. It really does and it doesn't matter if that's only four people, because that's four people who are changed in some way. You can't really change anything on a massive level until you feel that change within yourself and that's why theatre is so powerful." f

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