

David Michalek
Slow Dancing
Summerhall, Edinburgh Festival

By Iain Gale

It is a triptych. Three figures in three twice life-size frames, set alongside each other with the two 'wings', left and right, angled in to envelop the viewer. Seen from below the figures rise up, towering over us. On the left screen, a woman in a bright clinging robe, who brings to mind so many painted saints, extends her hand toward the centre screen where a female figure hangs in mid-air, arms outstretched as if crucified. On screen right, a male figure slowly bends his legs in preparation for a jump with all the force of a coiled spring. It is, for a moment, as if you are bearing witness to some miracle: a painted triptych come to life.

As I continue to look, the woman in the centre with outstretched arms is now descending, angel-like to touch the earth as the male on the right begins to rise with every infinitesimal fiber of his sculpted legs seemingly activated in the ascent. The saint-like woman in the clinging robe has now turned away as if to shun the events unfolding beside her. And so it goes.

This is *Slow Dancing*, one of the most extraordinary works to be shown at this year's Edinburgh Festival and all the more remarkable for the fact that it was not there as part of any official or fringe programme, but as one of the first installations at a new and quite independent art institute. It is the work of American artist David Michalek who sits beside me as I view just a fraction of his masterwork's astonishing two and a half hour run.

Slow Dancing made its debut at New York's Lincoln Centre in July 2007 and has since been exhibited at seventeen venues including the Venice Biennale, Paris Opera Bastille, and last July in London's Trafalgar Square. What is instantly clear is that this is not simply a piece of dance, but rather refreshingly, crosses the boundaries of a variety of artistic disciplines. While a dance critic might naturally view it through the context of dance, as a visual arts critic, I do so through the lens of art history: the dramatic sculptural narratives of Bernini, the pronounced chiaroscuro of Caravaggio, and, of course, the contemporary video artist Bill Viola, whose own slow motion portraiture seems a cousin to this one. Most essentially, this is a work about human beings both as they are in themselves (and as seen with level of rawness and detail that is sometimes even shocking) and in potential (these images seem to constantly metaphorize themselves as few others can or do). Like myself, viewers will, no doubt, experience this as a work about time and they will revel in not only the contrast between the extreme slowness of this work and their experience of it in real time, but also in the work's strange capacity to make one lose the sense of time altogether. Throughout all of this, the work seems to

bring on both a passive and even mesmeric state, as well as an intensely active and engaged one. I have never seen or experienced anything quite like it and it is no exaggeration to describe the entire experience as deeply moving. You will never forget this work.

To create *Slow Dancing*, Michalek filmed 55 dancers with a special camera that slowed down the video speed by 100 times. He had been searching for the technology for some time, he tells me, but eventually happened upon an engineering firm that was developing a HD, high-speed camera for the US military. At first he was treated with suspicion but when the engineers discovered what he was trying to do he was given permission to use the camera.

As he explains this to me, my mind is diverted by what's happening on the central screen. This particular dance sequence features a duet in which two nude dancers, one male, one female, are joined only at the mouth, in an open mouthed kiss. I imagine that to see it on stage would be stunning, but seen here and slowed down to a glacial pace, it acquires added element of sculptural presence and mystical intensity. As I continue to watch, it becomes clear that Michalek's work has a firm grounding in art history, as the classical soft key lighting of the Baroque wraps around these two figures into darkness. In fact there is much here which echoes the art of the late Renaissance, including the artist's own development. That this is a form of portraiture is also implicit. Not least in the fact that Michalek himself started out as a photographer of people. He tells me that he was an English Literature student at UCLA when he found himself a job with the famous fashion and celebrity photographer, Herb Ritts, working as a janitor, and which, in turn, led to his eventually becoming a studio assistant.

Michalek's work is a fine example of how high art feeds of popular culture. Just as Andy Warhol's art was born of his experiences as an advertising illustrator, so it is with Michalek's beginnings as a commercial portrait artist. But that he found photography at all was something of a happy accident. "I didn't grow up in an environment that overtly encouraged me to pursue a profession in the arts," he tells me. "I grew up in a certain kind of middle-class America where I didn't know any professional artists growing up and so that never seemed a distinct possibility for me. Because I was a good student, my high-school councilors encouraged me to set my sites on Law School. So I chose an English Literature major as a precursor to that plan." But by his third year in college, Michalek was reevaluating that strategy as his interest in picture taking began to grow. "Herb showed a real interest in my work and was encouraging me to take it seriously." And so he did, spending most of his free time building his skills and his portfolio. By his senior year, with raw talent, hard work, and some luck, Michalek scored his first serious campaign—for Calvin Klein. This was a turning point for Michalek and it gave him the confidence to continue pursuing commercial photography after graduation. "Herb really helped me to break into the business. He was great mentor in every way, both by the model of his professional work ethic, as well as in the ways in which he coached me and

