

Review: Shen Wei Dance Arts @ MASS MoCA, 10/26/13

By Tresca Weinstein



NORTH ADAMS, Mass. – Since its premiere 100 years ago, choreographers from Martha Graham to Bill T. Jones have turned to Igor Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring” for inspiration—so many that it’s practically become a rite of passage for dance-makers. Also on that list is the Chinese-born Shen Wei, whose company performed at MASS MoCA Saturday evening. (A repeat performance is set for Sunday afternoon.)

Visually, Shen Wei’s “Rite of Spring” might more accurately be called “Rite of Winter.” The dancers, dressed in black, gray and cool blue, move on a marbled floor that recalls snow swirling on pavement. Each step and gesture is crisp and clear, marked by a deliberation that feels almost ritualistic. Shen Wei was lead choreographer for the awe-inspiring opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and he brings that precision and perfection to bear here.

Yet there is also lushness in the curving arms, acrobatic floorwork and rotating isolations of hips and shoulders. A painter and designer, Shen Wei creates ever-changing compositions on the stage; one sequence juxtaposes a trio full of whirling turns with a

quartet that takes place almost entirely on the floor, and a solo made up of angular bending and folding. You don’t know where to look—so many interesting things are happening at once.

Each nuance and shift in Stravinsky’s score—Shen Wei uses a four-hand piano version performed by Fazil Say—elicits a choreographic response. The end result is music and dance that feels indivisible, despite the century that separates them.

Also on the program, Shen Wei’s “Collective Measures” is an exploration of the push and pull between isolation and unity. A translucent scrim separates the 15 dancers into two groups, then lifts away to leave them occupying the same space without touching. Each is in his or her own world—some moving pensively, others flying through fluid phrases, a few simply walking across the stage. But gradually they grow closer together, eventually becoming completely entangled in tender duets.

The piece, set to an ambient score by Daniel Burke, integrates animation, video projections of the dancers, and costumes by Austin Scarlett of “Project Runway” fame, which leave sections of the dancers’ bodies bare—a leg here, a breast there. But the most indelible images are of pure dance, as in the final seconds of the piece, when the divisions between the dancers have melted away and they undulate in a long row, fused into one strange, beautiful creature.