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→ Do It Again

"a quartet"
Heather Kravas
The Kitchen
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By Leigh Witchel



Obsessions are rarely dull, and Heather Kravas' "A Quartet" is obsessive, repetitious – and often fascinating. The ninety-minute piece for three women and a man methodically and hermetically drilled through a tight range of movement from elementary ballet to marching. Kravas also offered us speech, but no narrative. Yet if we weren't always sure where she was headed in the four long sections that made up "A Quartet," she seemed to be.

The work was done in a studio setting: a plain gray space on the second floor of The Kitchen, with seats all around the perimeter. Every available chair was taken with people seated so tightly in line it might as well have been the A train.

Four chairs were occupied on the short side of the rectangle – they turned out to contain the four dancers in the cast, all in street clothing as if camouflaged. At a nod from Kravas, who was sitting at the opposite end, they got up and walked across the space into a line. Kravas spoke isolated cues, "Ready!" "OK!" that seemed close to commands.

Shortly, the four rocked back and forth like the pistons of a train, speaking one word, "Want." Speeding up, slowing down, moving in and out of unison, they repeated for several minutes without a hint of the object of desire. There was nothing but repetition and mutation – a fugue of need.

Moving into the next part, the dancers one at a time stripped down to briefs: some matter of fact, some defiant. They left their shoes and clothing in the line, standing sentinel. Guitar music by Vorhees (Dana Wachs) picked up a thumping beat, infectious but incongruous in a section where no one danced. Once disrobed, the cast crossed the stage and laid on the floor. When all four had done so, they inched and crawled in formations lit with a Dantean glow: Busby Berkeley in purgatory.

A new section began as the cast strode out of the space leaving gamine Cecilia Eliceche to gather up the discarded clothing. Pushing a rack ahead of them, the dancers changed into the outfits hanging from it. Liz Santoro, with her tumble of red pre-Raphaelite curls, partnered Eliceche to form a balletic duo: Eliceche in a simple white leotard and skirt, Santoro in a stiff white tutu. Jennifer Kjos and Oren Barnoy paired off to form a social dance couple: he in black pants, white shirt and a ribbon tie, she in a simple black leotard, skirt and t-strap heels.

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With all the trappings of dance, and some of the steps, what Kravas really set before us in that next long segment was obsessive movement. Eliceche and Santoro did step after classroom step, slowly traveling the space in tendus, relevés or soutenu turns. Outside of the women, Kjos and Barnoy walked the perimeter in a nervous, driven march to stop, frozen. Three loud bangs signaled them to walk again and change positions.

As with the rest, Kravas allowed this to go on a good long while.

The section ended with the cast spinning out of the space, except Santoro, who traveled in the opposing direction and slammed up against a wall. Interestingly, Kravas' use of ballet wasn't loaded. She didn't bemoan the duties or tedium of classroom exercises – she seemed intrigued by their repetition.

Everyone reentered changed back into street clothing, but with the addition of different bells, carried or tied around the wrist. The quartet moved around the space, tinkling. Kjos took up the other women's soutenu turns, but soon all were moving in lockstep unison and chanting. The actual words again could have been chosen as much for rhythm as meaning: "Milk, bread, coffee, salt, sugar, potatoes, eggs." The shopping list got repeated and repeated – the cast marched out reciting it as they made an invisible processional outside the space. We could only hear as they circled outside our view and returned to move out of unison into another fugue and finally end the piece.

Kravas is kin to Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Sarah Michelson – artists whose repetitiveness thrills some viewers and exasperates others. As with the other two, one of the reasons that Kravas' work in "A Quartet" remains watchable is its precision. The construction is neatly mathematical; no matter how many times Kravas reiterates something, the structure gives the viewer an orientation point. But the most compelling virtue of all is tenacity. Kravas will not let go of an idea until she's completely done with it.

And few have made better use of a shopping list.

