



Solo and SoloShow: a Diptych by Maria Hassabi

Posted By Cristiane Bouger On 24 June 2010 @ 8:16 pm

Solo

Premiered at the intimate theater on the first floor of P.S.122 in New York, Solo was the first work of a diptych directed and choreographed by Maria Hassabi. The performance was part of Crossing the Line – FIAF Fall Festival 2009, presented by the French Institute Alliance Française.

The diptych indicated a clear continuity of the investigation of Hassabi's earlier work, Gloria, from 2007, in which extreme physicality, female imagery and pop culture were influences at work. In Solo, alternately performed by Maria Hassabi and the dancer Hristoula Harakas, the female body was still central.

In the show I attended, the choreographer was the soloist performer. When the audience entered into the theater Hassabi was laying down on the floor, covered by one of the extremes of a red Persian rug placed on the center of the performance space. The beige pants and top worn by the performer were designed by the collective ThreeAsFour. The background wall and the floor presented a similar beige color, simultaneously creating a particular space and a non-referential place for the choreography to be developed. The lighting design by Joe Levasseur uniformly covered the space.

The different colors of the fabric that covered each chair in the audience were puzzling. Seen from behind and among the seats, the almost Tropicalist visual input looked like a disrupted and incoherent choice in relation to the given austerity of the setting sustained by the Persian carpet and the emptiness of the space. Later, it was a great surprise to realize while looking at the photographs for this article, that the colors of each seat matched the colors on the pattern of the Persian rug, forming a pixel-like exposed image of the traditional carpet. It is hard to figure out how frequently this relation was perceived by the audience. Yet, by this mean, Hassabi established a visual common ground for both performer and spectator.

Choreographically, Hassabi created movements that were transformed into still images re-codifying the symbolic potential of the Persian rug. From reshaping its form in relation to her body, every image presented was mutable and physically challenging, interchanging stillness and liveness in a minimalist tempo.

According to the choreographer, her diptych is a work on the female body and its imagery embedded in culture. However, the visual relation between the dancer and the rug gave us room to think about a larger spectrum of human imagery. Solo allowed us to perceive how form reveals meaning and how our background informs the meaning we read in form. This is certainly nothing new, since meaning interpretation and subjectivity are indelibly related. But it is satisfying when a dance work leads us to a landscape in which we can create, question and disrupt our own visual connections, opening doors to reevaluate them. Evoked in the images of the performance, I could see reminiscences of Joseph Beuys (I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974), symbols of power and monarchy, the relation between a woman and a phallic symbol, high couture advertisements and female power. Indeed, these connections that appeared in my mind with such clarity and authority were probably not the same ones other viewers have read with equal weight. The rug was the manipulated code in which the choreographer operated a constant transformation. Every still image was imperious and clear until its dissolution into a new form.

The dramaturgy signed by Scott Lyall and Marcos Rosales created a fluent narrative of dissolution from simplicity to grandeur: the performer started using the rug as a blanket and as the work developed, she gave the rug spatial qualities using its volume through rolling, folding and enveloping herself in it, achieving different ranges of visual impact.

The sound design by James Lo and the lighting design by Joe Levasseur/Hassabi were most of the time constant, allowing all the focus to the movement score.

SoloShow, the second work of a diptych

The second part of Hassabi's diptych was commissioned by the biennial Performa 09, and it was presented approximately one month after Solo premiered in New York. SoloShow SoloShow interpreted by Hristoula Harakas. was presented at the theater on the second floor of P.S. 122 and was also alternately performed by both dancers in different evenings. This time I saw

For SoloShow, Hassabi conducted a research of approximately 300 images of female representations in art history, including paintings, sculptures, photographs and film stills. The choreographic score resulted from this examination of how the female body has been pictured over the centuries. Based on these images, an extensive sequence of poses was performed with slight variations in its dynamics.

Like the mirror-effect created with the audience seat colors and the pattern of the Persian rug in Solo, the second work created a mirrored continuity of the first part of the diptych. The choreographic structure was very similar in the kin solos. The stillness of the poses, the extreme physicality involved and how the movements were displayed clearly created coherence in the pattern in display, but this time the poses were more languid and the effort less dramatic than in Solo. As in Solo, SoloShow started to be performed prior to the entrance of the audience and the costumes were the same. However, the feeling of the first part of the work was like peeping at the intimacy of that specific room, while SoloShow presented a more spectacular, and yet minimalist aesthetic.

The set design by Scott Lyall and Hassabi – which consisted of a black platform –, continuously reminded us of the theater architecture. The weight, structure and dimensionality of the set created a completely different relation with the performer, contrasting with the alternations of flatness and changeable volume of the Oriental rug used in Solo.

In the same way, the lighting design co-signed by Joe Levasseur and the choreographer was beautifully imagined: the stage lighting was carefully set up on the ceiling in a corridor strip shape that crossed the stage in the audience-back wall direction. The micro-constellation of ellipsoidal spots composed a fine visual setting with the set design.

The decision for the beige costumes that in Solo matched the floor and background color and blurred the limits of the performer's body and the space, created here a bright contrast with the black background and platform.

SoloShow was a delicate piece of work. Its strength resided in the precision of its choreography and austere set and lighting design.

In Hassabi's and Harakas' performances for the diptych, qualities such as precision, presence and efficiency are continuously in tune. As defined by Hassabi, the two choreographies are two autonomous evening-solos. Even though both works can stand on its own, Solo revealed a certain incompleteness and the need for its double. SoloShow instead, could be independent from the first part of the diptych.

Watching performances in New York in recent years, I started to realize that the potential of a work is more likely to be fully achieved when the artist opts for specificity. No matter the art form or the intersection of arts that is on focus, when an artist makes very clear and specific decisions something more extraordinary about the content of the work is revealed.

In the sense simple choices may reveal complex ideas, the work by Maria Hassabi presents the density of something only the experience of the spectator – and not only of the choreographer – can unfold. She does not offer us any alternative to question this vision of the female body representations and the performer's body is through her dance, the object reproducing once more this art history. However, by relying upon the experience and repertoire of the spectator, the choreographer offers us a work in which we are not intently entertained. Instead, we are invited to open up our perception and question the sculptural images she displays in front of us.

Solo was seen on October 4th, 2009 as part of Crossing the Line – FIAF Fall Festival 2009, presented by the French Institute Alliance Française.

SoloShow was seen on November 14th, 2009, as part of PERFORMA 09.

To learn more about the artist, please, visit www.mariahassabi.com

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