The Choreography of Anticipation in Maria Hassabi's PREMIERE

Victoria Gray

Imagine as we may the contours and details of an event, an object, an activity in advance, we are always surprised by its actual characteristics. A work of art, or a body of knowledge, is not possible before it is real.

—Elizabeth Grosz (2004:187)

In the Event of *PREMIERE*

A "first" movement is not "the beginning."

—Erin Manning (2013:82)

We begin, in the middle. As the audience enters Djanogly Art Gallery at Nottingham's Lakeside Arts Centre, in anticipation of the inaugural movements of Maria Hassabi's *PREMIERE* (2013), we realize we've been had; the event, of course, is always already moving, has always already begun.[1] Biba Bell, Andros Zins-Browne, Hristoula Harakas, Robert Steijn, and Maria Hassabi are already in attendance. They are poised in anticipation of our imminent entrance. A crowd of over 100 bodies comprises the evening's full-to-capacity audience. Defaulting naively to theatrical convention, we enter expecting to take our seats. We had not anticipated that Hassabi would choreograph a more unconventional entrance. As we come into the theatre via upstage left we walk directly into the performers. Unprepared and unrehearsed, we are thrown into the midst of the performance milieu. Five pensive bodies are before us, each inhabiting a unique posture of standing, sitting, or reclining. Styled by threeASFOUR,[2] the dancers are buttoned up in shirts and jeans; four wear shades of greyish, bluish, brownish denim, while a single body bruises the otherwise soft palette in contrasting purple. Beckoning us at the opposite end of the space is the familiarity and safety of raked seating. Yet, we are a nervous audience. In our collective shyness, each of us is reluctant to be "the first" to traverse the space to the sanctuary of our seats. Instead, we politely skirt the edges of stage left, clustering timidly around the five performers. A knotted thicket of hesitant bodies begins to form. In this furtive choreographic strategy, Hassabi opens *PREMIERE* by opening us, exposing our disorientated bodies *in* and *as* the opening event. This is no

1. *PREMIERE* was performed on 23 May 2014 as part of neat14: Nottingham European Arts and Theatre Festival. The work was coproduced by Dance4 (Nottingham, UK), The Kitchen and Performa (New York, USA), Kunstenfestivaldesarts and Kaaitheater (Brussels, Belgium), and steirischer herbst (Graz, Austria). The piece premiered in 2013 at The Kitchen, as part of Performa 13.

2. threeASFOUR is a New York City–based fashion label. The designers are Gabi Asfour, Angela Donhauser, and Adi Gil.

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anonymous entrance—it is the event of our own premiere *within PREMIERE* itself.

Adding to our disorientation is the blinding glare from two walls of floor-to-ceiling theatre lights. Flanking us on either side of the space, these silver scaffolding structures hold an inestimable number of theatre lights of all shapes and sizes. En masse, the lights have both aesthetic and practical purpose. Within this nontraditional theatre space they act as a clever framing device, demarcating the edges of the floor-level performance space, thus defining the boundaries of "onstage" and "offstage." Designed by Zack Tinkelman and Hassabi, the lighting scheme seems to utilize every theatre lamp available in the house. The starkness of the lighting effect produces a temporary flash blindness, an overabundance of light paradoxically occluding our vision.

Figure 1. Audience view from onstage: anticipating movement from within *the performance milieu. From left: Maria Hassabi, Andros Zins-Browne, Hristoula Harakas, Biba Bell, and Robert Steijn in* PREMIERE *by Maria Hassabi, The Kitchen, New York, 6–9 November 2013. (Photo by Paula Court; courtesy of Maria Hassabi)*

I lose myself for a split-second, eye to eye with Biba Bell. Her eyes glow as they catch and reflect the light. It occurs to me, *this* is the first time I have appeared before Bell, and *this* is the first time she has appeared before me. We are premiering for each other in *this* moment. In the first-ness, in the *middle* of this encounter, I sense a heightening of intensity. I concede that this intensity is possible once and only once, when *PREMIERE* opens itself to us, to *this* first encounter with *this* audience. For Hassabi, in order for *PREMIERE* to premiere something must be at stake. The mingling of newly encountered bodies is where the stakes of a premiere lie; this is where and when the anticipatory force surrounding *PREMIERE* starts. In the middle is where it begins.

A Dance of Micro-Premieres

It's never still. It's never still.

