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## David Michalek: “Slow Dancing”

By Bija Guttoff

If “slow dancing” evokes the high anxiety of your high school prom — or any awkward moment — think again. Because artist David Michalek’s “Slow Dancing” is the antithesis: it’s mesmerizingly beautiful (and really, really sloooooooow).

Michalek learned filmmaking at NYU, perfected his photographic skills apprenticing with fashion legend Herb Ritts, then set up shop as a commercial portraitist. His pictures appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*.

Before long, however, his creative urges tugged him toward what he calls his project life. “I never stopped making portraits,” Michalek says, “but my motivations changed radically. I began to focus on making work for me, and to merge the idea of portraiture with performance, installation and large-scale multi-dimensional projects.”

Since that shift his solo and collaborative work has been shown nationally and internationally, with recent solo exhibitions at Yale University, *The Kitchen* and *The Brooklyn Museum*.

### Escaping Time

Michalek didn’t have to look far for his latest inspiration. He happens to be married to Wendy Whelan, who *The New York Times* recently lauded as “the greatest ballerina in America.” Mikhail Baryshnikov simply says, “She’s the best.”

Michalek’s work recalls nothing so much as the late 19th century explorations of Eadweard Muybridge, who used photography to study the exact nature of the horse’s gait. But whereas Muybridge uses sequences of just a few images to indicate the idea of motion, Michalek did the opposite: he captured thousands of sequential images to indicate the idea of stillness.

“The point,” he says, “is to capture the beauty of the body in motion while laying bare its most intricate workings. I want people to experience the movement in a new way.”

The project, funded by a commission from the LA Music Center and post-produced on Macs using *Shake* and *Final Cut Studio*, is a one-of-a-kind record of some of the world’s greatest dance artists. It premiered at the Lincoln Center Festival on July 10, projected on a triptych of 50-foot screens mounted outside the New York State Theater.

### 1,000 Frames Per Second

Michalek employed a special high-speed HD camera that’s typically used by the military for ballistic analysis and is capable of recording images at an impressive 1,000 frames per second.

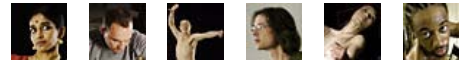
He shot the dancers in four sessions at the New York studio of photographer William Wegman. There, Michalek filtered 200,000 watts of lighting through soft silk. “Because the camera is recycling 1,000 times per second,” he explains, “you need a lot of light hitting the sensor to get good exposure. It was wild — everyone was wearing sunglasses.”

### Artificial Slow-Down

Even with Michalek’s amazing capture rate, the dancers’ movements weren’t slow enough to reveal the detail he sought. So he used a combination of *Twixtor* and *Shake*’s optical flow feature to time-remap them.

“Apple and Shake have been absolutely crucial to this project from the beginning,” he says. “Because no camera

### Gallery



Indian Kuchipuri dancer Shantala Shivalingappa.

### Now Playing

Watch American Ballet Theater principal dancer Herman Cornejo execute a seeming impossible double tours en l’air.



### “Slow Dancing” Installation Venues

“Slow Dancing” will premier as part of the 2007 Lincoln Center Summer Arts Festival, which runs from July 10-28. In the fall, it will be presented at The Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County, then



Left to right: Fang Yi, Judith Jameson and David Michalek reviewing printed stills

The artist felt Whelan's chosen art deserved a new and fuller appreciation. "Dance is often relegated to the lowest of the art forms because it's ephemeral," he explains. "It unfolds before you in time and space. Even watching a dance film, you don't understand it as you would by being with it in the moment where it physically exists. It's there, and then it's gone — that's the beauty of it."

It was precisely to escape time's constraint on the art of dance that Michalek conceived and directed his new piece. "There's a lot of beautiful dance photography," he's quick to acknowledge, "but I wondered, Is there a way to take what's missing from dance photography — the time element — and make something that's not just another dance movie?"

