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A DANCE OF A MILLION PREMIÈRES

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The ephemeral nature of dance is one of its great pleasures. Every moment is special, never to be repeated the same way, no matter how many times a dance is performed. It's impossible to see everything; one way to grasp dance is not to grasp at it, to be willing to let it run its course. When dance is slowed down so that its forms and images linger, though, viewers can immerse themselves in the continuity of the movement; there is time to become part of the dance, to inhabit it. "Premiere," the new work that Maria Hassabi presented recently at the Kitchen, in Chelsea, was an absorbing study in time distortion, an invitation—or a challenge—to experience dance on a microscopic level.

When the big doors opened from the Kitchen's lobby, we were confronted by the five performers of "Premiere," in glaring light, facing us. The risers had been moved to the opposite side of the theatre, and we had to walk across the dance floor, around the dancers, who were grouped more or less in the center, to get to our seats. The dancers remained still, expressionless. It was as though we had interrupted their performance, and now they were waiting for us to settle in order to continue. People moved purposefully past them, caught in unfamiliar territory, onstage and among the performers.

Once we were seated, we were looking at the dancers' backs—they still faced out toward the lobby. Hassabi and Andros Zins-Browne reclined next to Biba Bell and Hristoula Harakas, who stood; Robert Steijn lay next to them on the other side. Each wore a simple costume of matching jeans and shirts in different colors, with black shoes. Vast banks of lights of many shapes and sizes bordered the stage, illuminating the audience as well as the dancers. And then we waited. It was minutes before anyone onstage moved. Gradually, Bell and Harakas began making minute adjustments to their stances—turning out a leg, allowing a foot to extend jerkily along the black floor—pausing just long enough between movements that we wondered if there would be any more. Little by little, all of the performers made incremental shifts in posture. It was quiet in the theatre. All we could hear was the light scraping of a shoe now and then.

Ten minutes passed before we saw part of someone's face, as Harakas, in her vivid magenta outfit, turned slightly to the side. The effect of this was revelatory, and a relief. Without faces to ground us in the human, the work up until that point, though mesmerizing, was alienating; we wanted to connect. After twenty minutes, sound emerged from stage right: a faint crackling. Taking in the group as a whole was difficult; the dancers often moved at different times, and the eye naturally wanted to alight on just one, to indulge in the painstaking progress. Focussing on one dancer—Harakas as she inched into a wide, straight-legged fourth position; Hassabi reaching awkwardly behind her on the floor, contorting her body—made everyone else onstage disappear, and when you looked back at the others they'd somehow changed positions dramatically; their shifts had been imperceptible in one's peripheral vision.

When the attention eventually drifted to another dancer, it was like the beginning of an entirely new piece; it was a dance made of a million premières, and every time someone maneuvered from crouching to standing, or changed direction, it was presented with the solemnity and the elegance of a major event. Hassabi and her collaborators augmented this lean momentousness subtly. Alex Waterman's sound design—the crackling, then a metallic rustling with pings, and later a barely audible melody—came and went with large gaps in between, so that even in its austerity it was a welcome enrichment of the atmosphere. The lighting (by Zack Tinkelman and Hassabi) produced a lot of heat—it wasn't long before sweat stains bloomed on the performers' shirts—and dimmed and brightened sporadically, exaggeratedly, releasing the tension that had built up in the choreography.

"Premiere" was really five dances going on simultaneously. The performers never appeared to look at one another, and they never touched. But merely the proximity of two bodies, even when they are striking the most casual postures, can carry a thrill, or the possibility of one: Hassabi, reclining, stretched out her arm, her hand squeaking along the floor, and came within an inch or two of Zins-Browne's foot. When any chance of contact vanished, the moment had a tinge of sadness, even though the two performers occupied different universes, and their near-encounter was, you felt, purely happenstance. Later, she stood in his shadow—taking refuge, we'd like to think—until the two moved on once again. In the absence of interaction, or emotion, we latched on to expressions: Hassabi's suspicious, almost pained; Steijn's matter-of-fact; Bell's intense, wide-eyed; Zins-Browne's open, kind; Harakas's like a Vermeer girl, holding a secret.

(The audience brought its own character to the dance. In the stillness of the theatre, little dramas stood out: the man and woman who suffered through a fit of the giggles, a middle-aged couple in the third row who clearly wanted to be elsewhere. We were, of course, trapped; leaving in the middle of the show would have involved crossing the performance space while the dance was going on.)

As the dance became more protracted—its silences more ominous, the slowness more agonizing—formal arrangements (a diagonal, a semicircle, a cross) coalesced as if by magic, then melted away. In time, the dancers began to venture farther from the center—Harakas got right up next to the back wall, Hassabi lay on her back far downstage—but never moved beyond the gray wreath of footprints that we had left when we entered the theatre. After seventy-five minutes, the performers were arranged in a line, some on the ground, some standing, looking at us—the exact formation, in other words, that they'd been in when we entered the theatre, but rotated a hundred and eighty degrees.

Minutes passed. The lights blazed. The crackling came and went. Then each dancer shifted slightly, and the lights went out. When the lights came back up, the dancers hadn't moved. We filed past them as we'd done earlier in the evening, out through the big doors. If you stopped and looked back, it seemed possible that the dance—the same one, but always new—might begin again, with its different facing, and be repeated over and over, for eternity.

Photograph by Paula Court.