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“leave room for some unraveling”: Heather Kravas’s “a quartet” at The Kitchen

by REBECCA HADLEY



The Kitchen and Performance Space 122 presented Heather Kravas’s *a quartet* as part of the ninth COIL Festival. (For a brief explanation of the Festival, see *The New Yorker*.)

As I watched the piece on the opening night, Wednesday, January 8th, I thought a lot about the relationship between the dancers and the audience, as well as our experience of the dance as audience members. This was due in part to the intimacy of the performance space, the second-floor gallery of The Kitchen. The audience sat in folding chairs on the two long sides of the space, so we faced each other. Kravas, and the musician/composer Dana Wachs, who performs as Vorhees, shared one of the short sides. The dancers were seated on the other short side. Until they stood and walked to the opposite end of the space to line up, I had no idea that they were the performers.

The nature of the choreography also made me think about the connection between the audience and the piece. There was a lot of precision and repetition, which created a feeling of training or drills. It made the work seem functional and unadorned, rather than performative and decorative. I wondered how much of the audience was focused and interested during the longer, repetitive passages with small or simple movements and gestures. The word “minimalism” kept appearing in the press I read about Kravas’s work. Still, I do find “minimal” to be a misnomer. When each moment is rich, detailed, intricate, and clearly well-rehearsed, or very fast or slow, I don’t consider it minimal.

The four dancers began the four sections (hence, *a quartet*) by lining-up shortest to tallest, with their hands on each-others’ shoulders—except for Liz Santoro, in front, who held her hands in the air as though on an invisible person. They moved mostly from the hips up, feet remaining in a narrow parallel position as they gestured, moved hands from partners’ shoulders to partners’ hips, and twisted left and right. They gradually varied their actions to create a visual counterpoint. Part of this section consisted of the dancers chanting the word “want” as they moved their pelvises forwards and backwards. They accelerated and decelerated at different times, and the challenge seemed to be to continue

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to articulate “want” clearly. Kravas quite literally moved from “singular to multitude and back again” (language from the press release), with one dancer performing movements at a tempo different from the rest. The others would match the new pace one at a time, gradually leaving one dancer in the old mode. This experiment was later repeated in slightly different ways during the final portion, and was an interesting device in both instances.

After going to various extremes in tempi and moving through complicated sequences of gestures, the dancers stopped moving, and lovely music – Vorhees performing with a guitar and electronics – began. The dancers then undressed one at a time, coming to rest on the floor clothed only in gray underwear. They situated themselves in shapes on the ground, gradually assembling in different formations.

The long pauses and slow motions encouraged an attention to detail. I was interested to see how each dancer undressed – socks off first, or pants off and then socks? This brings up a good question for me: what are details? Or what is significant? Brian Seibert’s New York Times review points out that the dancers were spelling a word – “society” – with their shapes on the ground, which I hadn’t noticed.

Next, the dancers changed clothes and the bleak ballet section began. Liz Santoro and Cecilia Eliceche performed innumerable tendus, relevés, and soutenu turns in white leotards, while Oren Barnoy and Jennifer Kjos wore black and marched around the space in patterns. My attention began to wane a little bit. The stark environment created by the music and the steps contrasted with the previous nude section, which had seemed like a utopian world to me.

The last part of *a quartet* was the least interesting of the four segments. For most of it, the dancers moved in a stepping pattern, chanting “milk, bread, coffee, salt, sugar, potatoes, eggs,” and I wished that it was done with more energy and enthusiasm...as I imagined it would be done by a folk dance troupe. Nevertheless, the performers were strong and determined throughout; the work was an engaging challenge for me and for the performers.

One of *a quartet*’s strengths was a strong correlation between intention and impression. What is one investigating and how does one make that evident to viewers?

Part of the press release describes this exploration: “How do disparate beings become one faction? What is the nature of exclusion and opposition? Where is the end of us and the beginning of them?”

That last question struck me the most. Who are “us” and “them?” I thought of when the dancers moved in and out of unison, as they formed and reformed different groups. I thought of the ballet section, when Oren Barnoy and Jennifer Kjos didn’t do ballet steps with the other two, instead walking to the sound of a very loud fire-alarm-like beeping. This sound element made their presence menacing.

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Then I thought of still other iterations of us and them: people outside the walls of The Kitchen. I thought of my audience versus the ballet audience at venues like the Met or David H. Koch Theater, and folks who saw *The Nutcracker* last month. Many of them love ballet, but probably wouldn't be too keen on seeing tendus, relevés, and soutenu turns performed over and over. And yet I would not want to sit through *The Nutcracker*, but was very interested in this repetition of "simple" steps.

Of course there was the man across from me who unabashedly pulled out his iPhone and studied it for much of the performance. Maybe he was doing something really important. Other audience members were visibly disturbed by the alarm-like sounds during the demanding ballet segment. Were people interested, bored, critical? How many were friends and family of the performers?

a quartet reminded me a bit of Sarah Michelson's *Devotion Study #1* in its repetition of seemingly simple steps. There, at the Whitney Museum, there were many walkouts, but not so here. I'm grateful for institutions like The Kitchen and P.S. 122—forums for artists to experiment and for audiences to see, watch, and be challenged.