

Maria Hassabi
with Sigal Bergman

Sigal Bergman: So, I just wanted to see what you're working with in this piece. We can start with a general question, or we could do more specific questions.

Maria Hassabi: Specific.

SB: How do you start your process?

MH: Ok. I think every process is a little different. This one started very... I had an idea with it, which I'm not going to talk about because we're going to have to try this in the theater, with the sets. Specific sets that right away put my mind in the period of baroque, and without even pushing myself there all the way yet, I had it somewhat in the back of my mind: Baroque. Just because of where the set is, the feel of the set. But away from that, I usually go in the studio by myself for days, months, and it took around two months for this one. I improvise for many hours and then I see. Then I watch myself and cut parts of it. It's what speaks to me now more than anything, and from there I start creating the material that I hope... What I call the vocabulary of the piece.

SB: So you start with the visual image or...

MH: No, this piece started with just the sets. I had the sets in my mind, but I still didn't know if I could raise the money to be able to make the set happen. But I can't deny that it was there in my mind, even the idea that it was going to happen. I really took the decision in September. I wanted to do this set. I'm going to figure out the money, and I'm going to do it. But already when the idea is somewhere in your mind, without even realizing it, it's there.

SB: But it's there as a visual or as an emotional setting?

MH: No, as a visual. And then, I think throughout my work, I work a lot with collage. The same way that when I make my material for the dancers, who will come in, when I improvise for an hour straight and I just let myself... whatever's coming out. When I see... then watch... I take from it a few things that I like. There's a day when nothing works for me. So, even at

that very early stage, the idea of collage, because I'm collage-ing myself in a way, the movements that I'm making.

SB: And when you improvise in the studio, you think about Baroque or you think about...

MH: No, it wasn't that. It was coming from... it came out. That's what I said in the beginning. Even though I was not even convinced I wanted to use the set—because I didn't want to have this huge thing. I think subconsciously it was there. The way that I created these walks—how we walk—it's very Louis XIV. But I was not thinking Louis XIV. Afterwards, I was like, "Oh, my God, this is so funny." And I think that's how it's been going there for me. Then I'm interested in work that is, and that's why I spent time alone creating the material.

SB: "Personal" meaning, about you, the choreographer?

MH: Yeah, the choreographer. I wanted to have the taste. I think what makes work unique is not only about the idea that's behind us, because ideas... We all have similar ideas. Sometimes it's really focusing on bringing out what you don't even know that you have, really going into your research. I wanted to make this movement that is very personal; that comes from me completely. There are pirouettes—they don't come from me—but the way I made those pirouettes is kind of personal. It does fit also into the Baroque attitude.

SB: I can definitely see it from the previous pieces you showed me on tape. They were very much you, and I could see the personality coming out. And they were different from things that I usually see, but they also had to do a lot with whom you're working with.

MH: Very much.

SB: How do you choose the dancers then, and what are you asking them to do?

MH: Well, it [the piece] was about six individuals, so I wanted to work with six people that were very distinctive. And I didn't want to change them or make them me, or anything like that. It's not about making them me, and all of us looking the same. But, the underlying of the movement, I have to understand it. Even if, let's say, Michael Portnoy... He's a really strong performer, though he's not a dancer. I can't teach him movement, you know? But, he has to understand where I'm coming from, and for me, I'm

not an intellectual. I'm not going to sit and talk to you about Deleuze and Guattari. What I'm wanting to do is through my movement, and I have to make me understand it as close as possible.

I think my work is quite abstract, and it's becoming more and more abstract. This piece is more abstract than what I've done before. So, in this piece I wanted to focus... It was coming out of much more dancing. So I wanted... Michael could not do it anyway. Jeremy could not do it because they had their own shows. So, it was the girls, the same people, the same women. And I wanted to invite Ori because I needed to have one man that is as strong as the women, technically, so we could have the choice of doing difficult technical steps or not. Then we invited also David Adamo, who's not a dancer; he's a visual artist. This is going to be one of his first experiences on stage, and he looks amazing. He's a dancer in so many ways. The idea for me to bring him in was exactly because we're all dancers... to have one person who's keeping it real. So then, the dancers come in after I have most of the material. I still don't know how I want to formalize it together. How everything's going to be together. I teach them the phrases, which make no sense probably to anybody. Try to speak about the nuances and all those things. Slowly, we start making the structure.

SB: So you actually make the movement and teach it to them.

