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Weekend Arts I

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From Heather Kravas, “a quartet.” BY BRIAN SEIBERT



No Barbershops Here, Nor Violins or Cellos

At the start of Heather Kravas’s “a quartet,” the work’s four dancers stand in line like serious kids pretending to be a train. As they repeatedly bend forward

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and arch back, their collective motion — switching between unison, relay and counterpoint — takes on the aspect of a stationary machine. Then, as their pelvises rock, they add a word — “want” — which becomes a mantra. Accelerating, the sequence approaches the edge of comedy.

This opening is effective in establishing tone and procedures. The 90-minute work, which had its New York premiere on Wednesday at the Kitchen as part of Performance Space 122’s COIL festival, is bone-dry, rigorously structured and uncompromising in its minimalism. The question for audience members, seated in the gray-walled upstairs gallery, is whether they

“a quartet” continues through Monday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; 212-255-5793, Ext. 11, thekitchen.org.

A foursome weaves words and patterns.

want something more, or, with all the repetition, maybe less.

The dancers strip to gray briefs and lie on the floor. They do this methodically and one at a time, with long pauses between each disrobing. The composer Dana Wachs builds aural loops with her guitar and electronics.

Gradually, it becomes apparent that the dancers, as if they were Calvin Klein underwear models directed by Busby Berkeley, are configuring their floor-bound bodies into letters. In fact they’re spelling a word: “society.”

The relationship between individuals and the group is clearly on Ms. Kravas’s mind. For the third section, she splits her dancers into two factions. Liz Santoro and Cecilia Eliceche don white ballet costumes; Jennifer Kjos and Oren Barnoy wear black. Mr. Barnoy and Ms. Kjos pace and pivot in square patterns — his



PAULA LOBO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

a quartet From left, Liz Santoro, Oren Barnoy, Jennifer Kjos and Cecilia Eliceche performing at the Kitchen.

string tie suggests a square dance — while the ballerinas repeat basic ballet steps: doing tendus, rising in relevé.

The couple in black seems controlled by Ms. Wachs’s score, which keeps resetting with a piercing alarm followed by pile-driving percussion. Yet the pair in white has the more punishing tasks. The two groups pass closely but do not interact. Their patterns through space grow incre-

mentally more complex and (with the help of Ms. Wachs’s music and Madeline Best’s lighting) dramatic. The process tests your patience, but it has a payoff.

The excitement builds more quickly in the final segment. The dancers wear or hold bells, and their individual patterns add up. As they lock into a kind of folk-dance box step, chanting a grocery list, there’s a fascination in how they go in and out of sync,

three against one or two against two. Amid the repetition, the sudden raising of a curved arm feels momentous.

Yet the question remains. Does the word repeated disintegrate and lose meaning? Or does it rather emulsify and spread meaning around? Though “a quartet” takes off at moments, it’s too boxed in by its methods. Too much or too little: Either way it leaves you wanting.