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'Map' leads Shen to Eisenhower

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Photo by Briana Blasko A member of the Shen Wei Dance Arts company performs.

Shen Wei's life story is full of high drama and paradoxical turns, but the dances he makes often have a quality of calm serenity. The Chinese-born choreographer, who has made his career in the United States and has the unique distinction of being the Kennedy Center's only artist in residence, will bring his company to the Eisenhower Theater Thursday and Friday.

Since Mr. Shen was here in spring, his group has been seen by literally millions of people — on stage and on YouTube — when it opened the summer Olympic Games ceremonies in Beijing. The choreographer created a riveting work with his dancers slithering across the stage, all the while making swooping brush strokes as they moved, filling the glowing white stage with the look of Chinese writing.

We in Washington had a preview of that approach when his dancers created beautiful swirling brush strokes on the floor of Kennedy Center's Concert Hall.

Mr. Shen's world is filled with a bevy of artistic riches. He began life as a painter and his work is suffused with striking picturesque touches. He is interested in architecture and it shows in his use of stage space; he has sought out all kinds of musical approaches from Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" to Tibetan chants.

Adding extraordinary richness to the world he brings on stage is his own background of growing up with a father who performed in Chinese opera — as he did as a youth — and the travels he has made across Asia, to Tibet and Cambodia.

One piece on the program this week is called "Map." Another is called "Re-."

"It's like the English word," Mr. Shen explains. "Like re-turn, re-play, re-think, re-birth, re-born. It has to do with a visit to Tibet and my experience there. I made a piece inspired by that visit. I stayed a month by myself, stayed in the temples, talked to people in the streets. It was really refreshing."

Returning to the subject of the Olympic ceremonies, Mr. Shen says, "No one on our team had experienced anything like this — the biggest event in the world must be the Olympics' opening ceremony. In China, we have this saying that a bird is little but it has everything: it has stomach, a heart — everything like a big animal. Bird is small but it has everything it needs. Which means when we make [a] big production or small it's the same. Only difference - you've got more people."