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## Shen Wei's Olympian Feet: Soaring to Artistic Heights

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By Bill O'Leary—The Washington Post

The world knows Shen Wei now. That's a remarkable thing for a Chinese-born modern-dance choreographer who, until he was tapped to create part of the Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremonies, was known only to connoisseurs of the small, rarefied field of contemporary dance.

But here's what is even better: What billions of TV viewers saw in the first seven minutes of the Olympic spectacle in August -- dancers rolling and twisting across a white scroll, creating designs of human filigree -- is no different from what the audience at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater saw last night from his company, Shen Wei Dance Arts. There was that same melting softness in the body, and dancers streaming through space as fluidly as ink on a brush. In other words, the understated Shen didn't go commercial for the

Olympics. In a stadium and on a proscenium stage, his work manages to be both deeply traditional and thrillingly new.

The company performed reworked versions of two pieces, "Re-" and "Map." It's rare for a choreographer to return to old material, but Shen is a perfectionist's perfectionist, and his revisions have resulted in a pair of triumphs. "Re-," originally made in 2006, is the result of Shen's travels to Tibet a few years ago. It is danced in alternating stretches of silence and Tibetan chants, and begins with an unusual solo, performed by Cecily Campbell, to the haunting sounds of native horns and percussion. Most dancers impress us with their upright strength, their balance, their ability to defy gravity, but Campbell is a hair's breadth away from collapse, her body like jelly as she sinks close to the stage and rises, oozing away and re-forming over and over.

That aspect of heaviness, of being rooted to the ground, defines this piece, and it's amazing what a freeing, soaring feeling the piece has nonetheless. I've never seen anyone create such visual interest with dancing so close to the floor. Shen has brought the massiveness of the Tibetan steppe, and the punched-in-the-gut shortness of breath one must feel at those altitudes, onto the stage in simple, fascinating ways. Before the piece begins, the dancers array zillions of bits of paper into a multicolored mandala on the stage -- you'll have to be seated high up to appreciate the Buddhist images -- and then shuffle and slide through this carefully arranged mosaic with a nonchalance that made someone near me gasp. Soon the design is obliterated, and the dancers, in loose purple tops and black trousers, are covered in the stuff, and it is far more beautiful this way, like snowflakes or falling cherry blossoms. It has been returned to the earth, as the dancing has been, getting low in so many ways, and creating such a high.

"Map" is wonderfully whimsical -- I didn't know Shen could be so funny. It's also one of his most physically powerful works. The music is Steve Reich's "Desert Music," also whimsical, with gushing vocals, bright whistles and a steady, ticktock pulse. Shen's first iteration was nearly an hour long; here it's been cut to 40 minutes of sheer gorgeousness. The theme is circularity; how many different ways the body can rotate, swivel, swirl and wind. The variations on this theme are endlessly inventive, but what's especially striking is the comfy, gooey looseness of the movement. You want to be up there noodling around with the 14 dancers, dressed all in gray, but each in a different color of sock. The backdrop is Shen's creation (as are the costumes in both works): bright, smeary scribbles on a chalkboard.

At times the ensemble has the snappy force of a Bob Fosse lineup (almost); at other times the dancers look like they're doing a gentle bump-and-grind in pj's. At the end, they're all in a tight group, walking around and around in quick, short steps, reversing directions every few beats. And as Reich gets faster and quieter and more echoing, those socks are pounding the stage like a pointillist rainbow, spinning into darkness and taking your heart with them.