### Breaking New Ground

With "Slow Dancing," Michalek breaks new ground both artistically and technically. The hyper-slow-motion HD video portraits of 45 master dancers are so exquisitely decelerated that each subject's brief original movement — just five or so seconds of a single gesture — is stretched into a ten-minute film.

on the market allowed me to shoot in HD for as long as I did, at the frame rate I wanted, I had to find a way to artificially slow down the data. Shake — and six Mac Pros rendering 24/7 for about a week — allowed me to do that."

Michalek even located a German software company whose product allows playback of uncompressed HD from a hard drive. That was key, since he was determined not to lose data by running his footage through a codec. "Because I'm projecting the images so large," he notes, "where the effect of artifacting is amplified, I wanted to hold onto as much data as I could."

### Off-the-Shelf Parts

The playback system includes a Mac, dual 4 GB fiber channel, PCI Express Card, and two Xserve RAIDs for each projector. Says Michalek, "This system lets me do something that, until now, the market has not allowed."

He was keen to use off-the-shelf components. "I wanted the system to be modular," he explains, "so I can re-use it in different configurations. Also, I didn't want to drag around racks of esoteric equipment. Being based on Macs, I can install the project anywhere. Every city has a Mac store. If I'm in France and I have a problem, I don't want to wait three weeks for a part."

tour outdoor venues, galleries and museums worldwide. For a complete schedule of dates and locations, see [www.slowdancingfilms.com](http://www.slowdancingfilms.com) and [www.davidmichalek.net](http://www.davidmichalek.net).

## A Ballerina's Response

For Wendy Whelan — principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, David Michalek's wife and a featured dancer in "Slow Dancing" — the work illuminates the art of dance in an entirely new way. "One thing it showed me," she muses, "is how the world of dance is so small, and yet so vast. The films define each person's work while showing how we're all connected through dance — as if the dancers are unique gems on a big chain."

Whelan was fascinated to discover insights such as precisely where, for each dancer, a piece begins. "A motion may begin in their foot or stomach or head," she says. "Without this film, there's no way you could know that. It's kind of like finding out your blood type."

Enthralled, she watched the film of her friend, American Ballet Theater principal dancer Herman Cornejo. "Watching Herman, so close and so slow, really defined dance as a religious experience to me," she sighs. "His dancing was so pure, so clean, so egoless, so nude. He's very technically precise."

For instance, she says of the extremely difficult "double tours en l'air," where a dancer jumps, rotates 720° and lands in fifth position: "Herman just defines it. He leaps two feet off the ground and spins two full revolutions. He has incredible posture in the take-off, it's so stable and on-center. He never drops his focus or even blinks, he's just totally relaxed and precise." (Not to mention, Cornejo remains aloft a full, gravity-defying 30 seconds.)

Through Michalek's films, concludes the ballerina: "Each dancer creates his or her own personal poem."

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## David Michalek: "Slow Dancing"

He's long favored Apple tools. "I use the Mac for just about everything I do as an artist," he says; "film and video editing, finishing and playback, photography, sound design, word processing, email. Honestly, I'm glad your products are so beautiful, because I spend much of the day with them."

### The Digital Decision

During each shoot, Michalek and his dancers watched the raw video on a 23-inch Apple Cinema Display. "If we didn't like a sequence," recalls Michalek, "we got rid of it and started again."

Having the ability to review the clips onsite was crucial. Originally, Michalek planned to shoot film — until an early test at his and Whelan's New York apartment revealed why that approach wouldn't work. He rented what he calls "this cheapo little high-speed black and white digital camera that's made for golfers to analyze their swings," which provided a rough idea of the extreme slow-mo he was after, albeit at poor resolution, as well as instant feedback.



Dancer Shantala Shivalingappa getting ready

Then he spent a weekend filming Whelan and other New York City Ballet dancers and reviewing the playback with them. Michalek found those first slow-motion images "one of the most sublime things I had ever seen." To his surprise, however, "some of the dancers were mortified. They noticed tiny flaws that would never be apparent to the naked eye — it was like looking at their technique under a microscope."

### Professional Scrutinizers

Michalek immediately saw that digital playback — providing the dancers the opportunity to review their moves during the shoot and redo them as necessary — would be critical to a successful piece.

