

SUMMER 2010

REVIEW

ballet.m^{agazine}*David Michalek**'Slow Dancing'**July 2010**London, Trafalgar Square**by John Mallinson*

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Slow Dancing website:

www.slowdancingfilms.com

David Michalek was an English major at UCLA in the 90s when he took a job as assistant in the studio of the noted fashion and commercial photographer Herb Ritts to help fund his courses. This quite rapidly lead to his own successful career in the same fields. After some years he became dissatisfied with commercial work and started to pursue other more personally satisfying projects, some in association with theatre director Peter Sellars whose wide-ranging imagination he found especially appealing. Another important influence was the senior video artist Bill Viola, best known for large-scale installations involving slowed-down film.

Interested in dance since college, his clear link now is through his wife Wendy Whelan, Principal Dancer with New York

City Ballet. Unhappy with the ability of still photography to capture the essence of dance he conceived the idea of using a high-speed camera to expand a few seconds of movement into minutes of film. The high resolution camera that he uses was (ironically) developed for analysing weapons systems in action. It shoots at 1,000 frames a second and, played back at normal speed, the 5 second takes expand to around 10 minutes. He recruited 50 dancers, active and retired, to dance for him, flying them from all parts of the world to be

filmed in New York. All types of dance are represented from flamenco to tap, ballet to Balinese classical dance. The aim was to be catholic and not to concentrate on western or high art forms.



Isabelle Guerin in *Slow Dancing*

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The films are displayed as a triptych (the religious connotation should not be overlooked) projected onto large screens. The projections are not synchronised and are randomised so you can't predict who will be dancing after (or next to) whom. *Slow Dancing* was completed in 2007 and first shown outside the Lincoln Center in New York since when it has been exhibited widely in the US and also in Toronto, Venice, Paris, Taiwan, Dublin and Monaco.

It's easier to think of this installation as moving still images rather than film. Michalek has described the displays as "sculpting in time," which seems an apt metaphor. As in a Cunningham dance piece where the dance and music are unrelated but commonly seem to marry up by chance, so here the dancers on the three screens often seem to be communicating with each other, or mirroring one another's movements though there is no connection between them at all. The conjunctions of different styles, nationalities, histories and ages of the dancers are fascinating to contemplate. The film is of very high quality, the size of the projections is impressive, the costumes have

been carefully considered and the results are very beautiful. It is very easy to find that a couple of hours have passed without noticing.



Desmond Richardson in *Slow Dancing*

© John Mallinson

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There is much that could be said about the aesthetics and ideas behind *Slow Dancing*, but it's much best to go see it yourself. Anyone with any interest in dance will find it engrossing. Also we should treasure these free public art projects whilst they can still be afforded.

There are brief bios of the dancers, film clips and details of the project

on the Slow Dancing website: www.slowdancingfilms.com

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...aug10/jm_rev_david_michalek_slow_dancing_0710.htm revised: 16 July 2010

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