—Maria Hassabi (2013)

Time is elastic. Just several minutes have passed onstage, but in my disorientation, the duration feels much longer. Eventually, we find the courage to walk across the space and take our seats. Our bodies peel away from the edge of the stage; the bottleneck we had created is relieved and the whole room exhales. Enjoying the proximity to the dancers I find myself reluctant to leave the stage. Dutifully, I follow the crowd; propriety wins over my desire to remain close. Distance affords a fresh perspective and from my seat I absorb the composition of the scene as a whole. The dancers appear distant as they regard us with their backs, not their eyes. Across the trajectory of the next 83 minutes, the five dancers will turn to face us. The corporeal landscape will transform, albeit at an incredibly slow pace, like clouds moving imperceptibly in the sky. I scan the scene for the first twitch of a muscle. I sharpen my gaze for the stirring of tiny movements that slowly come into micro-relief.

For over a decade, Hassabi has utilized duration and temporality in choreographies where the body teeters between dance and sculpture, subject and object, live body and still image. Yet, we are mistaken if we think that these sculptural bodies are inert, passive, or inexpressive. Here, my reading of *PREMIERE* departs from those of other reviewers. For example, Andrew Boynton in the *New Yorker* writes, "The dancers remained still, expressionless" and of the opening scene comments, "It was minutes before anyone onstage moved"

(2013). Siobhan Burke in the *New York Times* echoes Boynton's sentiment: "They don't move. They won't move for a while" (2013). These assumptions are common yet inaccurate interpretations of Hassabi's choreographic intent to trouble easy binaries between animate and inanimate, still and moving states. In *PREMIERE*, and indeed throughout Hassabi's oeuvre, the dancers are never still. Stillness is absolutely the wrong word. Therefore, in order to talk about *PREMIERE*, we are provoked to find a new word for that ontological state we conveniently call "stillness" but which is actually one of "microscopic moves" (Lepecki 2000:344).[3] The bodies in *PREMIERE* are not inert, but are engaged in innervated processual states in which we sense a tornado lying fallow. The dancers might appear glued to the ground but they are flying, energetically, virtually.

These energies stem from microscopic corporeal universes and are accentuated by the piece's soundscape, designed by Alex Waterman. Throughout *PREMIERE*, subtle sounds such as crackling, creaking, and rustling seep from the stage like whispers. The qualities of these sounds are brooding and they unsettle because they occur unpredictably, often in discord with the dancers' movements. At times, the low volume makes sound *almost* inaudible to the ear, just as the dancers' movements are *almost* invisible to the eye. Like movement, sound is poised at the brink of imperceptibility, heightening the experience of anticipation that Hassabi creates through her choreography.

I watch Hristoula Harakas as she slowly begins to pivot, entrusting her weight to the balls of her feet. The effort to be controlled moves to her ankle and calf, both of which start to falter. Harakas appears to have hit a physiological nerve as her leg twitches in tiny reactive jolts. The quavering dynamic of her body's movement duets with the crackling soundscape. At the same time, Andros Zins-Browne pours his upper body weight into his fingertips, asking them to provide temporary support as he reclines on the ground. I notice that only some of his fingernails have been idiosyncratically painted with silver nail polish. (The same is true of the fingernails of the other four dancers.) His fingertips are too small to support the weight of a torso, and we witness the effort ripple through his fingers, hand, and wrist. Both dancers attempt to pause and balance their weight on unstable body parts that are clearly too small to provide sufficient stability. The potential of the movement is only realized once a site of weakness is made visible in the uncontrollable micro-movements that are by-products of the faltering attempt to "appear" controlled and "still." This simple task seems to be set up with the *intent* to press on a nerve within the body of the dancer, yet perhaps more broadly, it puts pressure on the received equation between dance and movement, weakening this symbiotic relationship so that it nervously falters too.

Stillness is still a raw nerve, it seems, despite significant choreographic practice and dance scholarship over the last two decades that has leveled a rigorous critique of the modernist notion, vigorously promoted by American modern dance critic John Martin (1933), that conflated dance's ontology with kinetic movement. André Lepecki challenged this modernist ontology in his book *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (2006) by analyzing choreographic acts of stillness emerging in European and North American contemporary dance in the early 1990s, notably in works by such choreographers as Jérôme Bel and La Ribot. According to Lepecki, choreographic acts of stillness were not merely an affront to modern dance; the *action* of stillness was political in that it posed a threat to the historical project of modernity more broadly, arresting its kinetic thrust.[4]

3. The following examples of dance scholarship extrapolate the concept of micro-movements in relationship to still acts in dance: see José Gil's chapter "The dancer's body" (2002), André Lepecki's article "Still: On the vibratile microscopy of dance" (2000), and Erin Manning's book *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (2009). The aforementioned are indebted to Steve Paxton's article "The Small Dance, The Stand" ([1986] 2008). The notes that formed Paxton's essay were originally taken in February 1977 during ReUnion's West Coast tour of Contact Improvisation. The 1977 members of ReUnion were Nita Little, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Curt Siddall, Nancy Stark Smith, and David Woodberry.

