

# Slo-mo replay

**A new installation honors the body as mechanism.**

By *Gia Kourlas*

Photographer David Michalek wants viewers to focus—to basically slow it down. His speciality is portraiture and, fittingly, he's intrigued by the notion of “just how to get people to look a little longer at other people.” His latest experiment won't give viewers much of a choice.

As part of Lincoln Center Festival 2007, Slow Dancing (irritatingly, one of the only dance-related events this year) is an outdoor installation of video portraits that will hang on three five-story screens on the facade of the New York State Theater. For it, Michalek focused his lens on dozens of dancers and choreographers who performed approximately five seconds of material in a 12' x 12' space. Michalek, who shot the performers using a high-speed, high-definition camera (recording 1,000 frames per second), stretched each segment to about ten minutes' worth of dancing. The results, strangely haunting and full of muscular detail, are like underwater paintings. Participants, who range in age from 13 to 90, include Trisha Brown, Glen Rumsey (as his drag alter ego Shasta Cola), William Forsythe, Benny Ninja, Fang-Yi Sheu, Janie Taylor and Wendy Whelan, who is also Michalek's wife.

“To see a leg work—how one muscle kicks in as another relaxes is kind of amazing,” Michalek says. “It draws attention to the body as an extraordinary mechanism. And on another level, things do take on metaphorical significance, like hair.” In her video portrait, Taylor, an NYCB principal, wears her waist-long blond mane loose; as it swings and ripples, the luxuriousness of it is somehow dizzying. “All it *is* is hair,” Michalek says, laughing, “but it becomes so stately and magisterial. We had a group of children watching a few weeks ago, and they said, ‘Her hair looks like an animal!’ So sweet.”

For each shoot, Michalek requested that dancers bring three movement phrases with a rough beginning, middle and end. “I noticed in some of my early experiments that the sections that had some narrative aspect were very satisfying,” he explains. “It didn't need to be extremely clear—just so the viewer could sense a growth pattern. Then, we would watch the sequences together, and I was able to put in my two cents from a pictorial standpoint. It could be how I thought something might be improved in terms of lighting.”



PUT THE MOVES ON Janie Taylor, Alexei Ratmansky and Fang-Yi Sheu, from top, grace Michalek's outdoor installation.  
Photo: David Michalek



Photo: David Michalek

Generally, that period of crafting took about three hours per subject.

Holley Farmer, a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, performs an excerpt from *Loose Time*—a staggeringly difficult solo full of hops, leg extensions and twists of the torso that travels along a diagonal. “Slow Dancing reveals what you think is invisible,” she says. “It was like, Oh! This is where I breathe and blink. Or I was laughing to myself and didn’t realize it. There was a sense of possibility in terms of getting the phrase, which was normally seven or eight seconds, into five seconds, and I was kind of amused by that feeling of, This is impossible. I look like I’m enjoying myself. It just had emotional context to it that I didn’t expect.”

Part of Michalek’s attraction to slow motion is just that: “What it’s not doing is inventing something that isn’t there, but revealing something that is,” he says. “Because we live in a certain time zone, we miss it.”

*Slow Dancing* also represents more than a reinvented portrait—Michalek was intrigued by the idea of creating an alternative to a static photograph. But his real fantasy has nothing to do with presenting the installation at another arts complex: “What I really dream about is showing it in a mining town in Kentucky or bringing it to a village in Vietnam. I love to travel with Wendy during *Nutcracker* season. She takes on these little gigs, and when I first started spending time with her, I said, ‘You really go to these bizarre little towns with regional ballet. What’s in it for you?’ And she said, ‘When I was growing up in Kentucky, those dancers who toured gave me the opportunity to see something that changed my life.’ ”



Photo: David Michalek

Consequently, when Michalek accompanies Whelan, he relishes theaters like a dinky auditorium in Ohio, where the dressing room is a trailer. “I love to watch people’s faces. They all sit up! You don’t have to know what the technique is or who Balanchine was. All you need to do is be a human being in an environment where you have the opportunity to see it.”

*Slow Dancing is at the New York State Theater Tue 10–Jul 29*