

Time Out

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Maria Hassabi unveils PREMIERE at the Kitchen

Maria Hassabi talks about her latest work, PREMIERE, which is a co-production by the Kitchen and Performa 13

By Gia Kourlas



Maria Hassabi presents PREMIERE at the Kitchen

Photograph: Marialena Marouda

Maria Hassabi talks about her new work *PREMIERE*, which she will perform at the Kitchen, alongside Biba Bell, Hristoula Harakas, Robert Steijn and Andros Zins-Browne. The work is a co-production by the Kitchen and Performa 13.

What constitutes a premiere? How is it more expansive than merely the first time a curtain is raised on a new dance? In the aptly titled *PREMIERE*, choreographer Maria Hassabi explores the idea of an anticipated event; for her, a dance is never truly born until the audience is present. In the evening-length work—the latest in her series of slow-moving pieces that crystallize and celebrate the exquisiteness of live performance—she

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highlights four stellar performers, along with Hassabi herself: Biba Bell, Hristoula Harakas, Robert Steijn and Andros Zins-Browne. *PREMIERE* is a co-production by The Kitchen and Performa

Time Out New York: What were your ideas for *PREMIERE*?

Maria Hassabi: I don't know if you've noticed from my past work, but I've been playing with these titles. It's almost like a dyslexic person: a show, what is a show? Premiere. What is a premiere? So I was in my own understanding of the terms and going in hand with the values that I believe in. When I look into the word *premiere*, more than anything—away from this highly anticipated event and all of these things—it is really the moment that a work of art is validated. I work in the studio for a long time. Friends can come over and watch it, but it's only when a premiere happens that it's really a work of art. Not because it's better. It's the moment that it validates itself. So that's what I'm playing with the most and that was my interest. Then I had this desire to work with these people, without thinking, They all live in different countries, their schedules are crazy—everybody's so busy and blah, blah, blah, and how am I going to do this? But I wanted to deliberately mirror my life—I'm never in one place; I split between living in Europe and New York, which is very difficult to sustain any continuity in life. It was a crazy idea, but it's mirroring my life. [Laughs]

Time Out New York: How do you cope with that existence? I'm sure you're all over the place.

Maria Hassabi: This team is kind of like that. We have two more residencies altogether, but for a show usually, in terms of New York preparation, you work the last few months intensely with everybody, which is not the case with *PREMIERE*. I work intensely with one person, intensely with another person.

Time Out New York: Why did you choose each performer?

Maria Hassabi: Andros is a New Yorker that moved to Brussels ten years ago. He's beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. I knew of him and saw him when he was still in New York, but I really met him when I started working with Jimmy Robert in 2011. Jimmy is a visual artist, and they're friends. Andros was the one who recommended me to Jimmy. Then I saw him perform a few times. The performance that really moved me was a show that he did with Tino Sehgal last year at dOCUMENTA. There are all these performers in the space, and somehow he came very close to me and the way he was, I was so touched. He didn't make me feel like he's a performer and I am the audience; his approach was so integrated in a very neutral way. I wanted to bring Robert back into my work, because I love him, and we've spent so much time traveling with *Robert and Maria* the last three

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years, that he's been family to me. With going again to do a big show—like a big show with more than two or three people—I wanted to keep this quality that he brings when I'm with him and when we're onstage together. It's more grounding.

Time Out New York: How does he do that?

Maria Hassabi: Because he's grounded. Not only as a performer, but as a person as well. [Laughs] And then Hristoula. [Smiles] I can never imagine making work without her. Unless she's pregnant.

Time Out New York: That is such a strong bond. But Robert too. In your work, you are making dances, but also deep, deep connections with people.

Maria Hassabi: I have goose bumps, because I feel that way. There's Biba Bell. Biba worked with me on *The Ladies*, and I really loved that. She came in the process very late; she was not at our first residency at [Brussels'] Kaaithheater in June. It was supposed to be Paige Martin originally. Paige was like, "If I have someone to recommend to you, I would go for Biba." And she was actually the person I had in mind; for the piece I made in Venice this summer, I had asked Paige *and* Biba, and then I couldn't afford it, so I dropped Biba, because Paige was already gonna be in *PREMIERE*. Then when Paige could not do *PREMIERE* anymore and had to cancel coming with us to the residency last minute and all of these things, I asked Biba. She joined us in France later.

Time Out New York: When did you first notice Biba as a performer who could fit into your very specific world?

