

The New York Times

Arts & LEISURE

December 29, 2013

7 DANCE

Work that includes ballet and cheerleading. BY GIA KOURLAS



Dance

On Point in Message, and Technique

Heather Kravas's 'a quartet' delivers loud and clear.

By GIA KOURLAS

Whether it rises to the surface or not, the notion of labor usually lurks somewhere in a Heather Kravas dance, in which repeated steps and patterns are knitted together with such exactitude that the results blend vulnerability with steely tenacity. It's an idea that she extends to herself, especially now as she prepares to unveil "a quartet," her latest, at the Kitchen in Chelsea beginning Jan. 8.

"I don't feel done with it," Ms. Kravas, 43, said in a recent interview. "It feels deep. It feels difficult. There's been a lot of firing of big ideas in the process of this. I don't know that I'm ever going to make anything that I feel satisfied with, but there are pieces that I can say, 'That one is done.' Until I get there with this one, I'm just going to keep confronting it."

In "a quartet," four stellar, dramatically different dances — Oren Barnoy, Cecilia Eliceche, Jennifer Kjos and Liz Santoro — meticulously undertake four dances that draw on aspects of ballet, folk dance, cheerleading and the perfunctory movement of workers. Part of Performance Space 122's Coil Festival, the production explores the tension between individuals and a group; how acts of repetition reveal, not sameness but difference.

Ms. Kravas's original idea was to work with four groups of movers: cheerleaders, young boys who study ballet, Greek folk dancers and men in the military. Even though the cast did spend time with cheerleaders and folk dancers, Ms. Kravas, who is half Greek herself, didn't follow through completely. In the end, she felt that the concept was too obviously about appropriation. Still, that experiential residue is palpable in "a quartet," from its cheerleading sequence and rigorous ballet section to the folk-dance finale.

"Somehow, my understanding of these ready-made dances became really important to me," said Ms. Kravas, who has been a choreographer for 18 years. "I have a lot of idealism about groups coming together, but utopias have a history of failure. That failure is really important, too, and I'm finding places to leave room for some unraveling to happen."

She presented the premiere of "a quartet," which features a live vibrant rock score by Dana Wachs — who performs as Vorhees — at On the Boards in Seattle. It will be reimagined for the Kitchen, where the piece will be presented, not in the theater, but in the space's intimate upstairs gallery. "It will be great to have Dana really be seen," Ms. Kravas said. "She's right there with us."

The longest, most involved section of "a quartet" is the ballet section, in which Ms.



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Eliceche and Ms. Santoro perform a multitude of steps. As Ms. Kravas, who often works with ballet vocabulary, put it, "How many dances am I going to do with a tenuous?"

Growing up in Pullman, Wash., Ms. Kravas studied ballet with Deirdre Wilson. "Everybody has dreams of being a ballerina, but it was always the technique that I was passionate about," Ms. Kravas said. "There was something about it that was always sort of beyond me, but I was just good enough that the challenge didn't thwart me. It kept me going. To me, ballet line is the beautiful line. So the relationship between beauty and ballet is part of the tension that I'm interested in, and why I keep coming back to the ballet vocabulary. It's an ideal."

In that diabolical ballet section, Ms. Santoro estimates that she rises in relevé into a tight sous-sus position numerous times. "For me, it's honoring something," Ms. Santoro said. "It's really giving something a bigger place than it could have in a contemporary-dance frame. I don't have an incredible amount of joy doing 300 sous-sus. By itself, it's a miserable task. But I get an incredible amount of joy executing them in

this frame, in this way, in this work."

But the ballet section is not just about technique or repetition. At its core, Ms. Kravas, who is mainly based in Seattle with her husband, a cello maker, and their 11½-year-old son, is exploring issues related to gender and isolation.

"When I first started thinking about this piece, I was pregnant, and I had a baby," she said. "One of the ways that the experience seeped into the work and into my thoughts about society and individuality was that I felt many wonderful things, but I was also a complete slave to my gender and biology."

She continued, "I think everybody feels that to some extent: You're in the world, but there's always distance."

When she could, Ms. Kravas tracked down practitioners to explore the nuance of group activities like Greek folk dance and cheerleading but eventually came to the realization that she didn't want to present someone else's version; she needed to make her own. Even though Ms. Kravas's cheerleading routine is stripped down to the point of sparseness, to get it to that point, her dancers trained at University of Washington's cheer and dance team.

Dancers, left, in "a quartet," by Heather Kravas, below. The work, blending cheerleading, ballet and folk dance, is to be presented at the Kitchen, as part of Performance Space 122's Coil Festival.

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For Ms. Santoro, the time spent with the cheerleaders was magical. "It's the same thing as being with Heather," she said. "It's such a crazy-normal idea. It's like: Why am I in this college gymnasium trying to get Oren Barnoy to throw me through the air with these 19-year-old kids staring at us with such generosity? That's something that happens in Heather's work: You think, 'what a strange idea,' but at the same time, it's extremely evident that that's what it should be."

A few years ago, Ms. Santoro recalled discussing Ms. Kravas's work with Brian Rogers, the artistic director of the Chocolate Factory in Long Island City, Queens. He noted that Ms. Kravas was good at making quiet-loud pieces. That image has stuck with her.

"Heather has a way of somehow dialing up the volume knob and being very quiet," Ms. Santoro continued. "She's good at giving me something I didn't know I wanted. She doesn't compromise, and what that affords the watcher, the performer and the work itself is quite a big payoff in response to her really staying the course and being strong. She's loud in her quietness and quiet in her loudness."