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Creeping in a Castle in the Dark

At the start of Luciana Achugar's newest work, "Puro Deseo," the Kitchen is transformed into a starless, moonless sky — so pitch-black, in fact, that it's impossible

DANCE REVIEW

GIA
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to see your fingers inches from your nose. Perhaps all dances should begin with such a forceful purification of the eyes and mind, but it isn't soothing; in "Puro Deseo," which began performances on Thursday evening, Ms. Achugar's rendition of the night was hardly tender.

The work, her most sophisticated to date, is at once stripped down and, for the first half at least, amplified by an uncanny theatricality that fluctuates between gothic horror and the primal, moving body. While she has frequently choreographed for women, conjuring a communal atmosphere of feminine mystique, "Puro Deseo" signifies a departure, frankly welcome: Ms. Achugar performs with Michael Mahalchick, her longtime collaborator and dramaturge. They are equals.

Their relationship is eerily symbiotic, aided to great effect by Madeline Best's lighting, which casts sinister shadows on the back walls and floors of the space, and Walter Dunderhill's extravagant black costumes, which evoke the Middle Ages with a nimble, modern touch of today's draping and layering. The elements work in tandem to transform a black-box theater into a castle (from the balcony to the dungeon).

Ms. Achugar, at first wearing a voluminous cloak-dress, glides across the floor in a diagonal line

Luciana Achugar continues through Sunday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, Ext. 11; thekitchen.org.



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Puro Deseo Luciana Achugar, right, and Michael Mahalchick performing Ms. Achugar's new work at the Kitchen.

and, like a wind-up specter in a Japanese horror film, turns her huge eyes to face the audience, before rustling backward along the same path.

Mr. Mahalchick, his body sprawled on the floor, is even more mysterious. During a series of fleeting blackouts, he inches closer to the audience in creepy increments; the theater echoes with the sound of rattling chains.

Mr. Mahalchick, a hulking man

Gothic images (and sounds) out of monstrous grace.

with a fleshy vulnerability, raises an arm as his fingers — held in the shape of a loose claw — quiver ever so slightly. (Disconcertingly, it's like watching a film become blurry.)

As the dance progresses, Ms. Achugar, stripped to a black shirt and patterned tights, mirrors her partner's monstrous, flinty grace.

But as the cinematic fragments become more whole through the performers' chanting and repetitive movements, the dance wavers. At just under an hour, "Puro Deseo" seems rushed. If Ms. Achugar's wish, as she has said, is to cast a spell on the audience by revealing the mysteries of the body, she needs more time to weave her magic; she needs to go deeper.