

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Carly J. Bales

A Life Redrawn

by Andrew Sargus Klein

Life or Theatre? was presented at Baltimore's Annex Theatre as a work in progress, and while there were components that could stand improvement, the performance was so fluid in structure and content that I hope this work never stops evolving, particularly since it's defined largely by fascism and suicide—themes as painful as they are current and necessary.

Written and directed by Carly J. Bales, *Life or Theatre?* is an experimental piece based on the life's work of Charlotte Salomon, a German artist who died at Auschwitz in 1943. Before her death, she produced over [1,700 illustrations and gouaches](#) that defy neat categorizations but are often reminiscent of graphic novels, complete with scraps of text.

The subject matter all but insists on an experimental framework, so it's no surprise that projections featured heavily. Designed by Rachel Dwiggin, these projections spread across the back and side walls of the small theater, creating an immersive effect. Dwiggin employed archival footage, inscrutable abstractions, silent film texts, and bucolic expanses—aesthetic choices that were in turn subtle, clarifying, and beautiful. They imparted a good deal of the play's kaleidoscopic structure, particularly when the text strayed toward the didactic.

The characters, introduced at the outset, immediately set the emotional stakes for Charlotte (Caroline Preziosi). Her life was defined by intergenerational trauma resulting from multiple suicides, including her mother's. We learned toward the end of the work that no fewer than eight family members had committed suicide over the course of several generations.

The performance rested on an elusive narrative. Charlotte was a gifted illustrator; she was desired by a young man (Daberlohn, played by Jacob Zabawa), a writer enamored with Charlotte's stepmother—or so it seemed. I found it difficult to parse these relationships into recognizable dynamics but grasped that the people in her life complicated Charlotte's struggle for agency. Her grandfather (Kevin Griffin

Moreno) left an uneasy presence whenever he entered the space, exuding a domineering energy. Moreno also played the character of Professor Kahn, whom I believed to be Charlotte's father. Most of the cast performed multiple characters, further blurring the work's trajectory. Surasree Das played a younger Charlotte, her presence intensifying the nonlinear psychological tension running through the play.

Daberlohn suffered from PTSD, presumably from World War I, when, unable to save his comrades, he witnessed their deaths before his own eyes. Zabawa convincingly created an unctuous, predatory man whose presence filled the small stage. Moreno delivered a similar performance. Their effectiveness offset uneven character portrayals in the rest of the work.

The dialogue shifted dramatically and often between the speaker and the audience, the speaker and self, and the speaker and another character. Overly pointed lines weighed it down: "An illusion of the world before the world"; "nothing has changed, except maybe manners"; "I can be transformed?"; and "Please don't let me go mad." The poetic heavy-handedness drove home Charlotte's inward and outward struggles with her mental health and her art, as well as the approach of fascism.

I soon gave up on signposting the narrative. The strongest themes were the parallel stories of Charlotte's fractured sense of self and the emergence of Nazi Germany. The difference in scale is extreme: a single person's mental landscape versus an entire continent on the precipice of all-out war and genocide. The very notions of personhood and agency unraveled under either lens, with little for the audience (or Charlotte, or the world) to hold onto. It left me disoriented and unsettled.

The blocking bordered on choreography at times, in an attempt at pairing abstracted movement with the work's surrealism. Those moments were largely unsuccessful. One small example: When attempting to fall to the floor, the performers didn't let their weight bring them downward; rather, they half-lowered themselves awkwardly. It's no doubt difficult to bridge the techniques of movement art with DIY theatre, but this work is at that crossroads.

In the end, Charlotte and her family fled the Nazis, only to be captured, ending in a gutting death scene, although it wasn't clear who died, or how. My confusion lifted when I read the *New Yorker* article that Bales cited as the initial inspiration for the work. Charlotte's biography is literally incredible—she murdered her grandfather and wrote a long letter about it; she died at Auschwitz and not by suicide, which is what I had thought happened in the performance.

These details changed my memory of the evening, and I wished I could return to the work with this information. I wonder how the experience would differ if the audience were given more details in the program, or if there were stretches of expository dialogue. These frustrations are part of what makes *Life or Theatre?* so promising as a work in progress—each iteration has the capability of cultivating an entirely different experience.

[*Life or Theatre?*](#), Written and Directed by Carly J. Bales, Annex Theatre, May 24–June 17.

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