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## [THEATER REVIEW](#)

# Samantha Chanse: Lydia's Funeral Video

By [Claire Light](#) | Feb 05, 2008



Chicken or egg? Does pop culture proactively numb us to the horrors to come, or merely reflect changes that are already happening? Take the three (arguably) most popular movies of 2007: the unintended-pregnancy-fests **Knocked Up**, **Juno**, and **Waitress**. Through the medium of politically regressive Hollywood flicks, we discover that the range of choice for battered wives, single mothers, and teenagers now spans keeping the kid (joyfully) or (tearfully) playing cornfield for a barren couple. We're taught that it's bad to say the "A" word (and offered the high-larious "schmushmortion" in its place), and asked to believe that women for whom abortion might be the best financial and emotional choice, would simply pass it up without

thought, discussion, or process.

In other news, 2007 also brought us a Supreme Court ruling upholding the first [federal abortion ban](#) our country has seen since abortion was first legalized.

So when performer Samantha Chanse, in the character of a Kevlar-vested abortion doctor, cries "You don't know an apocalypse when you see one!" -- is she speaking to a malaise that she worries will overcome us, or is she reflecting our blindness now?

Either way, Chanse's first full-length solo performance, **Lydia's Funeral Video**, is a powerful antidote to last year's choice-pulping. Set in a near-future U.S. that bans all abortions after the first 28 days, **Lydia's Funeral Video** takes the natural narrative arc of conception-pregnancy-birth and changes it to conception-pregnancy-abortion deadline.

The play also makes the embryo a speaking character (played by a string of IKEA lights). Of course, the embryo is merely a product of the pregnant Lydia's subconscious, coming to her in her dreams to tell her that she is dying and must make a video to show at her funeral. To complete the video, Lydia is to perform three tasks: talk to her estranged mother and immature lover, do three sets of stand-up comedy at a local open mic, and terminate the pregnancy.

The funeral video conceit solves the one-performer/multiple-character problem by neatly placing most of the action "on-camera." We meet Lydia's uptight, TV news reporter mom; her "Angel of Death" abortion doctor best friend, who operates from a fleet of armored vehicles; Manchild, the sperminator, who is engaged to someone else; and a couple of minor characters, including a violent pro-life activist

and a bubble-headed co-worker.

Chanse (full disclosure: she is a friend of mine; I attended a workshop of the play last year) brings an unusual level of complexity to her characters through her writing and performance. She integrates Lydia's Asian American and multiracial identity issues into the plot, without falsely highlighting or overemphasizing them. In fact, none of Lydia's issues are prioritized as we would expect from standard narrative fare. Her pregnancy is not always the number one problem on her roster, and her confusion is as much a weakness of her character as it is a product of her home environment or her circumstances. The heroic figure in the piece, the abortion doctor/best friend, is simultaneously the most confident and the most rigid personality. She is not an unalloyed savior. And while the play never forces the question of whether abortion is the right choice for Lydia, we understand that she needs time to process her choices and live with them, before abortion can become a human, rather than a political, choice.

The video conceit, together with Lydia's stand-up comedy sets, parodies art-as-therapy. Chanse takes the opportunity to point out the abuse of intimacy that a filmmaker can perpetrate upon her subjects, while showing the license a creative or documentary project can give interviewees to speak truths otherwise proscribed by custom or habit.

This is a common theme in Chanse's work. A native New Yorker and a multiracial Asian American, Chanse's 7 years in the Bay Area have been spent as a cultural worker (she has been a program director at [Kearny Street Workshop](#) and [LocusArts](#), and involved in numerous other community programs), and a multidisciplinary artist: musician, playwright, actor, and comic. Her most autobiographical work can be found in the stand-up routines, which invoke the personal identity searches we're used to seeing in spoken word and comedy, only to wickedly subvert them. Chanse's playwriting draws more heavily on fictional genres, including magical realism and science fiction, challenging audiences to look beyond conventional narrative expectations. **Lydia's Funeral Video** is Chanse's most accomplished and satisfying work so far, incorporating and subtly layering all of her concerns of content and form into an energetic and integral piece. Bring an open mind and leave your birthing-scene sentiment at the door.

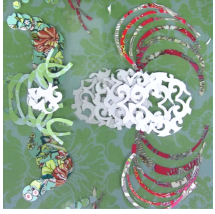
**Lydia's Funeral Video** is playing Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, from January 31 - February 16, 2008 at The Dark Room Theatre. For [tickets and information](#) visit [manja.org](#).

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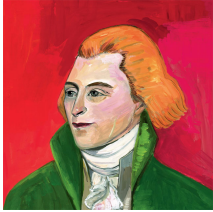
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