

SHEN WEI GIVES NEW VOICE TO MODERN DANCE

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This was great modern dance.

Something called Shen Wei Dance Arts came, danced and conquered Friday night at the Jackie Gleason Theater. It was a stunning spectacle.

The company, based in New York and founded by Shen Wei in 2001 after a series of workshops in the American Dance Festival, came with two of his works. First was *The Rite of Spring*, made in 2001-2003 and set to a piano reduction of Stravinsky's score. *Folding*, - which Shen originally made for China's Guandong Modern Dance Company, closed the program and had the audience in a frenzy at the long, choreographed curtain call.

Shen's *Rite of Spring* sheds the work's cultural baggage and pares down music and movement to an exquisitely simple fusion.

There is no hint of the original libretto, and there is also neither an alternate scenario such as the one Paul Taylor brilliantly imposed on this score in 1980, or the sort of reflection of the music's rhythmic brutality that many choreographers have sought since Nijinsky's transgressive 1913 original ballet and Maurice Béjart's landmark 1959 reimagining. Shen offers something else altogether, a panorama of individual lives in lonely trajectories, an improbably moving communal feeling by the end.

Folding, set to an eerie tape mixture of cavernous Buddhist chants and bells with an unsettling string score by John Tavener, had a pendulum's implacable motion downstage in full view of the audience as the company's dozen dancers wove in and out of surprising formations. Wearing long red skirts, their bodies powdered white and their heads topped by pointed skullcaps, they moved with virtuosity and created a mysterious ritual.

Folding was danced against a vast 18th century Chinese watercolor, but by the last scene the backdrop suddenly disappeared as darkness enveloped the stage and all but one of the dancers turned their backs to climb invisible steps. Their penumbral ascension to an unknown future was a devastating, disturbing image.

Taken together, the double bill at Jackie Gleason signaled the arrival of a major new voice in modern dance. In *The Rite of Spring*, the dancers entered one by one in silence, their soft glide of a walk carrying echoes of traditional Chinese opera.

But there was nothing traditional about Shen's choreography.

The meticulous isolation of, say, the shrug of a shoulder or the tilt of a torso could turn into an endearing suggestion of 1990s break dancing. Robotic pirouettes led to unsettling moments of tension, and the way the dancers' humanity came through all the mathematical precision would have made the late Alwin Nikolais smile with recognition.

The painterly virtues of the groupings could break apart amid kinetic frenzy and suggest an aleatory, downright improvisational atmosphere. Yet the diagonal symmetries of the ensembles told of tightly controlled groupings, of a real choreographer at work. East and West meet in Shen's dances, his references to Chinese opera and vintage American modern dance blurring into a pioneering new world vision.

And that glide that introduced the dancers, a sort of forward pas de bourrée that turned out to be a recurring motif in both *The Rite of Spring* and *Folding*, suggested sublime serenity under the surface of the dancers' skimming the floor and scurrying about. There was stillness at the heart of both dances, and there was patience.

Above all, on first impression there was something new at work here. That something may be real genius. We need to see more of Shen Wei and his dancers.