

Dance Review:

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Curious mind of Shen Wei

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DURHAM –

There is a curiously significant moment in the middle of Shen Wei's signature work, "Folding," when a dancer covered in black leotard from head to toe -- covering even his hands, feet, face and head -- enters at the back of the stage and does a series of slow-motion somersaults to the other side, never to be seen again.

This comes about the time a 10-foot-tall woman with an impossibly long black skirt (hiding a man underneath) is lurching in the other direction; when dancers in blood-red skirts and bulbous headdresses are gliding silently toward a mammoth Chinese watercolor of a koi pond; when Buddhist monks are chanting intensely and a synthesized carillon is chiming in the background.



This is when you realize you're inside Shen Wei's head, in a dreamscape of signs and symbols, glimpses and shadows. So compelling is his vision -- and so magnetic is the presence of his dancers -- you can't look away. You're sucked into the dream, frozen for 30 minutes, wondering.

Sunday's opening night performance marked the return of ADF's current golden child, Shen Wei Dance Arts. With many ties to ADF, Shen Wei launched the company at the festival in 2000 and soon became the toast of the dance world: glowing reviews, festival invitations and now a five-year residency at the Kennedy Center. The Chinese-born Shen Wei also has been asked to help coordinate artistic elements of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

Sunday's program was a perfect balance, with Shen Wei's "Rite of Spring" on the first half and "Folding" on the other -- perfect because of the completeness of the dance vocabulary in the first and the completeness of the visual vocabulary in the second. Both works have been seen here; "Rite" had its premiere at ADF. But this particular pairing showed off all facets of Shen Wei's artistic vision: the choreography, the painting, the costume design, the whole conceptual package.

A dance critic recently wrote that while visually inventive, Shen Wei lacks an astute musical sensibility. This seems exactly wrong in light of Sunday's program. The dreamlike mood of "Folding" flows palpably from its melding of real Buddhist chants with judiciously chosen excerpts of music by British composer John Tavener; Kung Chi-shing did the editing. And "astute" is exactly the word to describe Shen Wei's musical choices for his "Rite of Spring": He puts aside Stravinsky's familiar orchestral work and opts for an unusual four-hand piano version by Turkish virtuoso Fazil Say.

That not-obvious decision helps Shen Wei distinguish his "Rite." He also jettisons the typical program -- primitive society, human sacrifice, etc. -- for a purely abstract treatment. It is an exuberant kind of abstractionism, not freighted with an ounce of post-modern irony. It might not be too much to say that Shen Wei's "Rite" reclaims the ambitious, hopeful modern spirit bubbling at the time Stravinsky and Nijinsky created their 1913 original -- that is, unembarrassed to think and aspire to more.