HOW **SLOW**

Visual artist David Michalek turns his slow-motion camera on leading dancers.

BY EMILY MACEL

This month, 44 gigantic dancers will take over the Lincoln Center Plaza. Climbing up the side of the New York State Theater, these figures of Godzilla-like proportions are not something to fear, but rather to marvel at. Dance legends like Bill T. Jones, Allegra Kent, Wendy Whelan, Judith Jamison, and William Forsythe will leap into the air at extraordinarily slothful speeds, and defy gravity by remaining suspended for minutes on end. Dancers from all corners of the world will be represented too, performing the traditions of Turkey, India, China, and West Africa. Even a voguer and a drag queen will make an appearance.

Muscles will jiggle in ways the naked eye cannot detect. Costumes will turn into golden, silken liquid. And if you let your eyes linger, you will be able to see the initial impulse of every movement. Slow is the ultimate understatement.

The mastermind behind this larger-(and slower)-than-life installation, simply called *Slow Dancing*, is visual artist David Michalek. A changing triptych of Michalek's video portraits will be projected in high definition every night of the Lincoln Center Festival, July 10–29. All passersby, whether leaving a festival event or just walking through the plaza, are encouraged to stop and watch for free.

Left to right: Fang-yi Sheu, Christopher "Lil' C" Toler, Karole Armitage, Shantala Shivalingappa, Wendy Whelan, and Alexei Ratmansky.

CAN YOU GO?

"A photograph doesn't contain the thing that is essential to a dancer, which is the time element," says Michalek, who began conceptualizing the project last year. "I wondered if there could be a way of creating a record that wasn't a dance film but somehow merged the time element with what is in the photograph."

Michalek has an unusually calm demeanor. During the intense weekend-long shooting sessions last winter, he would hug each dancer as they arrived at the studio like they were close friends or family (and for some that is the case—he's married to one of his subjects, New York City Ballet's Wendy Whelan). Michalek himself is not a dancer. But as a yoga instructor he knows how to move, and as a photographer he knows how to capture movement.

"Megumi, do this part again," he said, sweeping his hand and angling his head to imitate the part he wanted Megumi Eda to repeat. (Eda, a dancer with Armitage Gone! Dance, was eight months pregnant at the time of the filming.)

When a five-second phrase of movement is played back in slow motion, he stares at the computer screen, elbows on knees, face cupped in his hands, wide-eyed like a child watching snow fall. He gasps each time, struck by the beauty of the way a dancer blinks, or the magical way an arm rises. The lack of speed is mesmerizing.

The dancers are amazed to see themselves move in a way that is both alien to their eyes and somehow close to the feeling they hope to project. Nejla Yatkin, a D.C.-based modern dancer and a *Dance Magazine* "25 to Watch" (2005), performed traditional Turkish belly dancing. She was fascinated to see the details in slow motion. "Watching a back muscle, the ribs, the breathing, the stretching, each position changing—I felt in awe of it."

What makes Michalek's project possible is the state-of-the-art equipment he found to capture the gradual, seamless

Matthew Wakem, Courtesy David Michalek

Trisha Brown on set during a *Slow Dancing* film session.

Matthew Wakem, Courtesy David Michalek

movement in high-definition detail. He tried several cameras at first, including one used to analyze golf swings, which he tested on Whelan and Edwaard Liang of NYCB. "I set some lights in the living room and we started playing. That was a sort of an 'aha' moment for me," Michalek says. "I was immediately transfixed by the slowness. But Eddie and Wendy wanted to fix what they had seen. The film acted as a new version of the dancer's mirror."

The camera wasn't quite slow enough though. So he kept searching, and eventually found a military camera that records missile launchings.

Normally, film uses 25 frames a second and video 30. The military device uses 1,000 frames a second. After Michalek recorded the phrase and slowed it down to approximately three minutes, a computer program then slowed it down to 3,000 frames and a hypnotic 10 minutes.

A project this technologically advanced is a pricey endeavor: The equipment, studio fees, and tech crew plus travel arrangements for dancers from all over the world add up. The Jerome Robbins Foundation, which provided $20,000, offered support from the beginning.

Nigel Redden, director of the Lincoln Center Festival, says that when Michalek approached him with his idea, he was intrigued. "The festival is about transformations, about a changing environment," Redden says. "It's about a juxtaposition of things that create a fresh set of ideas in the mind."

