

Gentle Waves and Lighting Bolts

Shen Wei Dance Arts easily fills the Armory



Photo by: Stephanie Berger

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Shen Wei Dance Arts put on an intimate show at the Park Avenue Armory; very few people handle scale as well as Shen Wei. Turn half an acre of abstract floor painting into a checkerboard with clear personal spaces? Sure. Make a solo in an even bigger space feel like a tiny dream? OK. Bring audience onto a tradeshow-sized floor that allows each a very personal viewing? Not a problem.

The large, evocative image of an old European train station that greets incoming audience is the first clever and functional spatial choice of the show. Rather than blast us with the enormity of the space, Shen Wei uses this portal image to welcome us on a journey, with romance and mystery cleanly implied.

The formal, silent opening of *Rite of Spring* fuels this feeling of embarking on a ritual, sacred journey. Dancers file in to surround the large square floor painting, three to a side. One by one, each steps into the brushstrokes in a deliberate but apparently random walk, as if the logic of their meandering is quite clear. As the last dancer arrives — and displaces another who may have occupied the wrong space — all

commence subtle, pulsing pliés with the first, soft piano notes of Stravinsky's music. All of these — hints of ritual, subtle musicality, strange logic and possible humor — are parts of Shen Wei's way. This piece itself, though beautiful, lulled a few to drowsiness with ebbing light and a Philip Glass-like evolution of movement, i.e. small circles of change that overlap and expand over time. Occasional bursts of virtuosity or strangely weighted movement — falling, twisting torsos over feet planted on heels not toes — keep us guessing, but the overall mood is quiet despite all the movement. Subtle syncs between music and movement work well throughout.

Folding is magical from start to finish. It is a butoh-inspired visit to an alien world that ends in a dream. Fast-floating creatures with elongated heads and long red dresses enter from opposite ends to meet in the middle and float away from each other again, as if on important business. Double-bodied creatures in black dresses move far more slowly and variously give birth/mate/separate/divide. All are close to human but also beyond, readable and unreadable. Eerie Tibetan Buddhist chants add to the otherworldly feel, and music by John Tavenor, where deep brassy horn blorts transform to smooth deep cello notes, gives depth and tension as well. The red and black creatures come in slow and unanticipated waves, coexisting but never mixing. And Shen Wei dances a solo that is made a dream by magic tricks with light and space, as he emerges from a large group of red dresses to take a new spot of light and they glacially disappear and float upward, with the help of Jennifer Tipton lighting and Armory drill hall space.

And *Undivided Divided* is an excellent title for the newly commissioned piece that follows a second intermission and wraps up the two-and-a-half hour experience with loose ends. Anticipation is palpable as the audience enters the vast and newly unfamiliar space that is laid out in a grid that seems to extend to infinity. Energy in the air spreads contagiously, probably due to the seeping realization that effectively nude performers are lying on their backs in the lit squares of a checkerboard. Pathways separate each square and give the audience inches-away access to every performer. The dark squares of the checkerboard become video screens of vital signs, either heartbeat or ultrasound monitors. And then the human "pieces" switch sides, jumping to the dark squares and beginning to move big and bold, gradually adding bits of paint to themselves and their squares. Scale and structure change in the space beyond the checkerboard, where performers have domain over large plexi cubes in various configurations and there is a long thin landing strip with two or three performers.

Nudity onstage is always powerful and seems to set off layers of neurons in our tiny animal brains, both connecting us undivided as humans and dividing us into clothed and unclothed, performing and watching. One fascinating aspect is that 95 percent of the time the experience is very neutral and natural — 'oh, people without clothes, what's the big deal after all?' — and then, zap: erotic shockwaves come from one performer — or one audience member, begging all sorts of questions. Who else, if anyone, feels these waves? Are they one-way or roundtrip? Am I powerful or powerless? And then the lights come down and come back up, and people are free to linger or flee.