

CULTUREBOT

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Week In Review(s)

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Thursday night took me to The Kitchen for Maria Hassabi's SHOW. This piece harkens back to her 2007 piece Gloria at PS122. Once again she is collaborating on a duet with Hristoula Harakas, once again she is exploring a series of posed situations and glacial choreographies. In this latest iteration she has changed the context, bisecting the space of the Kitchen to half, removing the seats and creating a more gallery/"happening" type environment. The audience enters the space and waits a good ten minutes before anything happens. In the empty space with a bunch of lights on the floor in one half of the room, we endure the now all-too-familiar experience of being abandoned to our own devices. People chat amongst themselves and then start to look around the room expectantly. Then everyone quiets down, waiting. And nothing happens, and everyone starts looking around again, and you can almost hear everyone thinking the same thing, "Is this the show? Are they really going to leave us here on our own for an hour? I mean, it is called "Show"? Maybe she's making a statement about show?" And just when you think you're totally fucked, Maria and Hristoula enter and strike a pose in the middle of the crowd.

Over the course of the next 70 minutes or so, they move through a sequence of postures and movements, alternately staring fiercely into each other's eyes or deeply into the audience, face to face. The first sequence, which was basically a duet, a glacial descent to the ground, was riveting. The dancers created tension in and between their bodies, inciting an air of expectancy. We watched as they slowly descended, muscles taut, legs and torso extended, subtly twitching under the strain, in deep concentration.

From there the piece moved on to explore the same basic idea, in different variations. For me the most compelling parts were when the two were in (silent) dialogue with each other. They really have a deep rapport, and they're both intense performers. When they were moving closely together, either in mirror or variation, there was a tension and subconscious communication that you could almost tap into. When they moved apart and to different areas of the space, that tension and connection seemed to wane, it was harder to maintain focus and my attention wandered. My experience of the work was alternately fascination and boredom. I appreciate the demands on my attention, the way I was being asked to focus on the minutiae of motion, the subtleties of interaction and the feeling of tension and expectation. But over the course of the hour I also felt fatigued and frustrated, waiting for something more to happen.

The sound design was very atmospheric – it sounded like it was just a recording of a crowd of people in a lobby waiting for a show to start. For a moment I thought that was what it was – that they had recorded us in the lobby of the Kitchen prior to the show and were playing our own ambient noise back to us, which would have added an interesting meta-layer to the experience. But I don't think that was the case.

UPDATE: THIS WAS IN FACT THE CASE. SOUND DESIGN WAS LOBBY NOISE RE-MIXED. Matthew Lyons from The Kitchen says: "Alex Waterman, the sound designer, takes a recording of the first few minutes of the piece when the audience enters the space. That gets played back into the house and he re-records that playback with the room sound. And then that gets played back into the house and re-recorded, over and over till the end of the piece. So the original few minutes of the start of the piece gets muddier and muddier with the new sounds on top of each playback."

Very cool! I really loved Joe Levasseur's lighting – it was incredibly bright and clean it almost seemed hyper-real, as if it added a dimension of extra clarity to my vision. As I looked at the dancers and, when my attention wandered, at my fellow audience members, it was as if I could see every hair on someone's head, every line on their face, every subtle flex or twitch of a muscle. I don't know if it is possible to create increased visual clarity through lighting design, but it sure seemed like it. The only element I kind of disagreed with was the ending. I'm not going to say what it was – I don't want to give it away – but it is actually a pretty familiar and obvious thing and I was surprised that she used it. I mean, it makes sense, but it sort of undercut the previous hour's worth of experience.

I like Maria's work. While her choreography is pretty out there, she definitely pushes the body into interesting and unexpected directions. She asks compelling questions about the meaning of the observed body and about the dynamic and expectations between audience and performer. That doesn't mean I always love the experience of the work – like I said, I alternated between fascination and boredom. But it is well worth checking out.