

Movement Research/Critical Correspondence

Maria Hassabi interviewed by Cristiane Bouger

GLORIA

Cristiane Bouger: After *Still Smoking*, what were the driving elements in the creation of this piece and how did you come up with them?

Maria Hassabi: I began working on *GLORIA* immediately after *Still Smoking* premiered in NY in April '06 because I had a deadline for a new solo to be performed in Moscow in July. There is a lot of *Still Smoking* in *GLORIA*. I think that my overall concerns, questions and aesthetics haven't changed and in general the dialogue I raise through my work is consistent. Hopefully I evolve and mature through time and that always advances parts of the work and destroys other parts... After traveling with *Still Smoking* through the summer of '06 I realized I couldn't continue pretending I am a company with an infrastructure behind me. Grants are not coming in, I don't have a manager, and I got burned out as a result. I wanted to do something minimal - free of huge production expenses and the commitment of a large number of collaborators... To continue where *Still Smoking* left off, but inverting the Baroque spectacle and leaving only the bare minimum.

Cristiane: Were the solos created individually by each dancer? How did you deal with that? Did you establish some directives and have them create material from that point on?

Maria: No, I choreographed both solos. My solo was set by the end of July 06. It has changed a bit since then as I have had more time to realize my intentions and support them more fully. Then in the fall of '06 I began working on Hristoula's solo. I had a vague idea of its intent but I wasn't sure how it was going to develop. In general I work a lot by myself. I do have the luxury of a living/working space so I get to rehearse as much as I want and need. I worked on Hristoula's solo in a chronological order developing the material. I don't improvise with the dancers as I'm very clear about the aesthetics and the references I wanted to access. Of course Hristoula's idiosyncratic way of moving and her physicality is quite different from mine, so even if I make most of the material it gets manipulated by the time she learns it and executes it. We kept on editing it down to its core over and over. What exists of her solo now is far from what I made originally but it is completely inspired by this gorgeous lady!

Cristiane: Talking about the presentation at P.S. 122... The presentness of silence was something I strongly experienced seeing *GLORIA*. I do not use here the word "silence" to refer to the absence of music or something like that, but to address a specific state I can feel or a landscape I can witness as a viewer of your dance. I think the stillness and the specificity in the usage of the space seem to be evocative of this silence...

Maria: I wanted the audience to have the time to reflect on the body images we were presenting as if they were gazing upon sculptures. The emptiness of the space was accentuated by the duration that each pose took. I had my specific concerns of body, time and space. When I began thinking of this work I went back to questioning what is the essence of dance, its value in our culture and times. Why is it important? What is important to me? It all came down to the basic concepts of dance: body, space, and time. These were at the forefront of creating this piece. I appropriated these 3 elements in my own way based on my personal understanding and cultural interests.

Cristiane: I was telling a friend that there is something I consider very inviting in this dance. It seems your choreography is more about experiencing the work than a platform for an experience. I can read whatever I wish to put there, I can find meanings to the solos and their relationship, but during most of the length of your piece I just wished to silence my mind and live that experience that it is not only about seeing, but about perceiving, about absorbing it and being absorbed... Does it make sense to you?

Maria: It is a piece about perception. The way we each perceive the body, the space and time. How we recreate what we see as we project our personal references onto any given images. In *GLORIA*, I myself was questioning perception, representation, and preconceived ideas.

Cristiane: Have you ever engaged in any studies on perception/phenomenology?

Maria: Not specifically, even though questions of perception have been part of the dialogue I engage with in art and in life.

Cristiane: I am asking this because I feel - and I know I am not alone - that a lot of dance artists avoid calling themselves "intellectual" artists and for me this is a funny thing because I see many of them being really "intellectual" in the results of their creation. And this is not necessarily achieved from an eloquent use of verbal language in order to justify their choices, but from a sophisticated and sensitive physical vocabulary and I can see the eloquent meanings or feelings their choices emanate. For me, this is highly intellectual - even knowing some scholar friends and former professors I love tend to reject my argument.

