

Exploring the Underage Sex Trade

Innocent Flesh at the Zephyr Theater

By Mike Schulte



As the lights come up on Kenyetta Lethridge's *Innocent Flesh*, the four-member cast is pantomiming a skipping rhyme and girlishly cartwheeling across the Zephyr's barren stage. Before the audience is settled, the scene abruptly shifts: the playground becomes "the track" and the girls swerve from playful to darkly lascivious, taunting the audience as though they're eyeing a line of tricks. It's the first of several late-breaking curve balls that writer/director Lethridge throws throughout her one act exploration of underage prostitution and the abuse and neglect that often drives its victims.

The wounded protagonists of *Innocent Flesh* comfort themselves with fantasies of fame (and the anonymous adulation that comes with it) to blot out the horror of their ruined childhoods. It's not an original conceit, but Lethridge spikes the confrontational drama with doses of survivor's humor. The cast has the timing chops to booby trap the laughs with uncomfortable aftershocks to keep the audience on edge.

The characters are pulled toward their fates in similar ways, most memorably Lisa (an electric Jameelah Nuriddin). Terrified by a killer stalking the neighborhood, she locks her bedroom window just as the real threat emerges from within her own family. Her betrayal, brokered by her own mother, is the kind of moment that could easily be overplayed. Here, it's handled with a blunt subtlety that freezes the air in the room.

As the girls are driven into the streets, their stories unfold in shifting character vignettes, interspersed with a kind of Greek chorus narrative, which occasionally tosses a spike strip into the production's otherwise brisk pacing. The writing is at its best when the play's harrowing situations are underpinned with gritty humor—and there's plenty of it.

Each actress dexterously flips characterizations to portray the pimps and johns that prey upon them. Nuriddin cries her way through a low-down monologue as victim before speed shifting into a swaggering pimp before her eyes dry under the lights. You laugh, but the laugh catches in your throat.

The no-nonsense pacing and whipsaw emotional transitions show off Lethridge's command as a writer/director, but the real engine of *Innocent Flesh* is the skill and courage displayed on the stage. Angelina Prendergast's Lupita is a lovesick poet whose pain is visible beneath her wisecracking sneer. Daphne Gabriel gives Candace a moist-eyed innocence that never strays toward cliché. Clara Gabriele's Danna stalks the stage like a lanky older sister until her story of a gang rape—half-remembered during a self-induced drug blackout—gets the blood pouring from the script. The pain in her eyes nails the audience to their seats. It's the play's most wrenchingly uncomfortable scene.

Innocent Flesh ends as it began, the girls as unsoiled children on the playground, pleading for love in a reprise of the opening. The intention may have been to sound a hopeful concluding note, but as the lights go down, it rings as a bitter admonition of all that has been lost.