

# The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW

## One Step Forward, One Step Back

Maria Hassabi's 'Premiere,' Part of Performa 13



Paula Court

From left, Andros Zins-Browne, Maria Hassabi, Biba Bell, Robert Steijn and Hristoula Harakas in "Premiere."

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The double doors part to reveal five dancers, looking right at you, drenched in bright white light. From left to right, they are Robert Steijn, Biba Bell, Hristoula Harakas, Andros Zins-Browne and the choreographer, Maria Hassabi.

Each performer wears an expressionless gaze, leather shoes and a different shade of denim. Ms. Harakas (the brightest, in magenta) and Ms. Bell (in bleached gray and white) stand with their hips and shoulders parked at very particular angles; the others, framing them, sit or recline on the floor, with just as much intention.

They don't move. They won't move for a while. And when they do, morphing from this asymmetrical tableau through other sculptural arrangements, they will move very, very slowly.

This is the opening image of Ms. Hassabi's "Premiere," greeting you — or austere­ly regarding you, at least — as you cross the threshold from the Kitchen's lobby into its black-box theater. Walking past the dancers, you take a seat in the rows behind them. From there, you have a long, long time to study the back of each head, the curve of each spine.

Dozens of theatrical lights, maybe hundreds, cover the walls, every variety of cylindrical, rectangular fixture (the work of Zack Tinkelman and Ms. Hassabi). The double doors close, forming a sleek chrome backdrop, a quiet but persistent reminder of the world beyond this sealed environment.

"Premiere," seen on Friday (as part of Performa 13, a biennial presentation of visual art that transcends disciplines), is quite literally about turning in from that world, about coming to face an audience, an extended first encounter. Luminous, strenuous, severe — as riveting to watch as it is taxing — it joins Ms. Hassabi's recent body of performances about performance, similarly pared-down studies with titles like "Solo," "Intermission" and "Show."

In "Premiere," as with the equally glacial "Show," almost every incremental change — of posture, of focus, of lighting — feels momentous. So much is withheld that release takes on new meaning. You start to notice things like a contracting hamstring, a quivering eyelid, a drifting pupil. In the first perceptible flicker of motion and sound, Ms. Hassabi's patent-leather shoes click together, like magnets, just once. (Credit for styling goes to ThreeASFOUR.)

Feet and hands produce much of the spare aural landscape (enhanced by emissions of crackling and static, thanks to Alex Waterman). Rubber soles scrape the ground, as a dancer sinks into a lunge or slides into a wider stance. Ms. Hassabi's fingertips squeakily inch along the ground as she lies on her back, lengthening one gaunt, trembling arm.

At a certain point you realize that you're witnessing something like a choreographic palindrome. The lights have dimmed to near-darkness and brightened again. The dancers are moving in reverse through crouching, torquing positions you've seen before.

"Premiere" ends where it started, almost: the same left-to-right lineup, but facing the audience instead of the doors. Mr. Steijn, Ms. Bell, Ms. Harakas, Mr. Zins-Browne, Ms. Hassabi: motionless as ever, but glowing with exhaustion. Their eyes meet ours, their expressions having softened just slightly.