Maria: I do admire intellectualism but I'm far from considering myself an intellectual. I consider Scott Lyall an intellectual – the visual artist I collaborated with on the set of *GLORIA*. Speaking with him, I'm aware of the things I don't know even though we share similar concerns and can engage in a deep dialogue with each other. He was so inspiring in the making of *GLORIA* in ways the audience can't see. At some moment right before entering PS122 he called his part of the work "invisible sculptures". His work was so subtle that very few recognized the impact it had in the work.

Cristiane: I am trying to understand the difference of a work like yours and those that strongly address an issue or that deliberately embrace a theme. In this sense I start to read the work from that point on because I have revealing previous information. In *GLORIA*, I just felt like having space to experience the dance, all its elements and P.S. 122's space. It was very peaceful. At the same time I do not attribute this peaceful feeling to the fact that your dance is an abstract work - even considering that is a concept naturally imbued in it. What do you attribute this peacefulness to?

Maria: I think the work is demanding to watch, and at the same time not at all. You can drift away from us and come back and find us again. This gives the spectator the opportunity to view the work at their own discretion. While you are watching Hristoula, you miss part of my story and vice versa. Setting this structure removes the demand of an ego-based performance of "look at me, look at me, my story is so important!"

Cristiane: Right... You made me free of the pressure of considering one of you "so important" and allowed me the possibility of editing freely what I wanted to see in a way I had no room to feel like "I am losing something". I knew all the time I was and this was just O.K. But there is something about your work that remains mysterious to me... Maybe this feeling is related to the fact you are both performers with a strong presence on the stage, but you pursue a completely different strength and different movement qualities, so there is a "peaceful tension" over there... and for me there is something mysterious about this contradictory possibility, that it is also beautiful... like it was about two different potencies coexisting side by side.

Maria: Dance is an abstract art form, at least the way I relate to it, and it carries its own mystery. Even if I tried to work with a minimal vocabulary in this piece in order to communicate something valuable and specific to me, everyone still reflects on the work in a different way. That's the beauty of abstraction that again relates to perception.

Cristiane: I guess I am trying to identify the major forces of this dance... It is like this piece asked me to access a different state of mind or just relax and I am thinking now that your choices on

space and stillness can lead to that feeling and the free ego-based performance too... but there is another element I would like you to expand upon from a choreographer's perspective: both solos happen very close to the viewers and exhale a certain intimacy. Do not you think silence and intimacy are very close entities? Did you want to bring it up in the work or did it just appear during the dance-making process?

Maria: This work is intimate and in some ways delicate. Performing it in a smaller venue allowed the work to stay within the notion of intimacy. The body is intimate and it was important for me to take its physicality to the extreme until I felt the moving body and its flesh. Silence is powerful as it gives space for thoughts but even though I wanted to access it as an element, it really came naturally in this work through the stillness, the extended duration of each pose and the emptiness of the space. It felt really silent within the piece as well -that's probably what you saw, our own silence.

Cristiane: I want to ask you something that personally instigates me. Thinking about the performer's presence in an intimate work... Have you ever felt like you were losing it during the performance? How do you deal with this major thing on the stage?

Maria: I didn't feel like I was losing it, but I was scared of my body and all the injuries we both had. Our physicality might not seem so extreme, but it is. Our hips, knees and shoulders were hurting so much. Our eye and lip movements are choreographed in this piece, so in that sense the intention and timing we inhabit during the piece forces us to stay there. Our inner dialogue has to be cut off.

Cristiane: It definitely seemed you were working with extreme physicality. You mentioned on the program that *GLORIA* is a very adaptive work. I imagine that the non-presence of the third solo (by David Adamo) creates a huge difference in the piece. Dramaturgically speaking, how do you deal with the presence or absence of this third solo? In each level does it recreate the work?

