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At Lincoln Center: Slow-motion portraits of dance

By Joy Goodwin
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NEW YORK: As the husband of Wendy Whelan, a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, the photographer David Michalek has spent many an evening at the ballet. Yet, he said, still photographs of dance have always struck him as "innately unsatisfying," too static, unable to capture the passing of time and the sweep of movement through space. Over time an idea began to nag at him: Could a dance photograph be made to move, just a little?

It could. In "Slow Dancing," a video installation that makes its debut at the Lincoln Center Festival on Thursday, Michalek uses high-definition video technology to show 43 dancers moving at less than one one-hundredth of their original speed. By shooting at 1,000 frames per second and using software to slow down the video even more, he has stretched each dancer's five-second clip to a video lasting 8 to 12 minutes. (The rate varies based on the dancer's speed in the initial taping.)

The effect of seeing human faces and bodies in crystalline extreme slow motion has been revelatory, to dancers and nondancers alike. Until now, Michalek said, this technology — still in the prototype phase — has been used primarily for applications like military ballistics tests and car-crash simulations. Now, in "Slow Dancing," slow-motion high definition is being harnessed to show things as minute as the trajectory of a flyaway strand of hair or the progression of a gesture through a hand, finger by finger.

Such stolen glimpses are certain to feel even more momentous when projected on three 50-foot screens mounted on the facade of the New York State Theater. Three projectors, each containing approximately one-third of the portraits, will beam the videos in uncompressed high-definition daily from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. through July 29.

While each video is mesmerizing, projecting three at once — in continually changing combinations — will allow viewers to consider the interplay among the diverse dance forms represented by the 43 soloists. Ballet, tap, flamenco, break dancing, modern, krumping, capoeira, Beijing Opera and Javanese court dance will appear side by side.

"I wanted to create a project that could be an advertisement for the idea of dance, rather than any one kind of dance," Michalek said one recent afternoon, sitting in the art-filled living room of the apartment he shares with Whelan on the Upper West Side. "Something that could travel and be light on its feet, and that could ultimately be shown anywhere and everywhere."

He worked out the design elements fairly quickly: black background, white lighting, crisp images. Recruiting dancers was more daunting. "I had a good feeling Wendy would do it," Michalek said wryly. "Then I had a wish list of about 65 people."

Working with Whelan and several friends, including the theater director Peter Sellars, Michalek reached out to a broad array of dancers from around the world. The eventual participants ranged in age from 14 to 90. What they shared was a deep mastery of their specific discipline, be it Indian

Kuchipudi (Shantala Shivalingappa), Martha Graham technique (Fang-Yi Sheu) or ballet (Herman Cornejo of American Ballet Theater).

Participants arrived at a rented Manhattan studio for one of four tapings from October to January. All were told they would have five seconds to perform a prepared phrase. The dancers would need to confine their movements to a space corresponding to the frame of the stationary camera. They would then see their performances played back in super slow motion and could choose to do another take.

Most were astonished by the first replay. To William Forsythe, it was alarming to see how slow motion obscured chains of muscle coordination, instead emphasizing tiny shifts in position. Karole Armitage saw her staccato movement smoothed and sanded by slow motion. Eiko and Koma, dancers who normally move at a glacial pace, decided to speed things up. And Bill T. Jones doggedly worked his way through several takes before arriving at a more basic phrase that pleased him.

"It was kind of a gruesome thing to subject a performer's ego to," Jones said after the shoot. "But ultimately I think that's what's very beautiful about it."

Whelan too availed herself of multiple takes. Like many of the dancers, she felt starkly exposed. "It was tough because I never see myself dance, especially so detailed," she said.

In the end, like her peers, she had to give up the hunt for the perfect take. "This is capturing 1,000 instants," she said. "I don't expect all 1,000 of them to be perfect. I just hope that more than 500 are good."

Undeniably it takes a sturdy ego to allow audiences to see every tiny detail of one's dancing in super-slow motion, especially when the unedited video is to be projected on a screen five stories tall. At the same time the monumental scope of the portraits has the effect of making the dancers into godlike figures. At this scale and speed everything the dancer does has an air of the miraculous.

Yet very quickly the viewer begins to ask how the jump or the turn is done, to look for the clues that trickle through the slowed-down video. The subtleties of movement are suddenly visible: the way a muscle contracts or expands, the way a foot points or lands. For the first time aficionados can really study a break dancer's head spin, the progression of an arabesque, the flutter of an airborne foot, the opening and closing of each dancer's eyes. Even seemingly fixed qualities like weight and lightness are parsed differently.

For Michalek, however, such technical revelations are a fringe benefit. Dance enthusiasts are but a small subset of his intended audience.

"What I've always marveled at is how every human being has the ability to read a face, to read a body," he said. "And I think what the dancers' being slowed down does is to reveal all of these beautiful, subtle changes in faces and bodies. This camera allows us to read moments that pass by so quickly they don't register."

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