

The ADF Gets Underway with Shen Wei



By Kate Dobbs Ariail
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Photo by David Wainer

The American Dance Festival opened its 28th season at Duke University on Thursday, June 9 to a full house in Reynolds Theater for a world premiere by the inimitable Shen Wei. Pilobolus and Paul Taylor, with their reassuring similarity from year to year, may be the biggest ticket sellers for ADF, but since he formed his company, Shen Wei Dance Arts at ADF in 2000, Shen Wei has become a draw for people who want to be taken by surprise.

An artist of wide-ranging imagination, Shen Wei is equally well-versed in Chinese and Western forms. His expertise as a modern dancer, choreographer and painter is underpinned by his long study of Chinese opera. Previous works have hinted at the importance of this influence, especially *Near the Terrace* with its ritualistic format, slow motion and attenuated gestures. With this new work, *Second Visit to the Empress*, we are given a revised version of a Chinese opera – supplemented with modern dance.

As is always the case, this Shen Wei performance is as visual as it is kinetic. He makes of the stage a sculpted space, and fills it with carefully placed forms and colors that glow under Jennifer Tipton's lighting design. The backdrops and the scrims are beautiful, as are the strange carapace-like forms that glimmer from a stepped riser. The costuming of the singers is glorious – but the dancers' appearance is muted, with only featureless gray pajamas for them.

The four singers and thirteen musicians (playing seventeen different instruments), all from China, are some of the most accomplished artists working there in traditional opera today. They were ravishing. I doubt ten people in the audience knew much about Chinese opera – I certainly didn't – but the entire crowd seemed to find it gloriously beautiful. I felt I could have listened to it for hours, mesmerized, yet in a state of heightened awareness. The voice of Zhang Jing was especially marvelous. She pulled out notes so long that they were like silk filaments being drawn from a cocoon – shimmering, sticky, and seemingly endless.

Not much action occurs in a traditional Chinese opera, and Shen Wei increased the amount of movement on the stage with his dancers. Their appearance and their motions were in extreme contrast to those of the singers, but the dancers did not seem out of place so much as superfluous. Mostly the dances seemed like a chorus or a rhythm section – a back-up group for the main focus. Many of their movements were wonderful, but they didn't compel the attention that the singers did. Their main function seemed to be to increase or clarify the energies of the simple story line, and in that the dance element worked very well.

Second Visit to the Empress is not a dance, nor could it be called dance theater. But who cares? It was another marvelous event in the on-going drama of Shen Wei Dance Arts, and it existed thanks to ADF. How will they surprise us next year?

Note: *Second Visit to the Empress* will be repeated tonight (6/11) – see our calendar for details.