Maria Hassabi: The funny thing, I think it was when we were rehearsing *The Ladies*, actually. *The Ladies* is this piece where they walk around the city. We would rehearse it here. I haven't really seen her perform. I was away for Walter Dundervill's work, and I heard that she was amazing in that. I've been missing a lot of the New York shows, you know? When we were doing *The Ladies*, it was still very specific what I was asking from the people I was working with, and the way she approached it, I sort of couldn't take my eyes from her. And I had told Hristoula already from then on, "Wow, this girl, I want her to be with us." But I didn't know when.

Time Out New York: When you were working with the dancers individually, did you give them specific tasks?

Maria Hassabi: They did have specific tasks at the very beginning, which is similar to how I explore movement—usually, it's really silly. Lying down. Kneeling. Standing up. Walking. But then when we were in Brussels—I don't know if you know this, but always in my work, I end up finding a specific task that we end up exploring. That's the hardest

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part in my process is to find: Okay, what is the task for this work? So it was in Brussels with everybody together that we found it and decided, This is the task we're going to go for. So that was discovered together in the theater.

Time Out New York: What is the task?

Maria Hassabi: I can't tell you. [*Laughs*] It's very simple, but I can't.

Time Out New York: What have past tasks been in your work?

Maria Hassabi: For the piece I just did for the Venice Biennale this summer, the task was completely related to the title. It was called *Intermission*—again playing with those words—and also the space. I decided to do the whole work on risers. So it happened in a huge gymnasium. When I went there in February to see the space, right away I decided I was going to do the whole work on the risers. They're much bigger risers than we have at the Kitchen. So the task was inherent in everything I was going to make going down the stairs and across going up the stairs. With *SHOW*, with Hristoula, it was about this closeness, but we would never touch; at the same time, we're rotating all the time. Because we do know we're going to have the people around us, the idea of *SHOW* is that it needs the audience, otherwise there's no show. So it was about exaggerating that idea. And the closeness that I tried to keep between us, that we tried to keep between us, was the closeness I wanted with you guys. And at the same time, the two-dimensionality, so you get to see us all the time. So there's never a front.

Time Out New York: So that's the task.

Maria Hassabi: Yes. With *Robert and Maria*, it's looking at each other in the eyes. With *SoloShow*, it was the copying of all these images that I found of iconic women, and how you transfer from one image to the next within the physicality of tension, muscles, bones? And it goes further and further. It's easier when there are props. Like with the carpet piece. Or with the piece that I did with Jimmy in February, I already knew that I was going to work with his material.

Time Out New York: What was that?

Maria Hassabi: The work was *Counter-relief*, and it consists of a specific number of wooden planks of different sizes. A three-minute Super-8 film and a text. So I had these three different elements to work with. And Jimmy. It becomes for itself what it is. It's enough of a limitation.

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Time Out New York: Do you have props in this new piece?

Maria Hassabi: No.

Time Out New York: Are you changing the space around in the Kitchen?

Maria Hassabi: We can't talk about that. [*Laughs*] But it is back in the theater, because for me *PREMIERE* is a theatrical moment, so you're sitting. Originally, I wanted to keep this closeness of the audience that we made within *SHOW*, but then I let go of this idea when I started working. The Kitchen is the smallest theater we are going to perform this in. I'm asking for really big stages. It happened like that just because the first residency was at Kaaitheater, which is a much bigger space, so right away I started seeing it there. Now this one is totally made for the Kitchen, and then I'll have to adapt it for the next ones.

Time Out New York: How did you work with your cast individually to make their solos?

Maria Hassabi: What I like to do with each performer is to really choreograph and direct every gaze, every noise that they're making. Then, there are all the extras that come in performance that you cannot control—there's adrenaline. Sustaining movements in space. The reactions that happen in the studio and those that happen in front of the audience are very different. And that's my love with doing still, slow works: It's to see how even though I take care of every detail, there is still so much movement that comes with the shakes, the trembles, the tears—that only happens in front of the audience. It's movement that's beyond my choreography, beyond any direction. So to get to that, I want and need to direct them in a very specific way. I want everything to be taken care of. Also, that helps the performer to stay involved in the work. If they know exactly where their fingers are going, for example, it keeps them very contained to what they're doing and very busy in the moment. I want to find a task that keeps us present within the moment. That's the idea of the tasks. Now, how much time do I have to go into such detail, which is my love of making work—making these details. It's not with everybody that I'm going to be able to do that. Maybe I will. I don't know. As of now, I'm like, You have to maybe let go. I've embraced this process the way it is.

Time Out New York: Do you have to work as hard with Robert and Hristoula, whom you've collaborated with before?