MH: Yeah, but right now the piece is finished and... It always ends up like this. Ultimately, Hristoula—she's one of the women in the piece—is the only one doing a whole phrase from the beginning to the end. Nobody gets to do a whole original phrase. Collage comes in again. So they take from, let's say three dance phrases. There's more, but let's say from the three phrases, each one fucks them up in their own way, not by adding different steps—keeping our steps the same, so it's only this vocabulary. This is our whole alphabet. There's no other alphabet. But, from taking parts of phrase one and combining phrase three in a different way than Katie will do it or Jason will do it. So their temperament comes in picking up what they are going to do: their pace, their thing, their cockiness. I kept on insisting that we're all from the same country. We're all from the same planet, let's say. It's a little bit less about six individuals.

Through the process of the piece, through the passage of the time as the piece goes through, their individualism does come up. It's just they're all under this filter of a different... It's much more unified even though we're not doing synchronicity or stuff like that. It's just the way that we're walking, the way we're carrying ourselves. We're all from the same place. It's not

"one comes from another country, and the other one comes from the underground, and the other one is from uptown."

SB: It felt similar in your DTW piece [*Dead is Dead*] because there was...

MH: They were more individuals there. They had big solos that each one had. Michael had this big song because he's an amazing singer. Caitlin had this other kind of singing because it's what she does with her band. Hristoula had this big solo of dance because she's an amazing dancer. I feel like I focused a lot on what were each one's strengths. It was part of this group of people and their talents and their misfortunes. This one is not about that. Even though there are some solos, they're not really solos. While one is having a solo, other people are doing something else. It's never focused on one person. The other thing that came up in this is that it is a very formal piece. I wanted to keep this through line of formality to bring to an emotional level. So even if it is very choreography—one goes the other one crosses, now, now, now, now, now, complicated patterns in space—to be able to rise into an emotional...

SB: I want to come back to that because I'm interested in how you're using form to evoke emotions. I think you're also using the space, the way the dancers move in space, and what part of the space they choose to occupy. At least from the *Dead is Dead*, it seemed very important. So, if you could talk a little bit about that. What you think brings out the emotionality.

MH: I have this idea, this influence of living in New York. I think my work is very much influenced by everyday life. I think being out on the streets and walking, without even understanding, realizing it, I get effected by the architecture of New York, the way that the buildings are. They are tall, but if you look straight, if you are looking a little higher up than our straight eye level, you notice these lines everywhere. These cuts. I think just in my mind subconsciously it comes out that I'm... Sometimes one dancer will say, "Oh, I'm just doing lines all the time. Can't we do a circle?" I say, "Yeah, try it," and I never like it. I think rarely I like the circles unless there's something behind it, and I think it has a lot to do with the street awareness.

SB: The motion...

MH: Yeah, which can be an old Trisha Brown kind of thing, but it comes natural in my aesthetic, and I think it's what I'm used to. If I was living in the mountains, I'm sure I would not be making work like I'm making. I think it is the influence of the city. I'm really interested in creating this environment that is so many fast cuts. Pastes and cuts.

SB: And simultaneous things happening?

MH: Yeah, and related to the over-stimulus of the city. Like, you're walking down the street and you see two people kissing and never finish it. You just see them, you see them for a second and then you continue. You see somebody else slapping somebody else. You see a homeless person almost dead in the street. Information, information... And it makes no sense, but it makes our day. We take it or leave it even though we give it no separate thought. So, I've been obsessed with creating this part of life... Now why representing life? I have no idea yet. It began with *Forest Near Chelsea*, a duet with Hristoula a little bit, then it continued with *Dead is Dead*, and now with this one again.

SB: And you're connecting it to Baroque, to over...

MH: It's like a filter, the Baroque thing. It's the style of it. It's a decoration almost. It's giving this other flavor to our movement, of our kind of Baroque. Again, I'll go back to the way that we're walking. It almost takes it away from the representation of everyday life, I think, I hope. I had trouble when I was making this piece, "why am I talking about Baroque?" "Who cares about Baroque?" "It happened in the 16th and 17th Century, who cares?" I do believe in contemporary work and in contemporary living, and that's my influence, so why do I care about that? I feel through the time of me asking myself that question I found out that I was interested. I find it relates to now, because Baroque is so much about excess and exterior, and the grandeur and the richness and all of these things, and I feel like we're driving life in that sort of way at this moment.