"We are athletes too. Here you see the work it takes to do what we do—and that's an art form."
—Desmond Richardson

And it doesn't stop with New York. After the Lincoln Center Festival, the installation goes to the Los Angeles Music Center September 18–26, and possibly the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Arts. The ultimate goal is to have these films act as an extensive archive of all forms of dance, to be accessed from all over, whether you live in a big city or a small town. (Online exclusives are already available at www.slowdancingfilms.com.)

Redden's commitment helped Michalek gain further funding as well as further interest from dancers, and his initial wish-list of 8–10 dancers grew: Lil' C, a krumper from South Central Los Angeles, was interested; so was a Javanese court dancer, Miroto Martinius. Michalek describes the process of piecing together the project as building a

Photos of Wendy Whelan, Bill T. Jones, Shivalingappa in a rendering of *Slow Dancing* at the New York State Theater.

house. And after the structure was built, the dancers made it feel like a home. "Suddenly one international treasure after the next would walk through the doors," he says. "How many times in your life are you going to sit next to a 90-year-old Afro-Brazilian capoeira master, and see the sparkle in his eye as he watches himself."

Inspired by the paintings of the Italian Renaissance artist Fra Angelico, Michalek wanted costumes of "slightly off-primary colors." He wanted the dancers to have an angelic presence. "Angels as agencies of both darkness and light," he says. Designer Karen Young made several of the costumes from silk, giving a liquid quality to the slow image. Some of the dancers were costumed in the clothes they would usually wear to dance. Lil' C wore bright orange baggy shorts and red shiny sneakers; Elizabeth Streb wore combat boots, a blue blazer, and her thick-framed glasses.

Shantala Shivalingappa, a Pina Bausch dancer from South India, says, "I think it's fantastic to bring all these dance forms together." Shivalingappa was in the studio at the same time as Isabelle Guérin, former étoile of the Paris Opera Ballet, and West-African dancer Youssouf Koumbassa. "Whether it's classical, traditional, or folk, dance is universal," she says. "Each dancer has a different technique, but everyone is still living in that moment."

For many of the dancers, the time constraint was a challenge. Tap dancer Roxane Butterfly (also a *Dance Magazine* "25 to Watch," 2002) said it made her see her dancing differently. "In a way, the five seconds was a meditation. It forced me to isolate myself from my usual technique of performing." Butterfly says the film captured her style, even though she typically moves at breakneck speed. "I thought, 'What is it of me that in five seconds can represent my life experience in this art form? Speed, lightness, and something that doesn't last, something that's ephemeral, like a butterfly.' I chose to represent that at the extreme. It's really a whole life in dance concentrated in five seconds."

Emine Mira Hunter brought the Turkish tradition of whirling to the project. "It's so shocking to see something so clearly," she says. Hunter wore the dervish's traditional garb: a long white cloak and a tall, felt hat. "It was so slow that it was almost like watching something that doesn't move."

Many of the dancers noticed things they didn't like—hiked up shoulders, poor turnout, knees not directly over their toes—and described seeing their film as "horrifying" or "painful." But Whelan says, "I've embraced my flaws." At the Guggenheim's Works & Process *Slow Dancing* preview program in April, she said, "I learned that less is more." Whelan, Desmond Richardson, and Herman Cornejo performed their five seconds live, and then the audience watched the 10-minute version of the films. "We are athletes too," said Richardson, whose intensely muscular body flexed, sending super slow ripples across his chest or up his legs. "Here you see the work it takes to do what we do—and that's an art form."

Redden believes that audiences will be captivated by the slow moving figures. "I think it will be impossible not to become engrossed by them," says Redden. "There's a kind of poetry of motion that is implicit in dance and becomes more explicit in the slowness. Something as simple as hair falling down—the hair becomes an avalanche, a flood of movement. That is just very stately and magical."

Emily Macel, a Dance Magazine *editor, is assisting in a book project that documents* Slow Dancing.

Allegra Kent (left, seated), David Michalek (center, smiling), and his crew watch a slow-motion version of Kent's performance.

Top: David Michalek and Matthew Wakem, Courtesy Lincoln Center; Bottom: Matthew Wakem, Courtesy David Michalek