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A Choreographic Breakout for 'The Rite of Spring'

LINCOLN CENTER FESTIVAL REVIEW

A Breakout For the 'Rite'

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

Poetic, impudent, beautiful and strange, the dances of Shen Wei, a Chinese-born choreographer, announce the advent of a strikingly original artist who fits into no familiar category.

It is hardly a risk to say that one of the most creative highlights of Lincoln Center Festival 2003 is the program with which Mr. Shen's new company, Shen Wei Dance Arts, triumphed to the sound of roars from a predominantly young audience Wednesday night at La Guardia Concert Hall.

Joining forces with the distinguished and equally original Turkish-born pianist Fazil Say, Mr. Shen offered a version of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" that is a jolt to all preconceptions. Stripped down to stark abstraction in black, white and gray and danced on a geometric floor painting, the piece is bereft of overt parable or scenario. Movement, music and spatial composition combine into something beyond conventional meaning: a stunning and objectivist approach to a score that has been overworked as a Modernist symbol.

There are only two more chances to see this program (tonight and tomorrow), which also features a very different piece by Mr. Shen called "Folding." Here, he is immersed in a theater of images. Mysterious figures with beehive-shaped heads float around the stage, the trains of their red or black skirts gliding behind them. They are set against a serene backdrop based on an 18th-century Chinese painting by Ba Dan San Ren. This vast canvas with its one big fish and two little fish is replaced by a black backdrop. Mr. Shen dances a hypnotically articulated solo, always fluid but totally controlled. He falls to the floor at the end while three tiers of dancers ascend concealed steps into darkness: a living mandala painting in a Buddhist temple of the imagination.

The music is, in fact, tied to this final image. Mr. Shen uses chants by Tibetan monks and "Last Sleep of the Virgin" by the contemporary British composer John Tavener, whose bent for the sacred and the mystical is well known.

That Mr. Shen is some sort of syncretic artist is

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obvious. But the influences that have shaped him are channeled into a sensibility that is his own.

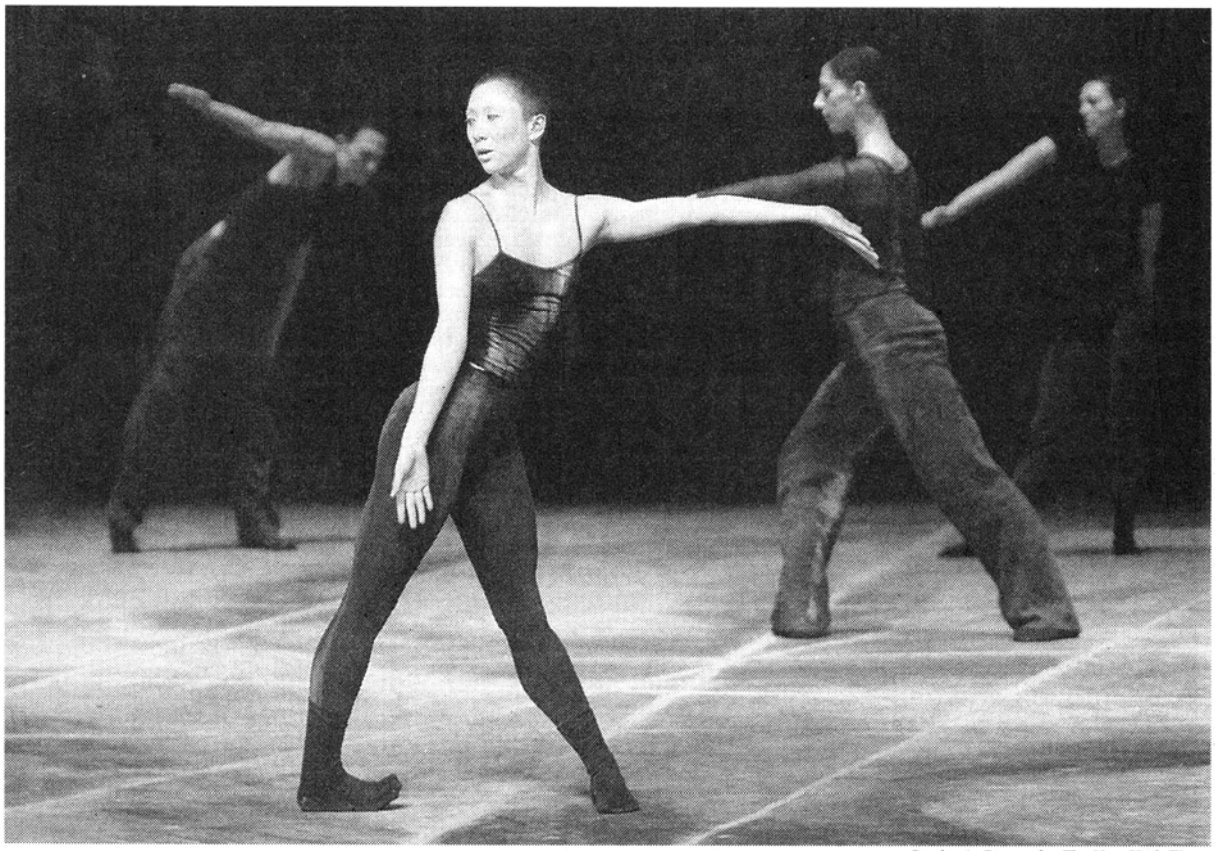
A paradox on the program tells the tale. Nothing would be simpler than to consider "The Rite of Spring" a Western-style piece and "Folding" a Chinese piece. Yet the reverse is true.

