

DANCE



BACK IN BLACK
Hassabi, third
from left, shows
off her group.

In excess

Maria Hassabi creates a world of grandeur in her latest piece, *Still Smoking*

By **Gia Kourlas**

In her new work, *Still Smoking*, Maria Hassabi takes her ongoing exploration of urban overstimulation to a melancholic place. But it didn't start out that way; originally, Hassabi envisioned a celebration. "All the movement I created is very decorative and excessive, but I ended up with a very sad piece," she says. "I'm referencing the notion of baroque. My imagination was full of Louis XIV and the beginning of opera, which was the moment when everything came together: theater, music, dance and art. That's what I do. I use people singing onstage, and they dance and there is art involved, and the costumes are not just jeans. There is a production to it." The set, for one, is extravagant, but Hassabi is keeping its design a secret (conceptually, it hints at the notion of beauty as an obstacle). Her reticence has less to do with preserving an element of surprise, however, than with the fact that, as she adds with a panicked laugh, she's "not sure if it's going to end up working out."

The final part of an unofficial

trilogy, which includes 2003's *A Forest near Chelsea* and 2004's *Dead Is Dead*, the new work will be performed at the Kitchen this weekend. "I'm sure it will remind you of *Dead Is Dead* because it has that same fast-paced quality, but it goes to a very different place," explains Hassabi. "In a way, this one feels sleeker and more refined. I kept running into problems, so I had to keep on thinking of solutions, and it ended up becoming very simple."

Like *Dead Is Dead*, *Still Smoking* features six performers, including Hassabi: David Adamo, Caitlin Cook, Ori Flomin, Jessie Gold and Hristoula Harakas. But while *Dead* was based on six individuals, *Still Smoking* frames a more cohesive group experience. In her choreographic process, Hassabi dealt with her own calf injury—which prohibited her from dancing for five weeks—as well as her per-

formers' busy schedules (Flomin, for instance, was away for a month and a half). "In the beginning I thought, 'Is this art-making?'" she asks. "Just thinking of solutions to problems? But it is what it is. Because it's simple, we finished the dance a month ago, and the performers have had time to really take on their roles. This work is so delicate; timing is important. They give it the texture that it needs. Even though the movement is mine and everything came out of my improvisations, they helped me in figuring it all out. It's almost like I picked the fabric, but we made the dress together."

Still Smoking incorporates original music by Ben Brunner and Dorit Chrysler, as well as selections from Godspeed You! Black Emperor. "I think that's why the piece became so sad—it's such beautiful music," says Hassabi, referring to Godspeed. "The dance starts out so fast, but I wanted to have this moment when you really notice the dancers. I think that becomes the core of the piece, and that part is really sad. There's abandonment. It's almost how you walk in the street and you see all these relationships, but you never have enough time to go deep and understand what they're about? We take the time to tell you a little story or two."

Hassabi, once again, has commissioned costumes by the fashion collective ThreeAsFour (formerly As Four). In *Dead*, dancers wore drastically contrasting and colorful outfits to reflect their individual status; in *Still Smoking*, the performers wear head-to-toe black. "I wanted sleek, but at the same time, I wanted them to be a little ripped so that everything doesn't become superromantic or too fragile, which goes with the movement, too. We're not the easiest people to put clothes on! In the beginning, all the clothes get ripped. We say, 'I'm so sorry' 50 times, and the designers say, 'It's okay! We make clothes. That's why we're here. Rip them now.' And then they figure it out slowly. They're amazing."

In many ways, the aesthetic of the designers mirrors Hassabi's own. "The way they create their clothing is really complicated," she says. "While they're formal, they're completely avant-garde at the same time."

Maria Hassabi presents *Still Smoking* at the Kitchen Apr 13 through 15.

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