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How Slow Can You Go?

Huge Screens, Languid Dance Come Together in Music Center Installation

by Heather Murphy

Krumper Christopher "Lil' C" Toler is known for popping and twisting with such speed that his limbs appear to blur like the flapping wings of a hummingbird. His fans may find it startling, therefore, to watch Toler glide through his iconic poses so slowly that it's as if he is swimming through molasses.

Toler is one of the 43 dancers featured in the installation *Slow Dancing*, which arrives in Los Angeles this week. Drawing upon technology generally reserved for observing missiles, creator David Michalek has stretched five-second dance sequences into illuminating five minute videos. Every evening from Sept. 18-26, renowned dancers of myriad genres, age groups and body shapes will float at a sloth-like pace across four screens surrounding the Music Center fountain.

The installation comes west following its widely heralded debut in front of Lincoln Center in New York. "Every single night there were moments of interplay that seemed so perfect that you would want to save them," said Michalek over lunch last week. At any given time, each screen features a different dancer. Thus, one might watch William Forsythe bend as Judith Jamison turns and hip-hop master Gabriel "Kwikstep" Dionisio kicks. The artists resemble marionettes "slow dancing" together across a sea of black.

Michalek, who is married to Wendy Whelen, a principal dancer in the New York City Ballet, believes that dance is an under-appreciated art form. "You hear the National Endowment for the Arts say only 8% of the people in the U.S. will ever see a live dance performance," he lamented. Drawing upon extensive experience creating interactive installations and portraits, the artist



David Michalek employed technology normally used to monitor ballistic missiles to capture dancers' movement. In *Slow Dancing*, his exhibit this week at the Music Center, five-second sequences are stretched out over five minutes and projected on large video screens. Photo by David Michalek.

from Huntington Beach hopes to spread the word that dance is, as he put it, "alive and well."

Looking for Technology

When Michalek embarked on *Slow Dancing*, he said he was looking for a way to capture the "essence of dance" more fully than what was possible through a photograph or a real-time video. He tested his early ideas on his wife, recording her flitting around, using a high speed camera "marketed to golfers trying to examine their swing." Despite the poor resolution, when he played the stretched-out images, he knew he was on to something.

Finding the technology to achieve the desired effect proved a formidable challenge. Film was too expensive and lacked the ability to "view the results instantaneously so we could correct them and begin this process of mutually sculpting the event in time." The only digital devices that were fast enough were those used to monitor ballistic missiles and car crashes. However, they lacked the resolution to properly capture the pirouette of a ballerina.

After six months of searching, Michalek found what he needed: a high-definition camera capable of processing 1,000 frames per second. Armed with the ultra-rapid apparatus, dancers' five-second sequences maintained a graceful flow over five minutes.

In the slow mirror of his high-tech camera, sinewy muscles and stunning turns were gloriously magnified, as were miscalculations, beads of sweat and ripples of cellulite.

"The thing I had always imagined would be true was truer than I had imagined," Michalek said. The dancers, he added, "were much more irritated than I even thought they would be at seeing imperfections and astonished and shocked and disturbed, but also equally thrilled so long as they had an opportunity to do it again."

Beat the Camera

Some performers attempted to defy the technology.

"Bill Forsythe came in and his initial impulse was to try to beat the camera," Michalek recalled. As he entered the recording studio, the former director of the Frankfurt Ballet told Michalek, "I'm going to move so quickly that it's not going to look slow." Of course, his sequence appeared as excruciatingly languid as every other one.

Stretched out to such a degree, chains of motion begin a peculiar process of disintegration. When Carol Armitage, director of the contemporary ballet company Armitage Gone! Dance recorded her sequence, she was going for

"raw physicality, she wanted to see her muscles jiggle," Michalek said. But the camera erased the swing of flesh.

Rena Williams, director of dance presentations for the Music Center, was an early fan of the project. At a critical moment in its development, she extended an offer to co-commission the installation. "While nothing can compare to seeing these artists live on any stage," she said, "it's a heightened sense of connection with the dancers."

Unlike a performance on a Music Center stage, not only is the show free, it is possible to see artists who would probably never work together, moving side by side.

"Krumping started right here and one of the things I am absolutely looking forward to is seeing [all forms of dance] set on the same platform," said Williams. "Desmond Richardson, who is a God to many when it comes to ballet and contemporary movement, is right next to Christopher Toler, who is a God in his own right. That validates absolutely everything."

Slow Dancing is Sept. 18-26, 6 p.m.-12 a.m., on the plaza of the Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave, (213) 972-0711 or musiccenter.org/dance.html. The event is free and no tickets are required.

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