

FINANCIAL TIMES

June 17, 2013 5:16 pm

Overture/Sacre du printemps, Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam – review

By Laura Cappelle

A cure for ‘Rite’ fatigue: Shen Wei’s ‘Sacre’ is a stunningly pure realisation of Stravinsky’s score



Dutch National Ballet in Shen Wei's 'Sacre du printemps'

You'd be forgiven for suffering from *Rite of Spring* fatigue at this point in a celebration-heavy centenary year. Dutch National Ballet's is the latest in a long line of homage programmes, but mercifully it doesn't feel like one. No reconstructions or history lessons here: the mandatory reinvention of the *Rite* is paired with a wholly new piece, *Overture*, and the company simply handed the whole business over to two masters of dance geometry, David Dawson and Shen Wei.

British-born Dawson carved out his choreographic career in the Netherlands and Germany, and while he will create his first piece for the Royal Ballet in the autumn, his work is emphatically continental in feel. Post-Forsythe bodies populate the stage in *Overture*, arms overstretched, arabesques arched high, costumes neon-bright. Like a game of dominoes, the dancers' neat lines and patterns soon give way to new shapes, and the cast never stops moving, reordering itself like so many lines of code.

This quasi-digital stage world gets much of its warmth from the score, designed by Szymon Brzóska as a companion to Stravinsky. It is a wonderful piece, with abrupt transitions from metallic beats to moody, cinematic sections, but Dawson's take on solitude in the electronic age is undercut by conventionally acrobatic partnering and a saccharine afterthought of a final image.

So much has been written about *The Rite of Spring*, so many steps choreographed, that being knocked sideways by a new version is a rare occurrence. But that's what Shen Wei has accomplished: never, in my experience, has a *Rite* so fully realised Stravinsky's maverick score. Wei, who choreographed the opening ceremony at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, does away entirely with the linear narrative at the heart of Nijinsky's original ballet and most versions since, the sacrifice of a Chosen One. Instead of human tragedy, he gives us abstract dance drama in a stunningly pure expression of the music's impulsive contrasts.

This *Sacre* starts in silence, with a circle of dancers. Like a watercolour forest slowly awakening in their pastel unitards, they start shuffling, randomly following one melodic line or another. Order morphs into chaos and back, with patterns arising from nowhere; when the score grows urgent, dancers break out into small, brief solos (the elfin Erica Horwood is a standout throughout).

The movement is simple, with arms flowing into spirals and turns, but Wei is alive to every aspect of the score. With his 30 dancers, he gives us an organism weathering the unpredictable, and drawing its internal logic from it, step by step. Only the most stormy section, halfway through, sees them stand still, eyes closed, perhaps waiting for spring. "See the music, hear the dance," Balanchine is supposed to have said; Wei achieves just that.