Maria: It's almost a completely different work with David. First of all, his solo is quite theatrical as he is not a trained dancer. Having a man on stage brings different references and representations to the work and its intent takes another direction. The body is not foregrounded anymore but instead the theatrics and the male / female relationship is.

Cristiane: Do you consider *GLORIA* a work in progress?

Maria: No.

Cristiane: You worked with the collaboration of Marcos Rosales in the dramaturgy of this dance. As the work of a dramaturge is quite new in the dance field, can you share the experience of this collaboration? Did you have a specific method of working together and talking about the creative ideas along the process?

Maria: Marcos, a visual artist, has been part of my work since almost the very beginning of my work at CalArts. We share a dialogue that I don't find available in the dance world. I respond to a dialogue the visual artists usually engage in. We are all making art, dealing with our concerns of form and culture in our own ways and within that pushing the boundaries of the establishment. I want to make people think, question, reconsider and feel. Every time I begin a new project, Marcos is the first person I talk to about my ideas and thoughts. He brings me text to read, images to see and questions the reasons of my interest and my curiosities on the subject. He's not always nice and easy with what I present to him. Over the years we realized this is dramaturgy. It was then that he got the title.

Cristiane: I love the last scene - if I can call it that - when the stage is empty but at the same time full of the presence of the dance that was just presented there and the light is emphasized on the two panels of the set. Here, again, I saw a beautiful paradox: a simultaneous presence-absence

(as the "peaceful tension" I mentioned earlier). Maybe because there was some kind of attachment to the memory of what was seen, but at that moment, it was updated by a bodily empty space... It was like "O.K., I am receiving something here".

Maria: I like to consider the space where we perform as a body. Each element of the work as a body – the sound, the lighting, the space etc. Since the work is about solos each element involved had to get its own moment. Everything else in the work had space and so the actual space needed its space.

Cristiane: That's pretty. Thank you for sharing that. Maybe this is usual for choreographers but I really like the idea of considering each element as a body. In theater I used to consider everything as "text": sound, set, costumes, movement and lighting as silent words inhabiting all the work... but I like much more this idea of considering all these elements as something alive. I can clearly see this operating in your work. Now... maybe this sounds a little naive, but at a first glance, it was impossible not to relate the title of your piece with *GLORIA*, by Patti Smith. Is there any relation or influence?

Maria: It's *GLORIA*. *GLORIA* is a very strong name full of references. Every time I mentioned this name, everyone had their own stories to project onto the name. My work and this work in particular is full of references and representations. *GLORIA* reflects on art, pop culture and everyday life, and this particular piece is a woman.

Cristiane: Do you have any plans to present *GLORIA* in a new or earlier version?

Maria: The computer says no!

Cristiane: (laughs) You should! ... You have mentioned it before but I cannot avoid saying Hristoula Harakas is an amazing dancer!

Maria: My favorite! Hristoula is more than what the audience sees on stage. She also carries an amazing work ethic which is hard to beat. She inspires me beyond. I'm happy to be in the studio with her each and every time. And it's not a lie! We work fast together. She can engage on extreme physicality and also detail work. She's a perfectionist and that's a gift for every choreographer.

Cristiane: Are you happy with the work? Can you already envision what will come next?

Maria: Yes. I'm very happy with *GLORIA*. I find her very strong. I have different ideas I am working on for the future.

Cristiane: I read once that the architecture of New York City influences your movement vocabulary. What else influences your dance making?

Maria: I don't remember when I said this in the past, but most likely it relates to lines, straight lines, verticality. My work is quite urban and it usually comments on urban living. The organized chaos, its loneliness, its energy, the bombardment of information, etc. If I created work in a rural setting, then I'm sure it would look quite different.

Cristiane: Thank you so much for your time and for embracing this conversation... It was really inspiring to think about that experience one month after it happened.

Maria: Thank you for posing all these really thoughtful questions!

GLORIA was seen on November 7th, 2007 at Performance Space 122. (This interview was made by e-mail.)