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DANCE

Dance to the Slowing of Time

By ROBERT GRESKOVIC
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New York

Late-night strollers on the plaza of Lincoln Center this month will find the porch of the New York State Theater, regular home to both New York City Ballet and New York City Opera, hung with three gauzy screens 50-feet high. From about 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. each night, through July 29, the white expanses will hold projected, gently moving images of individual dancers. Think a gigantic altarpiece triptych. Or Broadway billboards. Or the pediment decoration on the Parthenon. Or all three at once, captured by an all-seeing lens.



Matthew Wakem

Isabelle Guérin in David Michalek's "Slow Dancing."

The creation of David Michalek, a one-time still-camera portrait photographer who now prefers to call himself a "portrait artist," the presentation is called "Slow Dancing." It could just have easily been called "Slow Dancers," as its images evolve through their approximately 10-minute durations. Mr. Michalek's method involved shooting five-second etudes created by his dancing subjects with a 1,000-frame-per-second, high-definition, high-speed camera, thus stretching five seconds of performing into 600 seconds of reproduced activity.

Mr. Michalek, who is 40 years old and has other theatrical collaborations to his credit, including two with avant-garde director Peter Sellars, maintains an abiding interest in dance. (He is married to Wendy Whelan, a New York City Ballet principal dancer.) His 43 "Slow Dancing" subjects, including Ms. Whelan, come from an array of dance backgrounds -- from the formal, theatrical and traditional to the social, ritual and recreational. Their ages range from 14 to 90.

Computer programming will randomly determine the sequence of projections each night, so one four-hour display will not necessarily duplicate any other from night to night. Because of the variety of dance forms included, it's unlikely that any single viewer, however familiar with dance nowadays, will recognize all the performers. To take the project's full measure, it might be ideal to have no preconceptions whatsoever of the dancers on view, and to take at face value what Mr. Michalek's

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camera shows of them at this scale and at this pace.

More than half of these slowed-up dancers are already fairly well known to me as I watch them materialize at the center of their screens. In fact, I've found them in the real time and space of contemporary dance theater to be a mixed lot, to put it politely, as far as true artistic stature goes. In "Slow Dancing," however, they become oddly, eerily equal. If Andy Warhol could suggest with some confidence that everybody's famous "for 15 minutes," Mr. Michalek's work proposes, authoritatively, that all dancers can be equally formidable for 10 "slow" minutes.



Matthew Wakem

American Ballet Theatre's
Herman Cornejo.

In some cases, dancers of extraordinary gifts, such as American Ballet Theatre's Herman Cornejo, look intermittently less than their near-perfect selves. For all the visual impact imparted by the stark, black background provided by the 12-by-12-foot filming space of Mr. Michalek's studio, Mr. Cornejo, dressed in skin-tone trunks, at times seems blatantly "off." When almost ferociously pointing his powerful, bare feet as they stretch and spring him into the heavy air of determined flight, the scrupulous dancer looks as if his feet sickle, or curve inward, in a way that any ballet teacher would frown upon.

Elsewhere, however, the 46-year-old, Paris Opera-trained and now-retired ballerina Isabelle Guérin, in her ivory-colored lingerie-like shift, beats the devil of slowness. As the dark-haired and dark-eyed woman works through moves as pronounced as those of Mr. Cornejo, she manages to maintain the exquisite outward flow or "line" that remains central to ballet dancing's clarity.



Matthew Wakem

One-time muse of George
Balanchine, Allegra Kent.

Some of the improvisation-like "studies" arranged by these dancers even rise above the realm of sheer visual splendor and muscular radiance and become something still more resonant. Nearly 70-year-old Allegra Kent, one-time muse of George Balanchine, is shown in a translucent, floor-length, loose-fitting dress with pointed, slit sleeves, all in whisper-light sea green. As she looks out with lightly piercing blue eyes, she revolves with a mesmerizing impetus that flows through the length of her liquidly light arms and continues into her artfully opened fingers. In the process, Ms. Kent uses her 10-minute presentation to bring to mind the protective metamorphosis of Daphne, fleeing the advances of Apollo by turning into a laurel tree.

Even viewers unfamiliar with the performers' names will find innumerable variations and distinctions from one dancer to another. Witty Gabriel "Kwikstep" Dionisio, a hip-hop dancer and choreographer, spends his 10 minutes onscreen balancing and rotating on his head. Intense, tattooed Jeremy Wade, who describes himself as a "swimmer-turned-dancer/choreographer," keeps his back to the camera the whole time, never turning around.

Inexplicably, only one of the ballerinas is on pointe; all the others are barelegged and barefoot. The

one exception is Dana Caspersen, an unexceptional dancer who labors in ungainly looking pointe-shoes and who is connected by marriage and profession to William Forsythe and his German-based dance company.

Viewers who might like to have a way of identifying the dancers they see should know that there are two unassuming racks of programs under the overhang of the theater's porch giving the names, photos and backgrounds of each of the participants on the screens.

Mr. Michalek is taking his display on the road. In September, when it's installed at Los Angeles's Music Center, the project's initial commissioner, "Slow Dancing" will involve four screens surrounding a fountain. I suspect that any number of dancers who aren't now part of Mr. Michalek's sampler will crave their 10-minutes of large-scale exposure and hope to become part of some future array. Even when the merciless eye of his camera captures imperfections, it does so indelibly and manages to dramatize dance and dancing as no merely still image ever could.

Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.

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