

A painter's gift shows in Shen Wei's dance

Rachel Howard, Special to The Chronicle

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About two years ago, it seemed every dance presenter in the country was clamoring to book Shen Wei Dance Arts. The company's Bay Area debut Saturday at Cal Performances proved why. Trained in Chinese opera and modern dance, and as a painter, a choreographer and a calligrapher, the 36-year-old Shen doesn't fuse these backgrounds so much as use them as tools to realize engrossing new dreamscapes.



His New York company, founded in 2000, has drawn raves from sold-out crowds and reservations from some critics who find Shen's work too "painterly" and insufficiently kinesthetic. That issue was moot to the Zellerbach Hall audience held rapt by his startling vision of "The Rite of Spring."

At a time when "Rites" are rampant -- [Alonzo King](#) unveiled his last year and [Angelin Preljocaj](#)'s stands firm in recent memory -- Shen has liberated his understanding of the propulsive score from all preconceptions. He feels no need to put a twist on the scenario of the maiden chosen for sacrifice. He feels no need for a maiden. His 11 dancers wore body paint that turned their skin a bloodless alabaster, and played out an impersonal, almost elemental drama atop a geometric canvas.

Shen uses the two-piano reduction of Stravinsky's score, played with spine-tingling physicality by Fazil Say (at one point he plucks the piano's strings) and heard here recorded. The result is less bombastic than full orchestra but equally fearsome. The dancers shuffled with arms held rigidly by the sides in the focused manner of Chinese opera performers, charging the negative space like ionized atoms. At the first clashing chords, one dove into a somersault. The movements that followed were obsessed with the rotation of the joints, shoulders and hips torquing so that energy passed through like the crack of a whip. The dancers executed them with stark straight faces and incredible anatomical precision.

Shen's gift for visual tension is unflagging. A limb-by-limb collapse became more desperate. When the full company began walking tight circles, each in their individual orbit, you thought the stage might explode from centrifugal force.

From nightmarish laws of physics to spiritual transcendence, the closing piece, "Folding" (created in 2000 for China's [Guangdong Modern Dance Company](#), of which Shen was a founding member), presented a community of conical-headed, crimson-draped seekers. Here even more so than in "Rite," Shen's talent as a visual artist shone in the otherworldly costumes and the set: a backdrop re-creating an 18th century Chinese watercolor of fish and white stage wings lending the ambience of hushed marble halls. [David Ferri's](#) lighting made shadows ripple like water.

Like [Nederlands Dans Theater's](#) former director, [Jiri Kylian](#), Shen plays with scale and pacing to surreal effect. As Tibetan chanting gave way to the chime-punctuated music of [John Tavener](#), a black-swaddled figure twice as tall as the others entered. At another climax, the dancers' shuffling, which had once echoed the chant's rhythms, slowed beyond measure. The change felt monumentally important.

Wei, lithe and slight of build, danced a deliberate, yearning solo. The group's final rise -- against a black stage cloth, the means of their ascendance hidden -- drew gasps of wonder and contemplation. Wei is an artist who uses every imaginative resource, heedless of categorization, in service to his own vision. His work should be seen in the Bay Area again soon.