Maria Hassabi: I do. That's the way I understand. People think it's aesthetics; for me, it's trying to understand what it is we're doing. It's language for me. So I don't react to it



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unless everything is worked out. I always tell them it's like speaking—we choose our words carefully and then we speak them out with clear articulation.

Time Out New York: But it's punctuation too—the pauses.

Maria Hassabi: Yes. And I want each word to be heard clearly. It's not going, "Hiii." It's, "Hi. How are you?" And then it's like, "How are *you*?" It takes a little bit of time to put the color in there. And with this idea of working with each one of them, you put it together, and it doesn't totally work with the punctuation we found. So I'm not sure how close I'm going to get to what I dreamt of, of my true desire for this work, but we do have more shows. I think at some moment it's going to get to where I want it to get. And, anyway, *PREMIERE* is not supposed to be finished. [*Laughs*]

Time Out New York: Did you always intend on being in the piece?

Maria Hassabi: No, not in the beginning. I changed my mind partly when Paige couldn't come; there were only three people onstage, and I wanted five from the beginning, so I had to keep on putting myself in to at least have form. And then I was in the piece. Also, money.

Time Out New York: How do you work on that nuance on yourself?

Maria Hassabi: Video. Everything happens here. All the work.

Time Out New York: How long have you been living in this loft?

Maria Hassabi: I made *Gloria* here. But I made *Forest Near Chelsea* upstairs. And then I made the other two pieces *Dead Is Dead* and *Still Smoking* on 29th Street. So as you can see, it's also my storage. Chandeliers. There are mike stands over there; [*Points to a wall*] this is the paint from *Gloria*.

Time Out New York: So let's go back: You are working individually with everyone. What's it like when you put them in a room together?

Maria Hassabi: Crazy. Crazy. Like in France, I kept saying, "You guys, it looks terrible, but I trust it!" [*Laughs*] And then it became the joke: terrible in a good way or terrible in a bad way? It was so much, and you know how I like to pare everything down and to know where to look, but it was impossible. I call myself a director as well as a choreographer, because it's not just movement for me.



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Time Out New York: How do you direct them? What are their relationships to each other? Do they see each other? Do they feel each other?

Maria Hassabi: They feel each other. They are totally connected with each other. It's the space; there are thousands of cues. It's like composition from high school. [Laughs] I can't believe I'm making work with so many cues, but it's the only way to get to it, to keep it empty as possible. Because each solo has its own trajectory, its own continuity. If each solo does it all at the same time, you cannot look. You don't have time to see the people. And I want to have time to look at each one of them.

Time Out New York: How do you see pieces as a whole? How has that changed over time?

Maria Hassabi: I have no idea how I see them. I think I'm so connected to them that I can't completely detach myself in order to really see. I just wear my blinders, and I keep on going for what I'm interested in.

Time Out New York: Has there been a moment where you felt like you've succeeded in what you were trying to do?

Maria Hassabi: *Intermission* and other pieces as well, but I always forget the other ones. I love *SoloShow*. I think it was really the moment when I unfolded everything that I wanted. Everything happened there. And it was a departure point for me in a way. But then I love *Robert and Maria*, I love *SHOW* as well. I love *Counter-relief* even. But because *Intermission* was the newest piece, and it was such an intense experience as well performing eight hours a day....

Time Out New York: How did you do that?

Maria Hassabi: It was amazing. Biba was saying, "How could Paige do that? Paige has only patience performing for 20 minutes." We had no problem. It was such an incredible experience. And this is going to sound super cheesy, but at the end of the day it made us all, in our own way, come to this moment of, I love live performance. There's nothing more valuable to us than that. Being live. The structure of the work was a two-and-a-half-hour solo that we all learned; then each performer would come and start a half hour after the previous person so there were always three people for one hour. It was me, Hristoula, Paige. We took those half-hour breaks and went back in. On the first Friday when the pavilion was packed with people, we didn't take breaks, to be honest with you. We just kept on going. We would go to the bathroom and come back in. But I never told them to do that. Because I wouldn't see them. We would go for coffee in the morning, talk through notes and then we would see each other again at 7 o'clock at night. We were

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soldiers all the way. You owned your solo. Even though it was very specific and very choreographed and articulated, you were alone there. You were doing your solo. In a two-and-a-half-hour solo, you own the time.

Time Out New York: Is that one of the things you're grappling with here, in terms of owning your solo?

