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Life's Dramas in Slow Motion

Film Series Shows Emotional Portraits in 10 Stretched-Out Seconds at a Time

By PIA CATTON

Night after night at Lincoln Center Festival, which kicks off Tuesday and runs through Aug. 14, audiences will settle in for performances that last an hour or so, sometimes two. But when crowds gather outside the David H. Koch Theater to watch "Portraits in Dramatic Time," the duration will be a matter of the viewer's choice—and perception.



Mark Stephen Kornbluth

Patti LuPone during the filming of a scene in 'Portraits in Dramatic Time.'

This series of 40 art films created by artist David Michalek is a free, public installation that will be shown nightly from 8:45 p.m. to 11:45 p.m. until July 31. Viewers can watch as many, or as few as they like, but each film depicts a dramatic scene shot in just 10 seconds and played back in hyper-slow motion, extending the length to about seven minutes. The scenes vary from solos by famous actors—such as Alan Rickman portraying an angry businessman—to ensemble moments, such as almost a dozen actors partying in a honky-tonk bar. But no matter how many people are in the shot, the slowness of the film reveals the gradual progression and in-between moments of developing emotions.

"What I'm trying to do is create something that exists between portraiture, still photography, cinema and theater," said Mr. Michalek. "It's all of those things—and none of those things."

"Portraits in Dramatic Time" is the artist's follow-up to "Slow Dancing," which was presented at the 2007 Lincoln Center Festival. That project was also a series of more than 40 films, but each captured about 10 seconds of dance rather than drama. When played back over about 10 minutes, the extreme slowness allowed the viewer to witness details of movement—such as muscles, facial expressions, gravitational pull—that would be otherwise impossible to see.

Nigel Redden, director of Lincoln Center Festival, brought Mr. Michalek back in the same way that the festival develops relationships with performing artists of over many years. "'Slow Dancing' was mesmerizing," he said. "I feel that if someone is creating a great work of art, we want to encourage them to create more."

For Mr. Michalek, the transition from working with dancers to



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William H. Macy in another scene from the film.

actors raised a challenge: "Some actors become famous on a level that is unknown in the dance world. I didn't want that fame to get in the way of people watching."

Though he did invite famous folks—including Holly Hunter, Patti LuPone, and William H. Macy—he chose them for their ability to deliver specific acting techniques. He was less interested in celebrities destined to be the next face of cosmetics mega-brands. "I wanted to make sure the actor was an actor-artist," he said.

For each of the scenes, Mr. Michalek discussed the concept with the participants and sketched out the basics on paper, like a storyboard. Actress Lili Taylor came in with an idea: "She wanted to develop a scene where the experience of surprise or shock could create a bridge between two otherwise disparate emotions," said Mr. Michalek.

Together they developed a solo scene in which a grieving woman feels she's visited by the ghost of a loved one. The emotions register from sadness to shock to peace—within just 10 seconds.

Actor William Mapother is in two scenes, one of which was inspired by a near accident that a friend related to him. "A boy jumped into the street while his mother was distracted by his baby sister," he said. "As cars approached, the mother scrambled to pull the boy back onto the sidewalk. She succeeded, but then she fell to the ground and was unable to speak for several minutes."

How do they cram all that into 10 seconds? "By focusing on the eight minutes of playback rather than the 10 seconds of performance," Mr. Mapother. "What action and movement in silent, extreme slow-motion will engage an audience? We viewed it as a short film, with a beginning, middle and end—with suspense."

Though "Portraits" is similar to "Slow Dancing" in that a high-speed digital camera (the Phantom Flex was used most recently) captures images at several thousand frames per second, the presentation will be different. "Slow Dancing" was displayed so three films were shown side-by-side simultaneously. "Portraits in Dramatic Time" will be shown one at a time on a 85-by-45-foot screen on the facade of the Koch Theater.

"With 'Slow Dancing,' the films didn't compete with each other," said Mr. Redden. "We're now looking at theater and emotion. If your eyes leave the screen, you lose the evolution of the emotion."

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