

Alicia Ohs' "when i die, i will be dead" at Mama Calizo's Voice Factory

July 19, 4:25 PM · Daria Kaufman - Contemporary Dance Examiner

[Mama Calizo's Voice Factory](#) and Choyoh! Productions present [when i die... i will be dead](#) by Alicia Ohs, with performers Ay.Lin, Hana Erdman, Harold Burns, and José Navarrete.

Ohs' latest incarnation of dance and physical theatre will have its final run at Mama Calizo's in San Francisco this weekend, July 22-24; Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8pm; \$20 (no one turned away for lack of funds) [brownpapertickets.com](#).

when i die opened this past weekend to enthusiastic audiences who were more than willing to participate in the interactive piece. Divided into two acts - *New York, I Love You! I Hate You... Now Dance!* and *Dokuen* - the show explores, respectively, an artist's struggle between brilliance and imitation in the NY art world, and grief, understanding, and the humor of being human.

New York, I Love You! begins with the hallway the audience walks through to reach the stage. It is lined with the artists' and performers' video testimonies of living and working in NYC. As in most of her work, Ohs sources the majority of the creative material from the performers, themselves – in this case, their New York experiences, anecdotes, trials and tribulations.

Once seated in the long, narrow, black box theater, performers appear only to immediately demand the audience rise from their seats and participate in a NYC-style dance audition, a.k.a., a cattle call. They are treated just like dancers, forced into lines, given numbers, and worst of all, made to learn a dance phrase from none other than the famous Broadway musical number, the audition to end all auditions, *One (singular sensaTION, every little step she takes...)* from [A Chorus Line](#).

Ohs and the cast weren't sure how this initial audience-participation exercise would work out come show time. "It's one thing to try it in rehearsal with six or seven people, but you never know how a 40+ audience is going to react in these situations," Ohs avers. Fortunately, viewers have been game so far, with only a few remaining fixed in their seats.

The purpose of the exercise is not to humiliate the audience, but to flip the tables and give them a true, firsthand sense of what it's like to be in an audition – to know that you are being scrutinized for every tiny movement, that the sum total of your worth is being sized up second by second, and that, in the end, it might not be enough.

Fully embodied physical and emotional depictions of the brutality, inhumanity, extreme vulnerability, and heartless competitiveness that underscore cattle call auditions permeate *New York...*, as well as the auditioner's psyche and how it cycles through such extreme states. At one point, Lin, Burns, and Navarrete physically pile on top of each other. Lin, the clear winner by virtue of being on top, verbally and physically smashes a vulnerable, childlike Burns, cruelly taunting, "I'm better than you. I'm faster than you. I'm stronger than you. You're nothing."

Though *Dokuen* is a separate piece that focuses on death and mourning, it easily bleeds together with the first half of the show. Ohs and her partner both recently lost their grandmothers, whom they were very close to, and one thing Ohs has learned is how differently people grieve, as well as the imperfection of mourning – how it is never complete, "never perfect... always interrupted."

One confrontational scene finds Navarrete engaged in a moving solo when he is suddenly interrupted by Lin, who demands he exit the stage. What ensues is a flaring, cross-lingual battle over public and emotional space, privacy, and the right to one's special moment as the two hurl words at each other, Navarrete in Spanish and Lin, Turkish. By having them yell in different languages, Ohs poignantly demonstrates how, in such grief-fueled battles, all that is communicated is frustration.

One of Ohs' many strengths, which is clearly evidenced in this production, is her ability to so deftly and honestly depict heart wrenching scenes of vulnerability and pain in balance with hilarious comedic turns. In both modes, her authenticity, as well as her cast's, cannot be denied.

It should be noted that, unfortunately, Ohs' *when i die* marks the final show and artist-in-residency for Mama Calizo's Voice Factory, which is currently seeking a new home following sudden, recent complications. To read more about Mama Calizo's current mission, or to make a donation, [click here](#).



Alicia Ohs in "when i die, i will be dead"

Photo by Erin Siegal

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Author



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