4. Elaboration of Martin's claims can be sourced in Lepecki (2006). Further important discussions of modernity and contemporary dance can be found in Peter Sloterdijk's "Mobilization of the Planet from the Spirit of Self-Intensification"

As I write this, almost a decade on from the publication of Lepecki's book (2006) and over a decade since his earlier scholarship on this subject (1996, 2000), I realize I am speaking from within what would then have been "dance's tomorrow" (Lepecki 2006:1). From this contemporary vantage point, it is clear to me that stillness *still* returns as a threat.[5] In *PREMIERE* this threat is refigured in Hassabi's refusal to entertain by staging a spectacle of kinetic movement. Instead, Hassabi privileges the kinesthetic micro-movements that lie dormant, coaxing their micro-premieres by sustaining a glacially *slow pace* over an extended duration. I use the term "slow pace" to respect Hassabi's preferred description of the work's temporality and will avoid the temptation to describe the movement as "slow motion." On this frequent misreading Hassabi comments, "I don't approach movement by saying, 'Okay, let's move slow now'" since this implies "slowing down a recording [or movement] that would normally go faster." For Hassabi, the slow pace is "integral to the bodies as both image and physicality" (in Bakst 2014).

The fact that the question of stillness, or rather "what constitutes movement," has returned is a reminder that dance's relationship to stillness, as a radical economy of kinetic movement, is complex and conflicted. By asking these questions again, in the present, they do not remain the same; rather, they are recontextualized and thus premiered "as new" in conversation with the current artistic climate. In foregrounding the dancers' quivering, perhaps "weak" stillnesses as choreographies of micro-movement, *PREMIERE* restages the historically problematic and unsustainable dichotomy between stillness and movement, positing it as *still* dance's problem, *now*.

Choreographing Kinesthesia

The problem comes in believing only in what is seen.

—Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2014:154)

I attend to Maria Hassabi as she moves from a semireclined position to lying flat on the ground. While the intention may conceive of the movement as seamless, the reality of Hassabi's body, its lived physicality, denies the ruse of this grace. Instead, I seem to be witnessing a woman in acute pain. As Hassabi

Figure 2. Audience view from seats: the dancers face the audience in "stillness." From left: Robert Steijn, Biba Bell, Hristoula Harakas, Andros Zins-Browne, and Maria Hassabi in PREMIERE *by Maria Hassabi, The Kitchen, New York, 6–9 November 2013. (Photo by Paula Court; courtesy of Maria Hassabi)*

(2009) and Lepecki's "Embracing the Stain: Notes on the Time of Dance" (1996) and "Still: on the vibratile microscopy of dance" (2000) to which Susan Jones's article "'At the Still Point': T.S. Eliot, Dance, and Modernism" (2009) provides a counterpoint.

5. Lepecki articulates his first encounter with still-acts, in relation to "pressing political events," in the context of the choreographic lab SKITE (1992), at Cité Universitaire, Paris. Lepecki interprets the still-acts that occurred in this lab—by choreographers such as Paul Gazzola, Meg Stuart, and Vera Mantero—as a "suspensive response" to "violent performances of colonialism and its racisms." Further, the SKITE lab took place in a specific historical context, in the autumn after the first Gulf War, during the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in the aftermath of the Los Angeles uprisings (Lepecki 2000:16). In a contemporary context, stillness has been deployed in lying down protests in response to the death of Oscar Grant (Oakland, California, 2009), and in "die-in" protests, responding to the deaths of Eric Garner (Staten Island, New York, 2014), and Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri, 2014). Erdem Gündüz, dubbed "The Standing Man," used still-acts in Istanbul's Taksim Square in protest against the Turkish government (2013; see Mee 2014).

