

CHARLESTON CITY PAPER

Shen Wei's brainy Re-Parts is a journey worth taking

Be prepared for a long night talking about this stunning show



By Jon Santiago 06/04/2011

It's always a good sign when a performance provokes discussion. Even if the comments aren't entirely positive, even if comparing notes with friends is made tentative by the misgiving that "I don't think I'm smart enough to get what was going on." It's simple: a lively discussion proves that the work was taken seriously, found worthy of further study, not to be shrugged off.

Shen Wei Dance Arts at the Galliard is provocative in the best sense: almost too intelligent for its own good in places but ultimately a stunning tour de force when it gets out of its head and finds its soul.

The work is a travelogue of sorts told in three parts, "a choreographic journey through Tibet, Angkor Wat, and the new Silk Road." Each part is approximately 30 minutes long,

Re-Part I takes us to the windswept summits of Tibet. Even as the audience entered the auditorium and began taking their seats, dancers were already on the stage, hunkered down in silence, putting the finishing touches on an enormous floor mandala made of blue and white flecks of tissue paper.

Part I commences when a single female dancer advances to center stage and diffidently takes her place in the spotlight, as though launching a journey of discovery in which the only certainty is where she's

begun. She will re-appear, beginning each of the following pieces, as the archetypal wayfarer about to set off on a new odyssey.

Eight dancers take over from here, and traditional Tibetan chanting provides the musical background for this survey course in Tibetan Buddhist iconography. Against a projected background of wispy clouds, the dancers strut, glide, and shuffle across the face of the floor mandala, kicking up snowstorms of colored paper, tracing little arcs of gossamer movement lofted and drifting back to the ground in their wake.

The dancers create complex forms: birds in flight, trees buffeted and bent by alpine winds. It's all a little overwrought given the serenity and plain-spun beauty of the chanting that accompanies the dancer's demanding efforts. Group movements often betray off-putting individual variants—not the same degree of extension here, a slight difference in timing there. It becomes a guessing game trying to decipher whether these are unintended glitches or merely distracting affectations. Either way the overall result feels remote rather than tantalizingly exotic, chilly and cerebral rather than ethereal. The dancers carry off amazing, complex contortions and sadly, that's almost beside the point. Because a question mark punctuates the experience: has brainy ambition grabbed up all the energy here, choked the humanity out of it and left the ability to communicate sputtering for air?

The same question afflicts Part III which, with all its lockstep marching back and forth and heavy-handed music by David Lang, also feels emotionally unavailable. Shen Wei's marching hordes are so determined and united, they don't even register the odd person out who not only cannot keep pace but rather appears to suffer from paroxysms of individuality. The quirky misfits are not rendered as admirable in their own right; their jerky seizures are unlovely to watch and seem mostly to pose a danger to themselves. Here again, conceptual over-reach goose steps all over sympathy for simple humanity. At least in this piece, which has a point to make about the hive mind and conformity, it's easier to forgive the overbearing approach.

But all traces of convoluted tumult are wiped clean in the centerpiece of Shen Wei's evening: Re-Part II. The stunning power of this piece puts its bookend companions in the shade.

The curtain lifts on an Angkor Wat of the imagination: a line of 12 dancers who transform before our eyes into a series of bas-relief friezes. This hallucinatory beginning is only a hint of what is to come because here the demanding twists and unimaginable postures are informed not by frosty intellectualism but by delight, the lesser sibling of love.

More breathtaking still is a narrative that unfolds as the dancers portray the gradual return of the ancient temple to the incursive jungle. Against a stark monochrome photograph of great tree roots, a single body-painted dancer transforms her torso into a sculptural analog of a gnarled arboreal anchor: gray as old teak, breathing hard and highlighting her ribs as though to reveal the stark, living pulse of nature. That image and the others that Wei draws out of his dancer's bodies as the story evolves, make this a tour de force with the seductive power to change the way we see dance, the human body, even nature itself. This is an artist at the height of his powers reaching still further, to take his audience in a fond embrace.

This piece alone is worth the price not just of admission but of several repeat visits. And much, much discussion afterward.