Maria Hassabi: Yes. But when you're creating work for a space, like an exhibition space that is not a theater, it's a very different way of approaching the work. The attention it requires from you as an audience member of the black box—as opposed to the audience of the white cube, let's call it—is very different. The associations you create when you're looking at a frame of one or two hours in a theater—It can be an eight-hour show in a theater, but it's different. So, yeah, they are solos in this one, and I want them to be seriously engaged within their solos and own them all the way, but it's within a strict composition.

Time Out New York: You're thinking about structure a lot. Is that a shift?

Maria Hassabi: No. It's a shift to go back to the theater in this way with the audience seated. Just because of the last year. Because *Counter-relief* also had the audience everywhere.

Time Out New York: When did you start moving slowly in your work?

Maria Hassabi: It started that summer after *Still Smoking* when I made my solo that I was going to present in Moscow for this Springdance dialogue thing. We had these questions from Simon Dove; we had to present ourselves. They were very typical questions, like "Why *do* you make work?" But I took them very seriously. [Laughs] Like a good student. That's the moment that I was like, Why do I make work? What is this art form for me? What is art in general for me? It's changed since 2006, and it keeps changing, but I think it was that moment when I really narrowed things down and my lab of images came to the surface much more and I wanted to find a way to uncover images and to support them within live performance without them looking like tableaux vivant. How do you support physicality without changing costumes, without changing the lights—you know, scenery. And just how do you support physicality? Slowly through that, it became more rigorous.

Time Out New York: Do you have a practice to get you into that state?

Maria Hassabi: Yes, but everyone else takes more time. And I realize that when I teach workshops. Because otherwise right away it becomes very plastic. I hold a position, I stay, So when I teach, there are things that I tell people; and then when we started

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exploring at Kaaitheater, stillness and all of that, it was again going back to tableaux vivants, which was not making me happy at all. So then, once again, I realized a task is needed to keep us in the present moment away from just, I want to be here for a long time. More about how the task makes you be here.

Time Out New York: It's never really still.

Maria Hassabi: It's never still. It's never still. I like this idea that in dance, we break images. Dance breaks images. That's what it does, because it's moving. And then I'm breaking images in another way through stillness, because it's never still. I'm presenting images, but I'm still breaking them because there are the trembles and the shakes and the tears.

Time Out New York: When did you discover that you were crying and shaking?

Maria Hassabi: Live performance. I went with it, because you're onstage! [Laughs] But in the beginning, I remember in *Gloria* already, I'm sitting on the wall in the very beginning, and it's not a dramatic piece, you know? And then it's like, how does that work? Because right away the audience is going to see that as something dramatic with those tears, but it's not a dramatic piece. It's reactions to the body.

Time Out New York: Are there times your body doesn't react?

Maria Hassabi: Reactions are always different. The tears come in different places every time, and there are moments that are more predictable than others. You know the typical thing that I've put in so many of my works: the leg shaking when you lift it up. That happens in the studio as well. But that's pushing the physicality a little bit and the way the leg is held comes out from the hip in a strange place. That's more like an artificial way of producing those shakes, and it happens every time. There are other places where you're surprised all the time. I want that. Especially in this work, which is so embroidered. I don't know if it's going to be like that. By May, it's going to be like that.

Time Out New York: Where are you touring this?

Maria Hassabi: We go to Bologna, Italy in April and then in May we're in Brussels. Then we do Norway, Nottingham in the U.K., then River to River in New York.

Time Out New York: Do you know where you'll perform it at River to River?

Maria Hassabi: I have two places in mind.

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Time Out New York: Did you like performing at River to River?

Maria Hassabi: Loved it. I mean I love all these things. I love throwing ourselves in different places and trying the work and seeing the audience reactions. But something that was really special in River to River two years ago, or whenever that was, was the sun. I always make the lights in my work so bright and the sun was brighter than any light I've ever made. And let's talk about movements that you didn't know existed? Sweat. And all the people rushing right next to us and the ones that would stop. It was incredible. I also have this thing, when I do a premiere usually, my work is finished, but it's not finished because the audience brings you so much information in understanding your work. Not because you tell me something in words, but that moment that we come together, I'm like, Oh, that's an extra movement that somehow I didn't realize in the studio. So it doesn't get totally finished until after the premiere. That's when it gets realized. But in making work that is called *PREMIERE*, I'm also dealing with that and embracing that in a way. It is this final product, but it's actually *not* the final product. It's the beginning of a product.

Time Out New York: Do you continue to edit?

Maria Hassabi: I always do. If you see *SHOW* now, it's totally different. Remember when we sit by the lights and then we continue? That part is out. After the lights, we walk around in darkness. I kept cutting. After the Kitchen, when we did it next time, we just didn't need it. We rehearsed it and in the theater we cut it. Hristoula, in the show, was like, She's not moving. She's not going anywhere. [*Laughs*] I'm like, I hope she understands what I'm thinking right now. When we did it here, it was hilarious. It wasn't the first time, but we really cut a whole section out in live performance.

