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Hot fusion: Energy results when Stravinsky meets Shen Wei

By Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent | August 20, 2004



BECKET -- There are no sacrificial virgins in Shen Wei's "The Rite of Spring," which the choreographer's company is presenting at Jacob's Pillow this week. In fact, unlike the case in numerous dance versions of the landmark Stravinsky score, there is no storyline at all.

Instead, Shen's strikingly kinetic interpretation is a vivid fusion of East and West, of Chinese opera and modern dance informed by the keen eye of a painter. It makes sense. Though Shen Wei Dance Arts is based in New York, the choreographer was raised in Hunan Province, where he was trained in Chinese opera and painting from early childhood.

What Shen has done in melding his passions, however, is startlingly original and bravely experimental, without a trace of self-indulgent excess.

With "The Rite of Spring," pure movement in austere abstraction brilliantly captures the energy of the music. Just as Fazil Say's piano four-hand adaptation of the score (heard on tape) pares the original orchestral piece down to its core essentials, so Shen's movement seems completely necessary, stripped of extras and structured to a fare-thee-well. The work unfolds atop a floor cloth of white crisscrossing lines (painted by Shen himself) that looks as faded gray and playfully ephemeral as a child's chalk drawing on an asphalt playground. When the 12 dancers enter, they spread out, moving with a quiet deliberation, as if taking their places on a game board. But the rules of this game change with every shift in the music, whether softly skittery or jaggedly propulsive. Dancers rise and fall in spiraling spins. Limbs slice and slash, often rotating almost backward from fantastically flexible hips and shoulders. Moments of solitary lyricism and breathtaking suspension contrast with sections of powerful massed momentum. It is a riveting work.

Shen's recently revised "Behind Resonance" has a similar gamelike quality, taking place on a floor pattern of geometric black and white. But this work is more surreal, more ritualistic in its reverent solemnity and slow motion. Dressed in long, stretchy dresses/skirts of velvety gray, the dancers seem to move in separate realms, gradually connecting in stark, sculptural partnerings. David Lang's droning electronic score lends the work a hypnotic quality as the dancers move from tableau to tableau.

It is lovely to watch, but the afterimage fades rather quickly -- even the three bare-chested women who inexplicably roll and contort near the work's end. Resonance is ultimately what the work lacks.