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Dance: Calmness and chaos

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Performers as statues came to life, stepping mere inches. No matter whether toppling to the floor or bumping into something beside themselves, their movement spoke volumes with its gorgeous visual imagery.



Shen's work opened with his Rite of Spring and closed with Folding, a dance portraying rites of passage. Both communicated their messages as if created by a Chinese calligrapher making slow, clear brush strokes.

Born in Hunan, Shen studied Chinese opera from the age of nine, as well as calligraphy and visual art. His father was a Chinese opera performer, so he understood early on that careful articulation and detailed movement are paramount. After mastering acrobatics and theatre, he became one of the first members of the Guangdong Modern Dance Company and received a scholarship to study at the Nikolais/Louis Dance Lab — an influential training ground for American modern dancers — moving to New York City in 1995 and starting Shen Wei Dance Arts in 2000.

He did not have it easy. His early years in New York included rough living conditions, a heart problem and subsequent surgery. But he stayed with his dream and received commissions from the American Dance Festival.

The Rite of Spring was one of that festival's projects and it uncovers Shen's methodical way of thinking. The dancers start by standing in carefully appointed positions atop a giant, grey canvas.

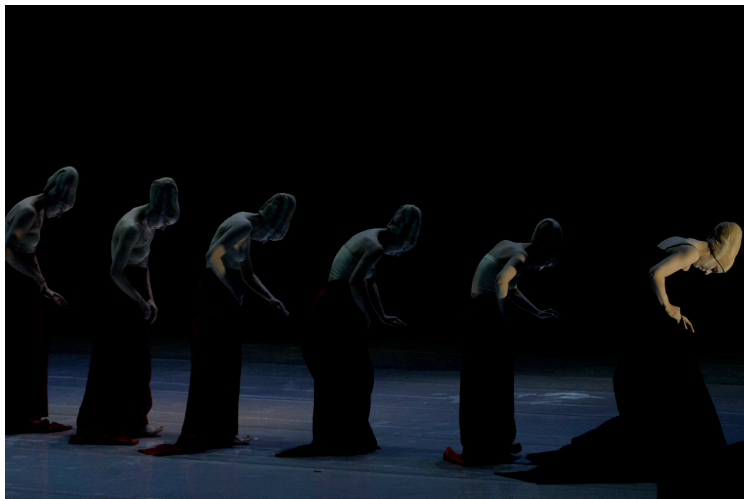
They inch forward, turn slightly, then gracefully step several feet away into the next square. The first few moves are done in silence, until the performers gain momentum and begin energetically crossing the stage. They wear grey costumes streaked with white; their powdered faces suggest dust or stone.

The cast has adopted a movement lexicon not seen in any other dance company.

Stravinsky's score, written in 1912, gathers energy and with it the dancers spiral and spin. No matter how fast they spin they maintain exquisite balance. Shen has passed on Chinese opera moves such as minuscule footsteps quickly covering space, so that whenever dancers do skim across the stage, leap or sit down, they remain statuesque.

The Rite of Spring combines a formal, upright stance with fluid arms and torsos so that the dancers' bodies remain compact while their limbs appear almost liquid. Just when the walking or running takes over, they spiral upward and unfurl like a kite's tail in the wind.

In previous pieces Shen has incorporated paint, fabric and other visual elements. Connect Transfer involves performers wearing floor-length fabric, bell-shaped gloves on their arms. As the performers move, the paint-dipped gloves create patterns on the stage. The Rite of Spring offers glimpses of those same weighted arms, as if choreography from previous dances has slipped into the dancers' bloodstream.



The careful steps throughout Rite of Spring suggest a formal, organised mapping, but Folding feels more human. In it dancers wear red robes wrapped and tied at the waist, skin-coloured tops and large bulbous head-dresses. John Tavener's music, edited by Kung Chi Shing, incorporates Tibetan Buddhist chanting and, in the beginning, dancers come and go suggesting monks attending morning prayers. Instead of remaining in this purely meditative motion, however, interactions begin to tell a story.

A figure in black appears, carried high above the proceedings like a goddess. She engages in a ritual with another figure under her billowing black robes and, when they finish, she holds on to him, hanging backwards, her world turned upside down. A new figure in black tumbles across the stage as if created from the couple's union, and as dancers shift and form different pairings, the effect becomes a slow-motion mix of visual art, dance and cinema.

One dancer lies on her back upstage, twirling her feet in the air. This playfulness develops into something more serious as a group congregates and one of the dancers — Shen — steps out.