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From China by Way of New York, a Cultural Revelation

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Shen Wei Dance Arts' "Folding" was presented as part of the Kennedy Center's Festival of China.

Shen Wei's works are suffused with serenity but watching them is exhilarating. Each of the two pieces performed by Shen Wei Dance Arts Friday and Saturday at the Kennedy Center was layered in recurring and expanding visual motifs, with the whole composition blossoming in a deliberate, musically paced and exquisitely restrained way. The interplay of elements -- movement, music, decor -- was infinitely absorbing. You couldn't break away if you tried.

Even after the last bows, the packed Eisenhower Theater audience couldn't bring itself to leave. Nearly the entire house stayed for Friday's post-performance discussion, in which Shen -- one of modern dance's most important new voices -- and two of his dancers spoke about the difficulty of dancing in the heavy trailing skirts that made the melting movement in "Folding" look so sumptuous. And Shen discussed the differences in creating the evening's two works. He made his bracingly abstract "The Rite of Spring," which opened the program, two years ago when he was well ensconced in New York's impersonal rush. "Folding" was made in China in 2000; Shen, who had left China five years before, had returned home briefly to create the work for the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, of which he had been a founding member.

"In China," Shen told the audience, "I am much more emotional."

"Folding" is not a teary-eyed piece -- any comment it has to make is tightly curbed -- but it is infused with something sad, a dusting of melancholy, or perhaps resignation. Certainly it invokes bygone beauty; the backdrop is a huge reproduction of an iconic 18th-century Chinese painting of a large, gracefully arced fish juxtaposed with two tiny bug-eyed ones, striking in its contemporary-seeming minimalism.

Against the painting's muted colors, the dancers drift on in their yards-long skirts, red at first, though some return in black ones. They are naked to the waist (or disguised to look like they are), and tall, flesh-colored caps elongate their skulls, bringing to mind both bald-headed monks and an alien race. As the fabric gathers and billows, so do the dancers' bodies, seemingly boneless. Their slow pace is punctuated by periods of sudden collapse so complete you wonder where their legs have gone. The black-skirted dancers enter in pairs, one lifting the other, the two of them arching and intertwining in a kind of ritualized kama sutra. There is a section of eerie-sounding Tibetan Buddhist chant, but mostly the accompaniment is a meditative chiming score by John Tavener.

"Folding" is filled with drama in quiet but pungent ways, as when the dancers in red curl their spines around and gaze raptly at something overhead -- is it writing in the stars? A summons from the mother ship? The lure of fame and fortune? Almost imperceptibly, the backdrop is replaced by a velvety-black void; as bells sound the dancers float toward it and slowly climb a nearly invisible set of wide stairs, their skirts finally unfolding behind them to their full length. It is a singularly stirring sight, the performers looking toweringly tall and suspended in blackness. But there is one who can't join them; it is Shen, who had turned from his study of the sky too late to follow. He stumbles and lies sprawled on the stage floor, watching, helpless, as the others ascend the Elysian heights.

Emotional? You bet. The work suggests that Shen is torn between two worlds. He left Guangdong, and left China, after he had been denied permission to tour. He'd become a political risk after befriending some Taiwanese dancers; he and his choreography were banned from overseas travel in the early 1990s.

He left these constraints behind when he came to New York on a dance scholarship 10 years ago, but he also left behind a land he loved and a culture with deep artistic roots. Shen had studied opera and painting from a young age at a boarding school in a mountainous region of Hunan province, where, he said in an earlier interview, studying nature had as profound an effect on him as the study of the arts. Watching clouds float and leaves twirl off the trees influenced his notion of human movement.

"The Rite of Spring" contains the tranquility of natural impulses -- there are spiraling movements and languid passages that bring to mind lazy breezes -- but it also has a sense of twitchy alertness and nervousness. The work is accompanied by a recording of Fazil Say's four-hand piano version of the Stravinsky score by the same name. The stage floor is black, etched in crisscrossing white lines, and the dancers are similarly dressed in dark T-shirts and trousers slashed with white lines.

A disarming casualness goes along with the choreographic rigor: The dancers in their paint-streaked outfits and socks look like college students who have dug deep into the dirty-laundry pile, but they move with a virtuosic crispness and attentiveness to the musical accent. Gone is any notion of a sacrificial virgin or primitive ritual; this is a rhythmic exploration with a sharply defined movement vocabulary, the body distended or buckled in surprising ways.

You hear the music anew. It doesn't sound like a banging, punishing ordeal -- as it can in an orchestral arrangement -- but like a fascinating mix of squiggles and wisps and cresting momentum. It's witty and intricate and unusual, and the dancing -- movement unlike any other, bodies working in entirely new ways -- was its perfect match. The experience brought to mind George Balanchine's masterpiece "The Four Temperaments," in which the innovator broke ballet technique apart and put it back together in startling and incomparably musical ways. Shen's choreography was like Stravinsky's music inked in space.

There has been much discussion and worry in the dance world about where the new important choreography will come from. Shen Wei delivers an answer: From the other side of the world, from an ancient arts culture of meditative minimalism. From an artist whose life embodies the best of China -- intensive early instruction in beauty, harmony and natural wonders -- and the worst -- state-inflicted punishment. And from a man who has handled the bruising clash of his culture and ours with composure and a powerful renewal of purpose.