executes the difficult transition with aching precision, her pelvic floor muscles tremble. I imagine Hassabi's visceral dance below the surface; I see muscle, fiber, and bone. Her body begins to struggle, affecting a cacophony of micro-movements that vibrate through her entire body. While the initial movement proposition might have been to achieve a consistent application of energy, speed, and effort, the by-product of this task leads us to more interesting, otherwise hidden territory. The difficulty of the task is paradoxically that which produces the most critical potential: the *involuntary* production of Hassabi's potentially infinite kinesthetic quakes. Rather than choreograph gestures, postures, and positions, Hassabi is choreographing intensities and energies; deeper involuted resources become Hassabi's material, specifically kinesthetic ones. Or rather, it would be more interesting to argue that these affective intensities and micro-movements *cannot* be choreographed. Viewed in this way, Hassabi uses highly controlled choreographic strategies of slow pace, extended duration, and painstaking specificity to bring about the opposite; namely, those uninvited movements that make the stakes of *PREMIERE* so high. As Hassabi's body trembles, her body's inner corporeal agitation and kinesthetic reserves are brought into *almost* visible relief. In the process, she finds expression for those micro-movements that reside rather frustratingly in largely invisible physiological territories. Here, *PREMIERE* sets in motion dance's choreographies to come, which I anticipate will, perhaps must, be made of the as-yet-unknown potential of the "unchoreographable": the *involuntary* kinesthetic dance of micro-movements.

Developing upon the body of scholarship on stillness in dance, I propose we turn our critical attention to the perceptual challenges that kinesthetic registers pose to choreographer, audience, and critic. Why is it critical to attend to kinesthesia now? Susan Leigh Foster has lamented that kinesthesia has suffered from derision, dismissal, and skepticism in scholarly and public domains (2011:7). According to Carrie Noland, kinesthesia has experienced "critical neglect" (2009:4). More recently, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone warned that "kinesthesia continues to go unrecognized and certainly insufficiently valued" (2014:122) and thus "kinesthesia is nowhere on the map" (123). The qualitative dimension of kinesthetic experience is ontologically processual not static, and is perceived in *felt* registers other than ocular perception. As such, the corporeal dynamics of kinesthesia often defy dominant modes of visual representation and language. We must not take this affront lightly. If in choreographies such as *PREMIERE* infinitesimal dances are, at first glance at least, imperceptible to their attendant audience, then we run the risk of falling into a counterproductive black hole of invisibility and illegibility. This challenge to perception, both the audience's and the critic's, must necessarily rebound and become a choreographic problem too. Therefore, works such as *PREMIERE* that foreground kinesthetic registers as sites of choreographic production, presentation, and reception are critical because they are unafraid to take on this challenge. In turn, such choreographies challenge dance criticism to develop a more nuanced language of kinesthetic experience, to close the gap in dance scholarship on kinesthesia. At the level of the sentient body, these questions can be *felt* premiering in dance now; it is this complicated kinesthetic *movement*, not stillness, that is addressed in *PREMIERE.*

I turn my attention to Hassabi and notice that her eyes are teary. Like the kinesthetic quakes of Hassabi's trembling gut, her eye muscles shiver and squint. It could be an effect of the strong light, as though the pain of the glare has drawn immaterial energies to the surface, like water from a well. The flicker and twitch of the delicate skin around her eyelids tells me something different; the watering is rather like an affect expressed in fluid form. The tears are not necessarily a result of a specific emotion but are perhaps closer kin to involuntary perspiration, where the inner affective state has exercised and exceeded its skin to such an extreme that it must find release. Hassabi remarks, "It's reactions to the body" (in Kourlas 2013) and similarly dramaturg Scott Lyall observes, "The sweat and the twitches aren't ornaments of resistance. They're becoming-conscious aspects of the substrate of the work" (in Bakst 2014). *PREMIERE* thus opens Hassabi's body to substrates of unrehearsed affective registers; it is as though Hassabi's choreographic task is to turn bod-

Figure 3. Audience view at close proximity: crumpled bodies and the blinding wall of theatre lamps. From left: Andros Zins-Browne, Maria Hassabi, Biba Bell, Robert Steijn, and Hristoula Harakas in PREMIERE *by Maria Hassabi, The Kitchen, New York, 6–9 November 2013. (Photo by Paula Court; courtesy of Maria Hassabi)*

ies inside out, physically and emotionally. I see a strong link between the emerging substrate of affective states in the form of tears (for example), and the work's precise attention to kinesthetic awareness. As Sheets-Johnstone reminds us, "What we feel emotionally and kinesthetically is of a piece" because the two are "experientially intertwined" (2014:168). Noland makes a complimentary case: "Kinesthetic sensations are a particular kind of affect" (2009:4). As if responding to Noland directly, dramaturg Lyall reveals that Hassabi insists that the *sensation* of anticipation is the core of the work, and for Lyall the physicality of this feeling of anticipation is absolutely "a kind of affect" (in Bakst 2014). In *PREMIERE*, the qualities of kinesthetic anticipation and the attendant affects seem inextricably linked: one is not a cause or effect of the other. In their inseparability, kinesthesia is a substrate of affect and affect is a substrate of kinesthesia.