really helped to shape what I was doing. He was always encouraging me to find my personal style and let it bloom, to trust my own instincts, and to follow in the direction of the things that I naturally loved and was attracted to.” And then, by happy coincidence, Michalek met opera director, Peter Sellars, who was teaching a course the last quarter of Michalek’s senior year. It would be another fortuitous and important meeting that would shift the direction of his creative life. He was 21.

Looking back up at the screens now I see they are changed. On the left is Michalek’s own wife, prima ballerina Wendy Whelan with the New York City Ballet, on the right a bald, black woman in flowing yellow satin dress and in the centre, a highly muscled Bill T. Jones. What is remarkable is the way in which they seem to be responding to each other. Extraordinary because whenever the screening starts, Michalek’s custom-built playback system reprograms itself and randomizes the sequences. He tells me, “Each of those combinations we see on screen are pure chance. And I never ceased to be amazed at the powerful connections that result from that fact.”

If Ritts was an important first influence, it was Peter Sellars who was the more profound one. As Michalek puts it: “That first day in class with Peter I knew he was a remarkable human being. But as the course continued, my estimation of him grew and eventually I realized that I was in the presence of one of our great living artists. I told Peter that I was taking pictures and that I had plans to continue the pursuit after graduation. He asked to see some work and so one day after class, I showed him a portfolio, which, even then, had some pretty serious professional work in it—mostly fashion and glamour. And I remember him flipping through the pages without so much as a comment. Then, he closed the book and handed it back to me and said, ‘David, you are so much better than this.’ It was terribly disturbing for me at the time.” I look up, conscious of the surrealism of what he is saying and watch, on screen, his wife’s body elongate to an almost impossible shape. The story continues, “...Then two months after graduation, Peter called me and asked me to work with him on the video-art component of his production of Messiaen’s *Saint François d'Assise* for the Salzburg Festival. Over the course of several months, I assisted with the photography and also played the role of the young Saint Francis on video. Eventually I would go to Salzburg to see the production and looking around that enormous theater at the constellation of 70-some odd monitors featuring all those shared moments between Peter and I—it really knocked me out. It began to occur to me that maybe Peter was right—maybe fashion and glamour and celebrity photography was not my best cup of tea. Not that there is anything wrong with any of that. But maybe it was not the most correct vehicle for bringing out the range and depth of my own innate gifts.”

In 1999 Michalek finally left commercial photography: “I just quit. I had enough money in the bank for five years of reasonable living expenses and I just decided to start attempting to realize all the creative projects I’d been dreaming about.” His first show revolved around a chance meeting with a woman living with severe and debilitating

mental illness who gave him a manuscript of her life story and whose text-covered apartment he subsequently recreated with her for an exhibition at the Kitchen in New York City. Further pieces followed, notably a project called, *14 Stations*, which features formally homeless men and women enacting scenes inspired by the Stations of the Cross. That work, which had a prominent solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, has also traveled to a variety of other venues including Yale University, where Michalek is now a guest lecturer in the Divinity School Graduate program on Art and Religion.

And then he had the inspiration for *Slow Dancing*. “I had this dream of creating a portraiture that moved at the pace of the passing clouds. Images that could exist on the edge of what we think of as still photography and cinema.” I am mesmerized again. Addicted to watching these dancers, just as the crowds were when the show was first exhibited at Lincoln Centre and as they have been in the seventeen cities subsequent to that premier.

Addictive, religious, ecstatic, *Slow Dancing* is also unquestionably sexual. And in this it mirrors the high Baroque art which lies at its roots—an art in which the ecstasy of the saints is so often explicitly erotic in expression. Bernini’s St Teresa in Santa Maria Della Vittoria in Rome in particular comes to mind. Religious yes, but implicitly non-specific, Michalek’s extraordinary, ineluctable comment on the human condition is one of the most memorable artworks I have ever seen. Edinburgh, as one of the key cultural capitals of the post-war world, is an obvious and appropriate venue for this work. But there is no doubt in my mind as to where its next stop should be. For surely its spiritual home and its ultimate destination must be St Peter’s Square in Rome.