But also, Baroque was the beginning of opera, and what they called opera at that time was the first time that they married together all these arts. It was theater, dance, music, visual arts... Arts came together onstage and they called it opera, which is what I feel like I'm trying to do. Me and many other choreographers around me. I'm using live music. People sing. We dance. We're very theatrical. I work with visual elements—the set, which is a big part of the work. It is a spectacle... It's not... Even though the choreography is quite minimal—everything is minimal—but overall, together, it is a show. And I was interested in making a spectacle. Now, why in our days, who am I wanting to make a spectacle? I have no idea, but that was in my mind.

SB: Do you feel that is different than your other work, or do you think...

MH: No, I think it is the same. Also, *Dead is Dead* wasn't a spectacle. But it was a production. It was not something I could perform in my backyard. It wouldn't have the same validity. It needed these sets; it needed these costumes, [the] whole thing. I'm not saying that I want to make work from now on that is always like that. My next piece might end up being a solo, and I'm actually really thinking about that: being able to perform it anywhere without having to have this huge, elaborate set and costumes and the whole grandiose... But, right now, I still wanted to do that. I still wanted to push this bigger dream, this bigger illusion of theater. Create that space. Again, really, it's back to Baroque. That's how I brought Baroque; that's how I made sense of Baroque. Why bring it now. Why use it now, in all this formality that I'm interested in creating to represent the outside world... exterior... the facade, which is what Baroque is: facade.

SB: So, you're interested in the facade of things, and how things look from the outside?

MH: Well, if you think about people walking down the street. We don't have time. We see somebody getting beat up. We don't stop to say, "Do you need some help?"

SB: But you do talk about that bringing emotionality.

MH: I'm going to go into that right now.

SB: This is really interesting to me because it's so much about exterior: how things look and how things are stylized. And you're talking about your dancers as being a group that is connected to each other by a style or being from the same...

MH: Continent. Country. Planet.

SB: Yeah. How do you go through it, and what comes out of it?

MH: From this exterior, facade place... if I was thinking about the piece as an architectural form, we have to care about the interior too. So, the way I went about this piece, I think it's the most different from my previous work in that way. Because in *Dead is Dead*, I think I did it by focusing on each one person and making these solos, and that's what brought a little more emotion to the piece, which anyway that's relating it to time. The passage of time through the piece, I mean. If I put Hristoula's solo in the beginning of *Dead is Dead*, it would not be emotional. Where it came in the piece, you were able, as an audience and as a performer... I think Hristoula,

being Hristoula, she was so tired by then that she was able to channel this more emotional place within herself too.

SB: All the solos came after long, long parts of everyone together and this hectic... Can you arrive there from a different place?

MH: Definitely. This thing... this thing called "piece"... It does a similar thing. As we are staying in this exterior, facade place, you don't have time, I think as an audience, to even look at us really. You're trying to follow and just, all of a sudden, catch us doing something over there. "Oh, my God, and Ori's doing something else over there." I was thinking, even if Jessie had blue eyes, you would never notice. It's fast. It moves. After this place we created, this long space, a landscape, it's almost like a moment to zoom in, to look at us. And for us to look at ourselves, really, a place for us to think. For you, you can space out if you want to, but before you space out, I think you're going to take a second to check us out. It goes back and forth between the facade and the interior of this architectural form that we are creating.

SB: So, when you take off the facade, then you leave your dancers... You don't direct exactly what you see?

MH: No, of course, it's complicated. It's really specific.

SB: But what were you thinking or what's your direction for that part of...

MH: How do we make it, you mean?

SB: I think from what I hear you say, you're directing the audience's eye in some way, and I'm wondering what are you directing the eye for in this part. For example, in *Dead is Dead* our eyes shift, and we're kind of going in that mode, where we can't really follow one person...

MH: It's hard. Yeah. It moves organically, so I think you would end up getting to this place... It's not a hard transition. I don't know how to explain it.

SB: No, but am I looking at the personalities of the people?

MH: No, I think it's a mood.

SB: It's a mood?

MH: Yeah. You don't get personalities in this piece. That's the difference with *Dead is Dead*. It's a mood. It stays... Architecture...

SB: It reminds me of music for some reason, the structure of music. I don't know why, but it sounds musical to me. Like you're thinking about the piece a little bit on that level, the level of density and pace. So that's the opposite of Baroque; it's paired down.