The Time It Takes

To break a world and to make a world.

—Simon O'Sullivan (2009:251)

Robert Steijn is standing up, barely. Delicately, like a crumpled piece of brown paper, Steijn's body, which is clothed in beige, unfolds against the invisible weight of duration bearing down on him. The coincidence of his unfurling with the occasional creak of the stage's wooden floor strongly evokes the sound of creaking bones and joints. From this moment, the sound of brittle bone is all I hear. I recognize it in the squeaking of the dancers' formal leather shoes in friction with the ground as textures of leather and wood find themselves incompatible. I register it in the ominous sound that seeps from the speakers, resembling the flutter of a moth caught in a light. The same fracturing sound is audible in the theatre lamps as they periodically brighten and fade, a popping and sighing sound of the metal warming and

cooling. As the lights groan they become a chorus of exhausted bodies.

Suddenly, with only 15 minutes of the 83-minute performance left, a man and a woman seated one row behind me stand up and walk out. Another man, seated two rows from the front and to my left, joins this newly premiering duet and together they make an exiting trio. The moment is electric. Rather than diminishing the power of *PREMIERE* by indicting an element of weakness in the work, the leaving serves to underline the potential weaknesses in our attentional capacity, evidencing the work's demands on all those present. Indeed, the moment the trio stood to leave, *PREMIERE* realized its critical potential by pushing its audience to confront their own kinesthetic, affective, and attentive limit points. By shaking the bones of its own event, the activation of a new event with much higher stakes occurred. *PREMIERE's* duration became a critical choreographic tool for first breaking and then remaking a world.

In that moment, I understood that it is not necessarily *PREMIERE*'s slow pace that makes the work so productively challenging. It is the *sustenance* of that slow pace over an extended duration that troubles our physical, affective, and attentive limits. Hassabi describes this as the challenge of "Sustaining movements in space" (in Kourlas 2013). For audiences of Hassabi's work, this might translate to the challenge of sustaining attention. Therefore in *PREMIERE*, duration is not just a temporal container for movement, a mere by-product of choreographic content. Duration becomes a malleable substance with its own *materiality* that presses on the bodies of dancer and audience, affecting their physicality through its temporal process. In *PREMIERE*, Hassabi actualizes the affective and kinesthetic potential of bodies as they nervously anticipate their new limits; underlining the subversive power of those unchoreographed movements and untimely affects that insist on premiering *without* invitation.

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Celebrating Odin Teatret and Holstebro

A 50th Anniversary Celebration

Ian Watson

Odin Teatret, one of Europe's oldest and most successful independent theatre groups, celebrated its 50th anniversary in the summer of 2014. Odin, founded and still led by Eugenio Barba, has played a major role in legitimizing the independent theatre movement, especially in Europe and Latin America. The group has generated numerous productions presented across Europe, throughout much of Lain America, the United States, Southeast Asia, and in recent years, China. Company members have taught Odin's performance techniques everywhere they have traveled. This puts flesh on the bones of the books about those techniques, written by several of the group's actors and, of course, Barba himself—the author of many volumes about performer training and acting.

Odin has borne its fair share of criticism over the years for creating obscure productions, Barba's authorial stance vis-à-vis the actor, and for his focus on the biological rather than the cultural in what he terms "theatre anthropology." Today, Odin is no longer the force it once was, but the company is hardly a candidate for the museum. Its actors are busy touring and teaching internationally even as Odin creates new works. In fact, except for one self-imposed 12-month break in 1982/83, Odin has not stopped working for 50 years and it does not appear that it will do so anytime soon.

That said, Odin's longevity is hardly measured by Barba's continuous presence or the fact that it has been called Odin Teatret since its formation. The majority of the actors, who Barba terms the core members, have been with the group for over 30 years with one, Else Marie Laukvik, a founding member of the company in 1964 and another, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, joining when it moved from Norway to Denmark in 1966. Little wonder, with so many of its members having an institutional memory decades in the making, that the group is drawn to anniversaries—the 50th

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