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He Gazed, She Gazed, and They Danced

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

The idea of the male gaze has played a prominent role in much of Maria Hassabi's recent work, which deals with sculptural, often extreme poses. In "Robert and Maria," that gaze is finally embodied, courtesy of her collaborator Robert Steijn. And Ms. Hassabi is looking right back.

Friday night at Danspace Project in St. Mark's Church, the pair remained locked in intense eye contact for almost the length of their intimate, erotically charged piece, which completed Platform 2010: i get lost, an acclaimed series organized by the choreographer Ralph Lemon. The two collaborators indeed seemed lost in each other, their bodies trembling and expressions roiling with unknowable emotions.

After beginning the work with a lengthy sideways embrace, their backs to the audience, the two faced each other in profile to the crowd, conjuring thoughts of "Imponderabilia," Marina Abramovic's performance art piece, now at the Museum of Modern Art, in which two naked people stand close together in a narrow doorway. But these performers' jeans and shirts stayed on; Mr. Steijn, a burly middle-aged man who began his career as a dance critic in the Netherlands, even wore shoes.

He loomed large beside the shorter, reed-thin Ms. Hassabi, but her gaze and finely honed physical presence were more aggressive than his gentle, somehow vulnerable mien. Her training became its own type of authority, even (or maybe especially?) when she hunched her torso and stared up at him with an almost animal-like beseeching quality.

"Robert and Maria" is a dance by degrees, in which the inching closer of angled torsos or the slow joining of hands becomes an act of rich drama. It required a high amount of endurance and attention from both participants and observers: like any serious relationship, this one demanded a considerable, sometimes exhausting commitment.

It's rare to get such an unadorned window into the world of two strangers. (Well, almost unadorned: the sculptural cluster of stage lights, designed with the help of Ji-Youn Chang, was attractive but oddly decorative in the larger context of the work, and seemed ill considered as a result.) The reward, of course, was the same as the toll.



Photo by: Tom Brazil
"Robert and Maria," with Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn, at Danspace Project, part of Platform 2010.