

The Star-Ledger

East meets West in Shen Wei's brilliantly imaginative dance trilogy

Published: Friday, July 10, 2009 by Robert Johnson

NEW YORK -- Shen Wei Dance Arts has returned to the Lincoln Center Festival, the venue that has become this contemporary dance company's de facto home since 2003. It's easy to see why Lincoln Center keeps bringing it back. *Re-*, a triptych composed of new and recent works, which opened an all too brief run at Alice Tully Hall on Thursday, is an ambitious work filled with provocative images. The choreographer's movement style, gently yielding and curvaceous, is instantly recognizable.



Shen has positioned the newest segment of the trilogy—*Re-III*, a Lincoln Center commission with music by David Lang—in the middle. Presumably that's because it's hard to top the topless nudity in *Re-II*, which concludes the evening. Joan Wadopian is the focal point, lying on her side with legs elegantly braided, her head thrown back so that her body becomes an anonymous sculpture in white powder. Wadopian's figure droops; around her, buff and flesh-toned dancers sink to the floor, as if beginning a gradual process of calcification. Two dancers join

Wadopian in a kind of frieze, and still more dancers enter in profile, including three old-timers—also virtually nude, and powdered—their loose flesh sagging. As the late Bob Hope would say, "Thanks, for the memories."

These effects are not gratuitous, however. *Re-II*, subtitled Angkor Wat, was inspired by Shen's visit to that legendary temple complex in Cambodia, and the dance's ending suggests a standoff between the timeless beauty of the monuments and the jungle that is devouring them. In *Re-I* (Tibet), a less intimate version of the dance that Shen presented at the Joyce Theater in 2006, the dancers' shuffling steps destroy a Mandala pattern laid out painstakingly on the floor.

The subject of *Re-III* (The New Silk Road) is the modernization of China, and today's encounter between East and West. Shen places these contemporary happenings in perspective, however, by framing them with his impressions of two ancient cultures, underscoring the transience of the present moment.

During *Re-III* (The New Silk Road), the dancers change from agrarian-green costumes into industrial grays and purples, and a horizon of low-lying buildings, briefly etched in light on the backdrop, is replaced by vertical skyscrapers. The dancers' movements gain speed and abruptness and, most significantly, individuals stand in isolation, their eyes closed and their shoulders lifted by sudden shocks. Later, dancers grope blindly toward one another.

Their task, it seems, is to rediscover the unity exhibited in the first part of the dance, when partners lean into one another's shoulders, supporting each other as long as possible with isometric pressure until gravity brings them down. In part one, too, individuals flail and express themselves without departing from their places in line. Daringly, a man tumbles head-over-heels and a couple clutches each other in the center of running cadres of dancers. Does this tightly knit society imprison or protect such people?

The choreographer doesn't answer this question, but the wall of dancers that coalesces at the end of *The New Silk Road*, advancing steadily toward the audience, suggests an oncoming challenge that will have to be met.