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DANCE REVIEW

Expanding 'The Rite of Spring' by Paring It Down

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If there is something to write home about in the dance world, it is the startlingly imaginative work of the Chinese-born choreographer Shen Wei.

To say his view of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" is unlike any other is foolhardy. Yet it is hard to recall anyone else who has responded to the music with such striking, stripped-to-the-bone abstraction as Mr. Shen has this week at the American Dance Festival. This is imagery and conceptualism with a difference.

Mr. Shen has yet to choreograph the second half of his "Rite," but his company, Shen Wei Dance Arts, presented the premiere of "The Rite of Spring (Part I)," commissioned by the festival, and a United States premiere, "Folding," on Monday night. The audience in the Page Auditorium of Duke University seemed momentarily stunned. A silence was followed by a prolonged ovation.

Just as it seemed that Mr. Shen, who is also a painter, was headed for his own brand of surrealism last year, with works like "Near the Terrace" and "Behind Resonance," he has struck out in completely new directions.

There is no hint of Stravinsky's scenario in this first half of "Rite," which Mr. Shen says he will complete at his own pace. His vision is painterly, mathematical and idiosyncratic. Like a black-and-white film, the piece is robbed of varied colors. The stage is smudged with white, a backgammonlike board with traces of triangles. Twelve chalk-faced dancers in gray or black walk, then accelerate in individual trajectories and individualize their movements, sometimes in solos.

Mr. Shen has used Stravinsky's two-piano version, recorded by Fazil Say, rather than the orchestral score. When the expected pounding beat occurs, it is muted, although sometimes the dancers are too close to the beat.

Nonetheless, the visual and emotional impact is overwhelming. There is no literal aspect to the visual design, but the white and gray combine to create a cold if not desolate place, with fine lighting by David Ferri.

In addition to the changing spatial composition of the dancers, there is their original use of movement: compressing the torso in a tilt, erupting into very sharp turns and spirals or, by contrast, skating along the floor and rolling on the back, Chinese folk style. In this eclecticism, movement becomes pure; this "Rite " dazzles with its amazing objectivism, its reach beyond ordinary meaning.

"Folding" ends with red-skirted dancers in conical hats ascending invisible steps: a human mandala. Tibetan Buddhist chants and music by John Tavener accompany this meditative and witty piece about life's journeys.

Dancers in red scoot along; dancers in black seem to grow out of one body. Mr. Shen performs an extraordinary torso-rotating solo against a backdrop of a Chinese painting. "Folding" refers to the folded drapes of the costumes.

New York has yet to see this special company.