

# The Herald-Sun

## Take A Trip With Shen Wei

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Shen Wei took the American Dance Festival audience with him on a journey Thursday night when his company, Shen Wei Dance Arts, performed his entire trilogy, "Re- (I,II,III)," for the first time. Armchair travelers at the Durham Performing Arts Center saw Tibet, Cambodia and China through this choreographer's eyes, ears and imagination. This gifted choreographer invites viewers into the unique world he creates onstage. That world has the power to wake us up and elicit a "wow" response as though we've just seen some strange, wonderful sight from a train window.

"Part II" actually made me say "Wow!" Shen bases this dance on his experiences in the ancient temple complex of Cambodia's Angkor Wat. No doubt, this U.S. premiere looks different than the world premiere in 2007 by Les Grands Ballets de Montreal because Shen's dancers know his way of working and he can do more with them. In a video on his company's Website, Shen speaks of what he discovered at Angkor Wat. "Everything just looked like magic," he says. In this dance, he creates a magical atmosphere through use of innovative movements, the sound score and large projections of his photographs of temples, jungle and huge banyan trees.



We hear his recordings of birds and even the persistent voice of a child trying to hawk trinkets for a dollar. We also hear folk music performed at the temples by local musicians who have lost limbs and sight as a result of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. Then, there's John Tavener's achingly beautiful music, "Tears of the Angel" that evokes a sense of loss and transcendence.

Shen's imaginative, transformative movements figure largely in the spell he weaves. One look at a bare-chested, female dancer, who resembles an alabaster statue as she reclines on her side and leans her torso so far back she looks headless and I thought to myself, "We're ba-a-a-ck" to the surreal world of Shen Wei. Although different and particular to this dance, it had the same quality as the startlingly original and strange look of "Near the Terrace," the first dance he created and premiered at ADF in 2000.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. This image marks the last section of this dance that begins with dancers under a "moon" in which a raven perched on a rock formation appears – a scene that looks somewhat balletic. That impression quickly fades as dancers link together in such conventional ways as holding onto legs and feet and pressing against each other to form a continually shifting, sinuous line. A vast green jungle soon appears – a photograph taken by Shen and projected to cover the entire back stage wall. This jungle almost swallows and obscures a bisque-colored temple. The scene seems alive, no doubt, due to lighting designer Jennifer Tipton's use of dappled light that even washes over the audience and red carpeted aisles, further drawing the audience into this world. Dancers' natural, unstudied movements bring birds to mind though not in a literal sense. The backdrop changes to a photographic image of the long, gnarled roots of a huge banyan tree that over the ages has become one with the temple and the dominant one, crushing the roof and clawing into the walls. Dancers slowly morph into banyan roots themselves – a remarkable transformation that begins with that one alabaster pose and ends with all dancers twisted and turned in such a way that they become a landscape of roots. Several crooked, raised elbows add to this impression.

"Re- (Part I)" creates a sense of peace and spirituality – the qualities Shen sought and found when he went to Tibet to get away from modern life, including a demanding dance-making schedule. Grounded in breath, dancers' movements evoke a meditative state calm and centered with a sense of greater awareness. This dance looks different in some ways from past performances that date back to the ADF premiere in 2006 and in January during the company's two-week residency at Duke University. The dance seems less intimate in the much larger Durham Performing Arts Center than it did in the smaller Reynolds Theatre at Duke. And, people seated in the orchestra section of DPAC could not see much of the mandala Shen created with bits of blue and white paper on the stage floor. So, the significance of seeing dancers destroy that design has less impact. In Tibet, mandalas made of sand are purposefully destroyed to signify both the impermanence of life and also the way all living things return to the elements and, in a way, never die. But the addition this time of a large projection of photographed clouds does help create a sense of the passage of time as light changes.

Unlike the first two parts, the third dance is more abstract, the set sparse with projected images suggesting a landscape reflected in water and a modern cityscape. Shen draws from his journey on China's ancient Silk Road and from his experiences in Beijing last year when he helped choreograph the Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony. The dance opens with groups of dancers striding purposefully up and down – a movement that seems pedestrian and brings to mind everyday life. This walking also connotes marching and suggests a military-dominated culture. As the music becomes louder, disjointed and chaotic, one dancer within the group seems trapped and seeks a way out. As though seeking balance amidst all the rapid changes of modern China, pairs of dancers lean on each other but ultimately collapse. Groups of dancers balance for a bit but also fall.

In the next section, dancers wear shorts, shirts and white knee socks and move frenetically to a throbbing sound and atonal, electric violin. Then, they walk tentatively about as though blind.

This dance ends with what seems like a reconnection with ancient roots as groups of dancers form horses and riders. Two dancers brace against each other's buttocks to make a horse while the rider sits where the butts meet. In one case, two riders sit astride a single horse. For some reason these figures reminded me of the life-size terra cotta warriors and horses (but no warriors riding horses) unearthed at Xian, China – the ancient city where China's Silk Road begins. The dance ends with the sound of a train on rails. The journey continues. And, performances do, too, through tonight.