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Shen Wei's Naked Dancers Glide Through Met Gallery: Interview



Photo by: Zoe Liu

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Bare-breasted dancers moved among the sculptures displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Charles Engelhard Court.

They fit right in. There are, after all, a lot of nude statues in the Met. Later, two dancers stripped down entirely while others sported very odd outfits with airy bottoms.

"My work is a celebration of the human body," said Shen Wei. "Why cover such beauty?"

After choreographing the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games, Shen Wei has been exploring various non-traditional spaces for dance. The new pieces were commissioned by the Met and will be performed again tonight.

We spoke in a conference room at the Park Avenue Armory, where Shen Wei is currently artist-in-residence.

Lundborg: Why did you choose the sculpture gallery?

Shen Wei: I first picked the Temple of Dendur, but as I was leaving I saw the American Wing with those gorgeous statues, the natural light streaming in, so I changed my mind.

Lundborg: Does choreography add the element of time to sculpture?

Shen Wei: The evening is called “Still Moving,” and it’s about time, space, and energy. The first part is classical, slow-motion and dream-like, as we focus on the beauty of the human form. That’s the past.

In the second half, I use electronic music to explore this moment in our digital time, and how we feel human connections in our bodies right now.



Photo by: Christopher Duggan

Body Language

Lundborg: Your dancers keep their faces expressionless. Is that a part of your philosophy?

Shen Wei: Dancers should show expression through their body movement. They’re not actors.

Facial expression always comes from your emotion, your reaction to what’s happening. But dance is a body form and uses movement as a much more subtle and abstract language.

Lundborg: What makes a Shen Wei dancer?

Shen Wei: They have to develop their minds as much as their bodies. I don’t use dancers to copy some movement -- human beings are not just puppets. A dancer has to have a really open mind, and be willing to take a risk.

Number one, though, is honesty. If you’re not truthful, you can’t even think about being an artist. If you want to inspire people, you can’t be a fake.

Feeling Chi

Lundborg: Tell me about your technique.

Shen Wei: I train people to be more sensitive about their internal organs. You can really feel your energy, your chi, your gravity. Then your movement comes from something inside, and you’re not just copying forms.

Lundborg: You’re in residence at the Park Avenue Armory. Doing just what?

Shen Wei: It’s the biggest thing I’ve done since the Olympics -- a huge production for the Drill Hall with maybe 50 dancers and other artists to debut in the fall.