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DANCE REVIEW

Shen Wei evening shimmers with variety

Using light, shadows, HD video, paints and moving bodies, Shen Wei creates a hybrid of dance, visual art and sound in a performance at Seattle's Meany Hall.

By Michael Upchurch
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Dance review

Choreography: Shen Wei.

Video and animation design: Shen Wei.

Costumes and lighting: Shen Wei (with collaborators).

The Chinese-born, New York-based choreographer has a hands-on role in almost every aspect of "Limited States," Shen Wei Dance Arts' new show that had its West Coast premiere on Thursday. The only key elements he delegates to others are the hypnotic score (mostly by Daniel Burke) and the actual dancing (transcendently performed by his troupe).

That may explain the extraordinary unity and drive of the piece, despite its disparate elements.

Using light, shadows, HD video, paints and moving bodies, Shen Wei creates a hybrid of dance, visual art and sound in which no single element dominates the other. Dancers in the flesh and dancers on video move in intricate call-and-response through much of the piece. Some of the performers even drop out of action occasionally to adjust the lighting or the video projections.

The dancers' moves are a kind of human calligraphy: a nonstop articulation of limbs and torso that flows, slices, ripples and curves. There's nothing dramatically grand or airborne about the action. Indeed, the dancers are often rooted to one spot or restricted to a small amount of space. But within those constraints, they summon a seemingly infinite variety.

The piece begins strikingly with Sarah Lisette Chiesa, on video, embarking on a puzzle-limbed solo, increasingly agitated, high above the stage. Meanwhile, the live dance troupe amasses below her, sporadically echoing her actions until she abandons them, casually "walking off" into thin air.

From there, rigid forms (a martial lineup of bodies, a truncated staircase) are contrasted with fluid, supple motion (dancers draping themselves like shawls over that staircase, for instance). One couple engages in slipknot-smooth partnering (Cecily Campbell and Austin Selden — beautifully matched) while elsewhere stiff-limbed or repetitive group activities go on simultaneously: a game of catch or an oddball variation on Twister with strictly enforced gender roles.

"Limited States" has a three-part, archlike structure, and the keystone of that arch is a solo created for Sara Procopio, a founding member of the company. Moving in and around a white square on the floor that turns out to be canvas, Procopio, with gymnastic folds and rolls, unexpectedly becomes a living paintbrush. It's a star moment, the pivotal point of the evening, and it's followed by a choral finale that teems with memorable images and configurations.

Plainly Shen Wei is a sculptor of body moves, and just as plainly he likes his bodies to be visible in every detail. His costumes (created with Austin Scarlett) are as close to nudity as costumes can be. The suppleness, subtlety and strength of every dancer thus exposed is impressive, none more so than Evan Copeland who's not just rubber-limbed but seemingly rubber-torsoed. In the penultimate passage of the piece, he moves as if he has a whole other creature inside him, slipping around just beneath his skin.

"Limited States" may be almost purely abstract, but it's invigoratingly organic in the way it focuses, veers, intensifies and subsides.

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