

Dance

Maria Hassabi Cuts a Rug

By Deborah Jowitt

Friday, October 2nd 2009

The sight of a Persian carpet sets off little eruptions in the brain: Cleopatra having herself carried onto Caesar's ship rolled up in one, exquisitely drawn Persian miniatures (so at odds with the present-day images of Iran in newspapers and books), Victorian parlors. I never thought to see such a rug used as equipment for a workout—no, for an ordeal.

Maria Hassabi begins *Solo*, the first half of her new "dance diptych," lying on the floor of P.S.122's small ground-floor theater, a rug drawn over her as far as her waist, like a blanket—except that it's about 8 x 10 and heavy. Its scarlet surface bears symmetrical designs traced in blue-green, cream, peach, and black. We have plenty of time to ponder this artificial garden, because Hassabi is in place as we enter and remains motionless for a long time, while we listen to James Lo's score. It sounds just like the traffic outside on 9th Street, augmented by what could be feet pounding down the corridor overheard, doors slamming, things falling over.

We also view Hassabi in the context of where she is. The room accommodates a relatively small audience. The cement floor is pale gray. The dark gray walls bear signs of past and present functions: pipes, an elevator, a non-functioning door, covered-up windows, a fuse box, a bank of heaters, a flat sheet of metal with one corner broken off.

When Hassabi finally slides out from under the carpet and flips onto her stomach to sprawl across it, she stays there a long time too. We can peruse her lithe body in its flesh-colored leotard and pants, her slim bare arms, her long-toed feet, her black pigtail. Like previous pieces of Hassabi's, *Solo* is part installation, part dance (although there are no dance steps per se in it). The rug becomes a heavy weight, a tent, a prop, a platform—altering in relation to her body. But because she is a component of this work, we read into it her desires, and the strength and endurance they involve stir up whispers of drama.

She rolls up the rug, sits beside it for several moments and then arches back over it. Her torso is twisted and, from the front row, her head is invisible. Her arms are spread, and you can watch the stretched muscles surrounding her armpits. She's breathing harder. When, still arched back, she slowly crooks a knee and lifts her foot off the floor, her leg quivers. Then she rolls over and rests, looking like a drowning woman draped across a floating log.

Almost every "picture" she creates is achieved with difficulty or is difficult to maintain. Hassabi's timing varies (thinking back on it, I wonder if her changes of action and design became gradually faster). She wrestles the carpet on end and stands beside it, her arm around it, then, after a few seconds, lets it go with a thud. She holds it horizontal for almost as long as she can bear to. She