He adds with a laugh, "Ballet dancers are professional scrutinizers. They've been watching themselves in mirrors for 30 years. So naturally they wanted to fix whatever they saw in their technique that wasn't perfect — which meant I had to allow them to see the clips in the moment."

### Ballerinas and Break Dancers

The thrill of the project, for Michalek, was assembling top dancers from all corners of the globe. He invited the world's reigning Balinese dancer, the greatest female tapper, a 90-year-old Afro-Brazilian Capoeira master, a whirling dervish — even the king of the street form called 'krump' from South Central L.A.

Their artistry represents a huge range of styles and affirms the glorious variety of the human form. "I wanted to create not just a celebration of dance," says Michalek, "but of human beings of all shapes, sizes, ages and races — and every one is a master."

"The most memorable thing," he continues, "was having one national treasure after the next walk onto the stage. What a privilege, seeing the legendary 72-year-old ballerina Allegra Kent just hanging out with New York's greatest break dancer."

### To Beautify and Beatify

Michalek summons the impulses behind his newest piece. First, "I wanted it to exist as a work of art that sparks people's creative imaginations and fills them with mystery and wonder — those things that are hard to put in words."

Second, "I read a recent estimate that only eight percent of the U.S. population will ever see live dance in their lifetimes. So I wanted to disseminate an endorsement of the idea of dance — without limiting it to any one kind of dance."

Michalek, currently a professor in the Graduate School of Religion and the Arts at Yale Divinity School, concludes, "On a deeper level, I wanted to create a mode of viewing that's akin to meditation, where the art slows you down and brings on an intensified sense of focus. Much of what

I'm ultimately interested in is the sacred function of art: art that doesn't merely beautify, but beatifies, or makes blessed."

## Toolbox

### Michalek's Studio

Mac Pro  
23-inch Apple Cinema Display  
Nikon F3 film camera  
Nikon D100 digital camera  
Nikon 28mm, 50mm and 85mm lenses for use with both Nikons  
Mamiya RZ67 medium-format film camera with 110mm and 150mm lenses  
Sinar F1 8x10 large-format film camera with 210mm and 300mm lenses  
Vision Research HDcam used for "Slow Dancing"  
Epson 9600 printer  
Shake  
Final Cut Studio  
Aperture  
Garage Band  
iTunes  
Safari  
Photoshop  
Microsoft Office

### Digital Arts (Post-Production House)

Mac Pro (used as render farm and as video playback system for uncompressed HD frame sequences)  
Xserve RAID  
Shake  
Final Cut Studio  
Final Cut Server  
RE:Vision Effects Twixtor

## World's Leading Dancers

The subjects chosen for "Slow Dancing" hail from traditions including ballet (Herman Cornejo, William Forsythe, Isabelle Guerin, Allegra Kent, Alexei Ratmansky, Wendy Whelan); modern dance (Karole Armitage, Trisha Brown, Holley Farmer, Bill T. Jones, Desmond Richardson, Shen Wei); tap (Roxanne Butterfly); Javanese court dance (Miroto Martinius); Krumping (Lil' C); Voguing (Benny Ninja); Afro-Brazilian Capoeira (Maestre Joao Grande); Hip-Hop (Kwikstep and Rokafella); Indian Kuchipuri (Shantala Shivalingappa); Beijing Opera (Wu Hsing-Kuo) and Flamenco (Omayra Amaya). They come from the U.S., Russia, Guinea, Indonesia, China, Turkey, Brazil, India, Taiwan and New Zealand.

## "Slow Dancing" Project Credits

Conceived and directed by David Michalek, Moving Portrait, Inc.  
Post-Production: Digital Arts  
Technical director and post supervisor: Axel Ericson  
Post production: Manu Sawkar  
Producer: Lynn Zekanis  
Key grip: Jason Amos  
Production manager: Alisha Borth  
Lighting supervisor: Bob Bushfield

Production fundraising: Lordes Lopez  
Production assistant: Chris Martin  
High-speed photography supervisor: Jim Matlosz  
Production stills: Matthew Waken  
High-speed camera technician: Gregory Wilson  
Costume: Karen Young