MH: It's like you drop everything. You drop the facade, but without us becoming melodramatic and showing you something specific. There's a space for the audience to read whatever they want. But, I feel you do and you totally space out and you lose us completely, which is maybe really nice. I do like the audience having a time to breathe because it's too much information before. We lose you completely, because there's a slight moment where you space out. It can be beautiful as an audience member. But, you space out too long, then we've lost you completely.

SB: So, you go into yourself and then you come back?

MH: Yeah. I think it's very easy to see this as a desert place. It has a quality to it. Things move very slow... without the melodrama. I don't know how else to explain it

SB: It's very interesting. I want to see it. So, now that you have the set. Are you using it physically, interacting with the set? Or it's just the setting that you dance in?

MH: No, it changes a lot of our space. It inhabits the space a lot. So, from the beginning, towards the end, the stage itself, the set, changes, and it's not a subtle change. So that's why we also wanted to finish the piece in advance. So when we're in the theater with the set, we don't care about the steps anymore, but we need to adapt to the set. The set is overpowering, and that's why I don't want to talk about it that much because I don't know if it's going to work out. We might just say, "Forget about it."

SB: Oh no.

MH: We're not going to say it, but you know, we might have to really... It might not be the original idea that I had, and it's going to be in our way... from after 40 minutes. No, after half an hour, it's going to be in our way. I think the set is very dominant, and I'm sorry I can't speak about it, but it has to stay... I don't want the audience to have expectations before they come...

SB: No, that's fine. I'm just talking about you as a choreographer, because it changes the space of the dancers; it changes everything about the dancers. So now it makes more sense to me what you're talking about... It's a spectacle, meaning the set has as much influence as the dancing.

MH: And the costumes... they're very chic. It is a production. It is theater. It is not...

SB: I wanted to ask you about chic-ness and connection to fashion or that part of the world, because it is part of you definitely, and part of the pieces that I saw, and how do you factor it in, or how do you think about it?

MH: Well, there's again... my answers can never be one... it's so all over the place. I believe in fashion. I think that fashion is something that many [people] think is superficial. I believe in fashion. I think that fashion is a turning point... not a turning point... a stamp of our times. There's this great book I love so much, *The History of Costume*, and you can look at what's happening sociologically in the world, what we wear is so together with what's happening politically, sociologically, with everything. So, I do believe, if I'm going to be wearing jeans, right away it brings you to this everyday person that is wearing jeans. It's very connected with how we're seeing, dressing codes. if I see you dressed like this, I almost know what kind of food you like to eat, almost. It's very much connected to what we do, whether we are right wing or left wing. It just gives it all up.

SB: But, you're interested in high fashion more than... You're not putting the jeans person onstage, you're putting...

MH: Maybe I will in the future, if it fits what I'm doing. These last three pieces, including this one, have a similar thing to them. There's a stylistic affect to them. This one even more, in the sense of the Baroque qualities, [the] excessive place. So it needs the costume to be also... O.k., we're wearing black, but I cannot just wear a black pair of pants and a t-shirt. The t-shirt has to be decorated. It has to bring out that accessorized Baroque thing to it, which is going to go also with the movement. It's going to go with the set.

SB: But still, it probably has a contemporary look.

MH: Yes. I like fashion. You know, I like fashion. I don't know. I always did. It was always part of my life, since I was a kid. My parents are not fashionable. I don't know why I was interested [in it]. It's not like I dress

fashionably all the time or anything like that. But, I pick it up. Again, it goes back to this place. I'm not an intellectual. I trust in many ways an intuition and I work from there a lot. That's why it was such a big conflict in my mind the Baroque thing because I was stuck on it, but I couldn't understand its relation to now.

SB: Did you want to say something about the dancers?

MH: Yeah, even though—I feel like I need to say this—even though I make a lot, all of the material, more this piece than the other pieces because the other pieces I had to include a lot of their material. [In] this piece there was no space for improvisation from them, but I still call it a collaboration. Not only because they're here every day—well, not every day, the days that we rehearse. It's not only about that. Because the way they choose to collage the material together... It would not be the same piece if it were other people. They help me figure out counts, which I'm really bad at, find out logics of things. They really help with the process. They ask me questions that for me are very natural. You know, you make it and you don't really need to explain yourself exactly, but it makes me think in a different way. Even in this piece that is so rigid, and I knew what I wanted: the same planet and all of these things, their influence is huge. And who these people are, these specific people are, who are all incredible in this case, has everything to do with the piece as much as, you know, I am the director and I have the big idea in my mind.