

PERFORMA MAGAZINE

PREMIERE: Maria Hassabi's new instance on dance

By Cristiane Bouger



Maria Hassabi's *PREMIERE*, a *Performa 13* Premiere, had its debut at The Kitchen in New York on November 6, 2013. As its title suggests, *PREMIERE* depicts a reflection on the moment in which an artwork is presented to an audience for the first time. The cast is composed of Hassabi, her longtime collaborator Hristoula Harakas, and performers Biba Bell, Andros Zins-Browne, and Robert Steijn. The work brings on board dramaturge Scott Lyall and counts on the lighting design of Zack Tinkelman, co-created along with Hassabi.

In *PREMIERE*, it is possible to trace the recurrent peculiarities of the dance structures choreographer Maria Hassabi has continuously developed over the last few years, more specifically with works such as *SOLO*, *SoloShow* (P.S. 122 and *Performa 09*), and *SHOW* (The Kitchen, 2011). Her optioning for the intimate, the use of lighting equipment as installation piece, the minimalist movement compositions with extended duration, as well as the incitation of the observer's gaze are all part of her visual and kinesthetic vocabulary. Hassabi's new instance on dance touches on recognizable structures from earlier works, though not as mere recurrence. *PREMIERE* could rather be defined as a step into a deeper level of the core of Hassabi's choreography. Extreme and fragile, her dance advances into a territory in which the gaze is expanded and the viewers' expectations reframed.

When the doors of the theater open, the image seen from the foyer is magnificent: Two parallel structures in front of the right and left walls sustain a considerable quantity of lighting equipment forming vibrant light walls; the audience seats are facing the theater's entrance, and at the center of the performative space, the five performers are fixed on specific positions, staring in the direction of the viewers.

The performers, each dressed in different colors and styled by threeASFOUR, are all dressed in denim costumes composed of long-sleeved shirts and pants, accompanied by black shoes. Harakas, in magenta, and Biba Bell, in a bleached grey and cream outfit, are standing. Hassabi sits on the floor wearing light blue, while Steijn, in beige, and Zins-Browne, in gray, are lying on the floor. While crossing the performance space to reach the seats, the audience's footsteps mark the black floor of the theater, tracing a contour of footprints around the performers. From the seats, the flux of spectators resembles extras making their entrance out of a backstage. The doors of the theater are closed and the initial composition of the performers remain, their back turned to the viewers. The image persists for minutes, immersed in the luminosity that comes from the walls.

The stunning visual composition captured on the first glimpse at *PREMIERE* is delivered in its fullness to the viewer's contemplation along the entirety of the piece. The performance is ultimately centered on the revelation of the first and last gaze at—and by—the performers. What is seen in between is the development of a slow dance that never detaches itself from the ground.

The dance develops in slight movement shifts—inclining, crouching, standing, lying down, reclining—in between long pauses. The initial grandiosity of the piece gives room for an intimate atmosphere between observer and performer, whose eyes eventually meet. The impact of the lighting design created by Tinkelman along with Hassabi is suddenly minimized, its effect seems to be diluted. Distilled from the glittering of its first moment, the dance starts revealing the humanity of each dancer: their gaze, their tempo, their silently presence, only broken by the sound of their shoes gripping onto the floor. The score modulates new images, slowly constructed, as the aligned frontality gains spatial depth and movement variations. The viewer becomes witness and beholder of the dancers' minimal scores, while the passage of time reveals five solos evolving simultaneously, side by side.

Incidental sounds coming from the lighting equipment accompany the dance. Later on, what sounds like a reflector bulb loudly crisping entices certain tension in the audience. In fact, the pre-recorded soundscape overlaps the actual equipment noises and apparently comes from the speaker placed along with the stage lights on the left wall. The original sound design by Alex Waterman is composed of what resembles white noise sounds, and include a song excerpt coming from another speaker, on the back of the stage. Still, for most of the time, it is silence that prevails allowing the incidental sounds originated in the theater itself to be heard.

Although the lighting design was a strong visual component of the performance, the lighting changes seemed mostly unnecessary. The shifts on the light did not last enough to reframe, modify, or reassure what was already seen, and its few alternations seemed unclear in purpose, yet too evident not to address one.

Hassabi's choreography is extreme. It makes the viewer look at those interstices that would not be perceived otherwise. By asking to be looked at patiently and persistently, her work claims to the viewer to immerse oneself in the act of seeing. Thus, it is necessary to endure the slowdown of one's own rhythm and to enter in a contemplative mood to fully experience her dance.

The solos draw spatial relationships that are soon dissipated. The individuality of each dancer is revealed by the way each body copes with his or her solo and the idea around the meaning of a premiere. From sustaining a pose for too long, not uncommonly, the bodies experience involuntary movements—some hesitation, some trembling. After approximately 80 minutes, each performer gets once again aligned in an mirrored image of the one seen when the theater doors opened. They are looking at the audience's direction, but their bodies highly differentiate from the first moment we looked at the performers. The score they performed clearly altered their physicality and presence, and their faces have dramatically changed. They are vulnerable, yet their presence stands stronger. The dance culminates at this final image and it is suitable to wonder if we also have been transformed, mirrored on and by the performers' gaze. It is like meditating on anticipation: once the expectations are broken, the viewer is free to see the intricacies of what is fully presented. The audience leaves the space, carrying this updated image, whilst the performers remain onstage.

For those who have seen Hassabi's earlier works, to experience *PREMIERE* is seeing her evoke the same quality of questions over and over again. As she attunes to and extracts the subtlety of her dance, we all can muse on what is revealed and transformed when dance and observer experience each other.

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