

The Washington Times

Shen Wei Puts the Art in Dance

Sunday, October 23, 2005 | Andrew P. Napolitano



The Festival of China has brought a lot of dance-as-entertainment to the Kennedy Center this month. Finally, this weekend, we encountered the real thing when Shen Wei Dance Arts offered dance as art -- and as an exploration of profound beauty and spiritual grace.

In the program's two works, "The Rite of Spring" and "Folding" -- and also in "Near the Terrace" seen here four years ago -- Shen Wei's singular imagination and brilliant stagecraft brings us to strange and wondrous places.

In each of the two works his company danced Friday and Saturday evening at the Eisenhower Theater he created a complete world, each with its own unique movement, timing and sense of space.

For "The Rite of Spring" Mr. Shen, who is a visual artist as well, painted the work's floor with geometric grey, black and white lines.

The work begins in silence as the dancers enter one by one with small quick steps, toes slightly upturned, bodies quite rigid; they take places around the stage, each facing in a different direction. That quick uninflected locomotion is a leitmotif throughout the piece and its simplicity foreshadows the primitive quality of Igor Stravinsky's score. The music used is the Turkish pianist Fazil Say's sprightly recording of Mr. Stravinsky's four-hand version of "Rite."

After the music begins there is a cascade of focused, intent movement. Occasionally it is small, spare and rhythmic. At other times it bursts into explosions of flying limbs, bodies corkscrewing in the air or vaulting to the ground, legs swirling. Mr. Shen has a mesmerizing, darting solo. Another dancer slumps in angles to the floor, each bent arm, jutting hip or sudden squat corresponding to the chugging beat of the music at that moment. A stage full of dancers moving individually suddenly morphs into striking unison lines or circles. Besides his imagination and depth as an artist, Mr. Shen is also a master craftsman.

Another dance, another world

In "Folding" Mr. Shen creates a dream-like space, surrounded with the sounds of music by John Tavener and Tibetan Buddhist chants, and peopled with elegant creatures swathed in elaborately folded trailing skirts (men and women alike), their bodies and faces whitened, their heads encased in elongated golden beehive structures.

The work is set against an enlargement of an 18th-century Chinese painting, spare and almost modern in its simplicity, with a fish and a couple of small tadpoles splashed across its watery surface.

Into this fantasy world attenuated figures enter, swirl, separate and coalesce, forming striking, painterly shapes, their brilliant red skirts making fascinating patterns as they glide to the back of the stage.

Interspersed with the serenity of these dancers -- the men bare-chested, the women with skin-colored bodices -- come even slower-moving double-creatures enveloped in stark black with the man holding a woman high above him. Their robes obscure the complicated partnering, making them seem like two-headed figures. Sometimes only the woman's head rises from the back folds, at others she is seen bent backwards to the floor.

At the end the dancers appear to rise in the air at the back of the stage while a lone figure moves in the foreground.

Together these two works made for an enthralling program, greeted by the audience with cheers of pleasure that continued through the beautiful stylized bows that sustained the mood of otherworldly beauty.

Shen Wei is one of the great artists of our time. May we see him here soon again and often.