Time Out New York: How long have you known each other?

Maria Hassabi: Since 2002 we've been working together. There is this idea of the Wooster Group—these people who have worked together for many years. I like that. I've always liked that.

Time Out New York: I wonder if I'll be able to tell who you've worked with longer in this piece.

Maria Hassabi: I hope not. I hope you have time to see each one. Hopefully, it's not going to be about who is the most comedic person...but that always comes through. And it's also your taste. You're going to choose this person or that person.

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Time Out New York: How much time do you spend in New York?

Maria Hassabi: This year, it's going to be five months.

Time Out New York: What is your life like?

Maria Hassabi: It's crazy. I don't even think of it as a nomad [existence]. Somebody called me a nomad the other day and it's not quite right, because I'm always performing. I performed so much this year. I think of the art form that I chose—you're on the road because it's the only way for people to see what you do. They're not going to be able to see it on video in the same way. At the moment I can't imagine that you don't have to go anywhere, that you send your performers, and you can stay a little bit longer in one place. But Merce always went with his dancers; Pina always went with her dancers. So I'm talking extremes now; Meg Stuart still travels like insane. All the time. And of course there are choreographers like Ralph Lemon who don't like to travel, and that doesn't make him less or more, but for me, it was always about this traveling. I always wanted that and loved that. This year, I got really tired. But it's also that this is my third premiere in a year. I think having two weeks of a break is not a good idea. You need a little longer. Two weeks is enough to go to the doctor and take antibiotics. So there is a structure that needs to happen. I have to think about and see how I want to continue doing that. Because this was really exciting when it started. And I just got tired now, which is okay, but I need to really think about this model for me. I'm not sure how. That's the other project: How to live this life and sustain it with happiness.

Time Out New York: What else are you working on?

Maria Hassabi: There are a lot of things. There are two new site-specific works that I have to make. One is in Switzerland, and it's a performance in a public space. The other one is in Australia in the Centre for Contemporary Art. In the summer, I'll start working on another new theater piece. Because I want to continue working in a theater.

Time Out New York: Do you ever think of moving away from New York?

Maria Hassabi: I love my studio, and I still have good friends here. Now I have good friends in other places too. So as long as I can afford this place, I'm here. What we do in the dance world most of the time is ask for a show to happen. And you do put the studio as part of the expenses, because it's rehearsal space, but when commissions come, they initiate it, right? So I'm just thinking of a way that I can make this sustainable with all the different projects even if the rent goes up.

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Time Out New York: How did the Kitchen happen?

Maria Hassabi: I went to them. In New York, always. I think everywhere in the dance world is pretty much like that. There are very few times that they've come to me. Or like Vallejo [Gantner of P.S. 122] in his crazy way: "When are we doing a show?" That doesn't exist very much. In Belgium, they do that.

Time Out New York: Is there a place in Europe where you feel most at home?

Maria Hassabi: Belgium. I have good friends there and support. I pretty much love it.

Time Out New York: Can you talk about what everyone's wearing in *PREMIERE*?

Maria Hassabi: Simple. I had a really hard time with costumes, to be honest. I had a nightmare that we were all wearing yellow and orange, very cheap satin. I woke up in the morning, like [*Gasping for breath*]. So it's not yellow and orange. [*Laughs*] It was a real nightmare. I woke up sweating. It just came in my dream like that. But threeASFOUR are still styling a little bit. They always come in at some moment in the process.

Time Out New York: This relates to something we were talking about early on. What is a work of art to you? What are your values?

Maria Hassabi: First of all, my work is live performance. My values are within live performance. One of the biggest elements of that are the performers themselves and having the time to look at them and see them as human beings. To give them this value. For me, that's really important. Then within live performance, there is the use of space, lights, the audience. These are really the elements I always work with in different ways each time, but something that is always there and has been always there is extended duration and precision. Sculptures as opposed to movement. And why is that? It gives time to see the people.

Time Out New York: Do the performers touch in this work?

Maria Hassabi: No. I should make a piece where they touch.

Time Out New York: Does the idea of a premiere freak you out?

Maria Hassabi: It's not so psychological. It's a much more formal approach. It freaks me out more in the way that it's never finished, and what does this mean? I need *you* to finish this work. You the audience, you the viewer. That interests me: the moment I need you. *Maria Hassabi is at the Kitchen Nov 6–9.*