

Maria Hassabi premieres "PREMIERE" at The Kitchen



Choreographer Maria Hassabi (far left) with members of her troupe--
l-r, Robert Steijn, Andros Zins-Browne, Biba Bell and Hristoula Harakas
(photo by Marialena Marouda)

The publicist wasn't kidding when he wrote, "The artist and The Kitchen would like for me to remind you that there is absolutely no late seating for this show, so please plan accordingly to be here before 8:00."

As soon as you pass through the set of doors into the performance space for Maria Hassabi's PREMIERE (co-presented by The Kitchen and Performa for Performa 13), you're trapped. With the action--yes, I will use that word--unfolding in front of you, the five performers arrayed between you and those doors, there's no unobtrusive way to get up and walk out. And, any number of times, you might think about walking out, think about fleeing the tedium and the cumulative heat of countless stage lights massed on either side of the performance space. The dancers' movements are incredibly slow and slight; the temperature in the airless room, elevated; and you are uncomfortably aware of everything going on within your own body.

Over ninety straight minutes that feel like ninety minutes indeed, you tilt forward, backward into your seat, list to one side or the other. Your eyes droop. You fan yourself with your program. You hear your neighbors similarly shifting, rustling, coughing. You catch one checking her watch. You check your own watch.

And yet you stay put. Not because you are a Performa type, because maybe you're not. Not because you're self-conscious and/or polite. But because the work--an endurance trial for performers and audience alike--is a knockout.

You first experience PREMIERE as you enter the space, noticing the dancers rooted in place--Biba Bell and Hristoula Harakas standing, Hassabi, Robert Steijn and Andros Zins-Browne lounging on the floor--all motionless as they face the theater's doors. They maintain that tableau, inside the blaze of hot lights, with their backs to the audience as it settles in. When the last stragglers enter, Kitchen staff close the doors--the only indicator that the time has come to pay serious attention.

You watch for something--anything--to break loose. You feel relief and triumph to notice even just the flow of breath ruffling through a dancer's back, and you search for more of the same. Your outer and inner senses reach out. Despite yourself, you have already begun to live in this dance.

This persists over a long stretch until Harakas breaks the spell with a teeny, tiny twist of one foot. Bell also makes a minute slide or twist that slightly re-positions her body. In time, Zin-Browne's arm, which has been supporting him on the floor, slips backward an inch or so, and so does both of Hassabi's supporting arms. Glacial pace and subtlety in movement get the job done, though. You can look away for a while and look back to find the grouping changed in significant ways. It not only breathes; it evolves.

"Sound, here," I wrote in my notebook, "is color." I cannot say what I meant in that moment, but, so be it. The sole of Bell's ankle boot makes little crackles as it inches along the floor. In the otherwise silent atmosphere, that reaches us like amplified music. This approach to sounds, created by the friction between surfaces, recurs throughout the piece as dancers adjust their grounding. In one part of the dance, a crinkly sound initially seems to issue from one or more of the lights, like a sudden electrical problem. That distracts you until the volume of the noise strengthens and you get the joke. It's part of a recording as is a soft, high voice that appears somewhere and swiftly disappears.

Late in the piece, the blast of light reduces and then gets restored. Maybe you notice, for the first time, the oval pattern of dusty shoe marks--presumably from the audience, but it looks so perfect--that decorates the floor. Maybe you think, "Who's to stop me from napping for the remaining time? Really, who?" Instead, you continue to watch the dancers work their way 'round to their original tableau in which they face the doors through which you now may exit. In their end is their beginning.