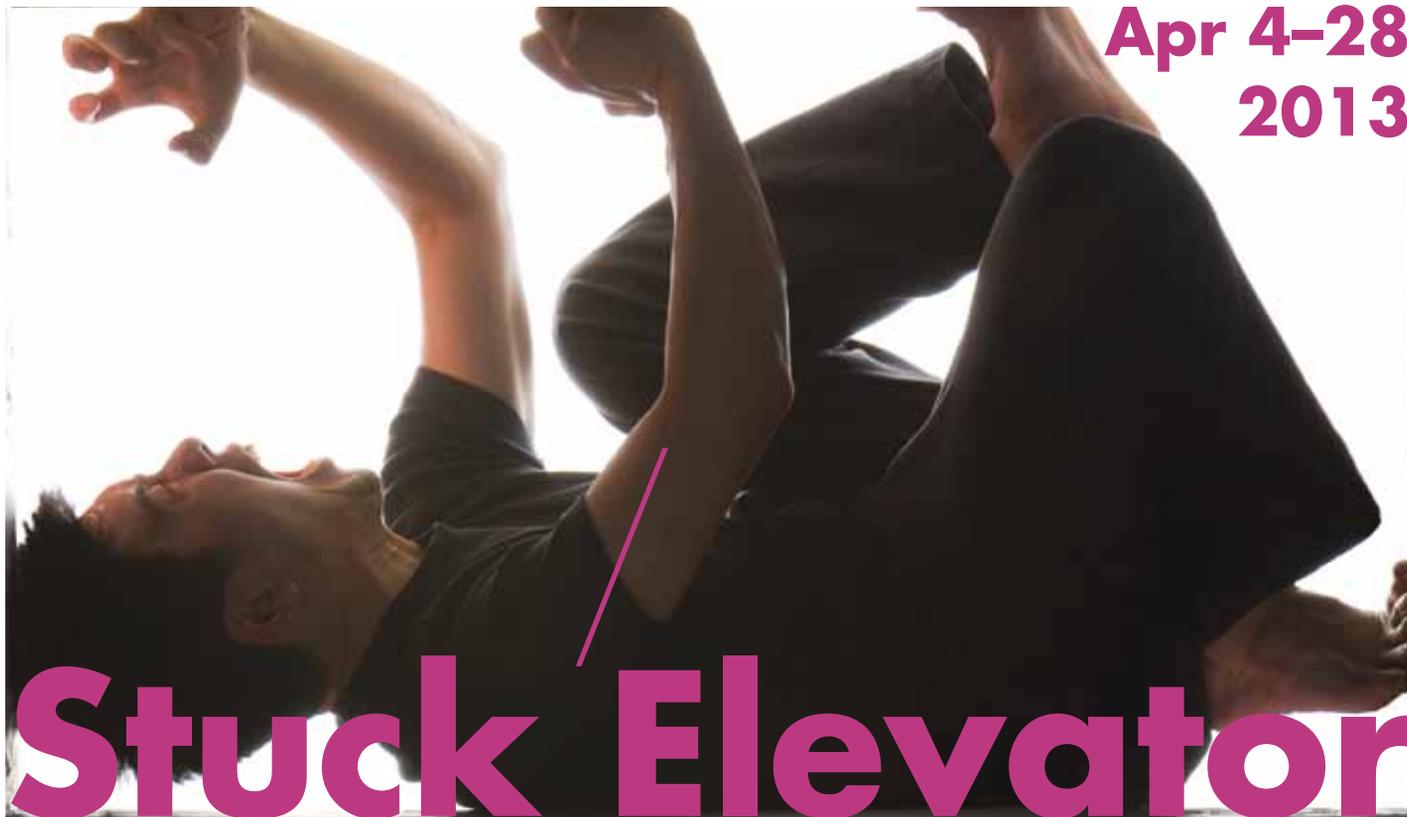


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# Stuck Elevator

## Going Up!

by Dan Rubin

On April 1, 2005, Ming Kuang Chen, a 35-year-old Chinese deliveryman, left New York's Happy Dragon restaurant on his bicycle to deliver three dinners to customers in an apartment complex in the Bronx. After making his final drop off, he was riding one of the building's 12 notoriously faulty elevators when the car dropped suddenly and became stuck between the third and fourth floors. Chen remained undiscovered for 81 hours; he was finally freed early on Monday morning, dehydrated but otherwise physically okay. Mentally, however, after spending three days alone in a 4'x6'x8' metal box, he was traumatized.

In 2007, avant-garde/classical/folk composer Byron Au Yong and hip-hop poet/playwright Aaron Jafferis interpreted this harrowing tale as a poignant allegory for the situations immigrants are forced to face every day in this country, "suspended between the upward mobility of the American dream and the downward plunge into an empty abyss." They created *Stuck Elevator*, a visionary new musical work, to tell the story of Chen's life while interweaving the nightmarish realities of living undocumented in America. It is a recession-era parable, they say: "In the middle of a recession, when the lives of undocumented immigrants are overshadowed by

unemployment statistics, *Stuck Elevator* focuses on a heroism that happens day to day and dollar to dollar."

In our studios last August, Yong and Jafferis joined OBIE Award-winning director Chay Yew and members of the ensemble that will debut *Stuck Elevator* during its world premiere at A.C.T. next April—eight years to the day after Chen was saved—for an exploratory workshop. Versatile Korean American tenor Julius Ahn, who has been with the project since 2011, plays Chen; Marie-France Arcilla plays various roles, including Chen's wife; and Joel Perez also plays various roles, including Marco, the Mexican deliveryman Chen competes with for tips.

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▲ **TRAPPED** Composer Byron Au Yong expresses the anguish of being stuck in an elevator. (photo by Tim Summers)

► **[TOP] ENSEMBLE WORK** Workshop performers (L to R) Joel Perez, Marie-France Arcilla, and Julius Ahn have some fun. (photo by Kevin Berne)

► **[BOTTOM] REWRITES** (L to R) Librettist Aaron Jafferis, assistant director Naya Chang, composer Byron Au Yong, and music director Dolores Duran-Cefalu make changes to the script and score during the August workshop of *Stuck Elevator* at A.C.T. (photo by Kevin Berne)



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*Stuck Elevator* is about people who are “suspended between the upward mobility of the American dream and the downward plunge into an empty abyss,” say the show’s creators.

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Yong and Jafferis have been workshoping *Stuck Elevator* since 2007, but this was the first time they had heard it in a streamlined form. New A.C.T. subscribers were treated to a sneak preview of the workshop, and the creators learned a lot: “The workshop showed us how appropriate San Francisco will be to premiere *Stuck Elevator*,” Yong explains. “The aesthetic and themes of the show will resonate with folks in the Bay Area who are engaged with labor, immigration, contemporary music, Chinese food, hybrid identities, and social change, and after working with A.C.T. and meeting board members, subscribers, and supporters, I am confident that *Stuck Elevator* will soar.”

Jafferis explains that the piece keeps growing, becoming at once more specific and more universal: “As we’ve explored the piece, it has moved away from trying to figure out the details of Chen’s life to incorporating details of other immigrants whose stories resemble his; simultaneously, it has moved away from the immigration issue as a faceless abstract to being intimately about this individual human being.”

***Stuck Elevator*** begins a limited run on April 4, 2013. Visit [act-sf.org/stuckelevator](http://act-sf.org/stuckelevator) for more information about the show.

