

PERFORMANCE: EVENT

NAKA Dance Theater Investigates Violence and State Brutality on the Streets of Oakland



Photo by Steven Sanchez

By **Villalobos**

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EXPLORE: **PERFORMANCE, PERFORMANCE: EVENT**

We've come a long way from *West Side Story*. No more pretty switchblade scissor-kick or pegged-jean pirouettes for us. Here's our new crib note for context: begin with the mid-century rise and fall of an underserved, black working class, accompany with the rise and calculated destruction of the Black Power movement, douse with the militarization of urban policing, [sprinkle in the biometric scanning of Oakland residents](#) since 1999 (akin to the type you might find in say, Fallujah), and this, dear reader, is our scene.

If it fails to draw a real picture, we've only to imagine Martha Graham's dance company on the rubble streets of Baghdad, and eureka! Now we've found the right page. Let's begin: The recent death of Anastasio Hernandez-Rojas is [NAKA Dance Theater's point of inspiration and departure](#) for *The Anastasio Project*, a multidisciplinary public performance that investigates race relations, state brutality, and violence. Though it's been four years since Hernandez-Rojas was detained and subsequently killed by a group of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents near the Tijuana Border in May 2010, no one has yet been held accountable for his death.

The choreography of one man's death is a dance of tasers and fists. Alone, save for the handful of border patrol agents who are beating him, our subject is handcuffed face down on the quintessential concrete stage. Cell phones document the event, screams and shouts punctuate it, and the man's last gasp and final heartbeat close the act. Using several local narratives, cell phone footage, and recent interviews with Anastasio's widow in San Diego, Naka Dance Theater's Debby Kajiya and José Navarrete are interested in connecting Anastasio's death to the impact and trauma of similar, all-too-common local experiences in brutality.

Intent on public dialogue, Kajiya and Navarrete have sidestepped the traditional stage for the streets. In their push to perform along the complex environment of International Boulevard in East Oakland, the team hopes not only to reflect issues already familiar to the community, but to reinvigorate conversation in a place where exclusive models of contemporary performance run the risk of leaving residents cold.

"How do you engage an audience without making them watch something that's [overtly] accessible and they feel comfortable watching?," asks Kajiya. "That's not interesting to me. And also it's not interesting to have [performers] do whatever they're comfortable with already. We have to dig a little bit deeper."

Regardless of genre, to dance in the streets of East Oakland is to make oneself vulnerable beyond nervous butterflies and heckling. It's a vulnerability that involves physical danger, if not directed at you then at least swirling nearby.

We're talking about International Boulevard, a main urban artery for one of the nation's most diverse sets of working class immigrant families. Yes, I argue that it's a beautiful place in the middle of Oakland that many call home, but it's also a major inner-city Broadway for the down, the out, the sexually trafficked, and their relentless young pimps. And now, it's host to *The Anastasio Project*. An Oakland beyond East 14th Street, far from [the city's idyllic billboards beckoning curious Portlandian visitors](#). Where's the room for success when artists specify such challenging locations for concept-heavy performance?

"Some of the people around here, when they get engaged they get really inspired, and they come in and they say 'Oh my god, this is really cool!'" says Navarrete, "And then some people, they don't like it, like, 'What the fuck are you doing?'"

It's one thing to talk about [turf dancing](#), nurturing strength in movement via the Black American body that serves as a holistic hyper-processing in flatland Oakland neighborhoods where police,



Photo by Steven Sanchez

residents, bullets, and their dialogue tend to move with mortal agility. It's one thing to talk about that slow-motion dance form in its relevant organic context, but it's a completely other discussion to take modern dance, a kind of dance without any street credibility whatsoever — with no ties to a specific geography or ethnicity, and insist that it make itself a home on the streets of East Oakland. It's here, in a community where nearly everyone you talk to has a story about harassment at the hands of law enforcement that [NAKA Dance Theater enters with a vulnerability and a push for empathy](#) that butts right up against a history of militarized police and violence. "I'm hoping that there will be some kind of emotional engagement with the audience, and some of that might involve discomfort," says Kajiyama.

NAKA Dance Theater's *The Anastasio Project* runs from September 19-21, 2014 along International Boulevard and 23rd avenue in Oakland. For [more information](#), visit nkdancetheater.com.