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In a Sculpture Garden, Beauty as Strangeness

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Photo by Mark Sadan

The opening image of "Behind Resonance," a new dance piece by Shen Wei, a 32-year-old Chinese choreographer who is attracting increasing attention, is striking.

Chalk-white figures in draped gray velvet become slowly visible under a lifting gray-blue mist. The piece has a strangeness in the best sense, radiating an originality that is both dislocating and stimulating to the eye.

The stage suggests a haunting sculpture garden. As David Lang's equally affecting music surges with multilayered and textured waves, the headless and bisected figures (body parts hidden by human limbs or drapes) enter into a remarkable flow.

Dance, theater, Chinese opera, painting and sculpture seemed channeled into this stream of unexpected images when the Purchase Dance Corps performed Shen Wei's premiere at the Performing Arts Center at Purchase College in Purchase, N.Y., on Sunday afternoon.

A dancer and choreographer who settled in the United States in 1995 after he was a founding member of the Guangdong Dance Company, China's first modern dance troupe, Mr. Shen is also a painter. The striking beauty of "Behind Resonance," created at the invitation of Carol Walker, dean of the Purchase College Conservatory of Dance, owes much to a sensibility that fuses several arts.

Mr. Shen is well versed in Surrealism but his piece reaches beyond Surrealism's concern for the subconscious. Drawing from the measured time sense of Asian theater, the atmosphere suggests something more than a dreamlike state.

The figures onstage do not change position; they evolve and are transformed into new shapes. Occasionally the pace is broken by a dancer whose rhythm and gait are different.

Yet the ruling image evokes an inevitable process as the title, "Behind Resonance," evokes an extension of an event or form. The figures are forms resonant with meaning, reacting to something that has happened earlier.

The student dancers of the Purchase Dance Corps melded superbly into the environment created by Shen Wei's own décor: a shiny floor covered by plastic and a backdrop whose grainy blue hues were ever-changing under the lighting designed by David Grill and Mr. Shen.

The white body makeup was a distancing device, especially on two topless women who tumble in, feet held up at angles, as well as on a topless woman who suggests a mermaid. Yet the 2 men and 10 women in the cast are never less than real in their encounters. The groups have a choral power, and the movement is unpredictable. It is short on leaps but never on imagination.

The program included Megan Williams's exuberant staging of Mark Morris's "Grand Duo," with the Lou Harrison score played by Daniella Strasfogel, violinist, and Mina Kim, pianist. The dancers took wonderfully to the quick-dissolving patterns and the turbulence of the final "polka."

Bettijane Sills's meticulous staging of excerpts from the Balanchine-Sousa ballet "Stars and Stripes" gave the young ballet dancers a more difficult workout with Quashone Perry, the sole man onstage, impressively attentive to style.