To American eyes, this "Rite" may look Western because of its score, abstraction and leotard-style costumes. Anyone familiar with the classical Chinese opera tradition in which Mr. Shen, 35, was trained in his native Hunan Province could, however, recognize the movement vocabulary and exercises from Chinese opera that he has adapted to his choreography here.

For all its Tibetan chants, "Folding" will not look Eastern to Chinese eyes. When created in 2000 for the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, China's first modern-dance troupe, Mr. Shen was very much in his Surrealist phase. "Folding" is in the style of works that Mr. Shen has created on commission recently for the American Dance Festival and the Purchase College Conservatory of Dance. Some are influenced by the Belgian Surrealist Paul Delvaux.

"The Rite of Spring" signals a new direction for the choreographer, who is also a dancer and painter. Lincoln Center Festival is presenting a revealing exhibition of a few of his paintings in the lobby of the theater (65th Street, west of 10th Avenue). An opera performer for four years in the Xiang Opera style, Mr. Shen became a dancer and choreographer in the Guangdong Modern Dance Company shortly after its inception in 1990. A portrait he painted that year is obviously realistic. In 1995 he settled in New York, and the 1998 paintings on view show the influence of Francis Bacon, a favorite painter.

In 2001 Mr. Shen formed his company and the two most recent canvases are described as action paintings. They are more calligraphic than Jackson Pollock but they were driven by the music of "The Rite of Spring." In some sense, Mr. Shen's



Stephanie Berger for The New York Times

Hou Ying, foreground, of Shen Wei Dance Arts in "The Rite of Spring" at La Guardia Concert Hall. Stripped down to stark abstraction in black, white and gray, the piece avoids overt parable or scenario.

Adapting the movement vocabulary of Chinese opera.

dance version of "Rite" is an action painting come to life.

In the performance, Mr. Say is certainly part of the action. He is seated to the left of Mr. Shen's geometric floor, a smudgy blend of gray surfaces, triangles and parallel lines. The dancers in chalk-white faces line up before the music starts and begin to scoot around. Knees bent, they accelerate into a gliding walk as Mr. Say — or perhaps his prerecorded self — begins.

One of the most exciting aspects of this "Rite" is Mr. Say's tour de force. His recording of Stravinsky's two-piano reduction of the "Rite" score is highly acclaimed, and here he shows how one pianist plays a piece for four-hands piano. His piano is a Yamaha Disklavier that combines his keyboard with the two-hand parts that he has recorded. It is also "prepared" in the John Cage sense. At one point, Mr. Say stands up and plucks the strings.

Thoroughly engaged on all fronts, he often stamps his foot on the floor and sits in near profile, his body thrust toward the dancers. The sound is very different from the usual orchestral pounding, and at the end when a flute usually signals the sacrificial virgin's death, there is a trill and a bang.

There is no victim as such onstage. Instead the 12 dancers face the audience and step slightly back, taking an audible breath.

In this direct moment, more transcendental than the image of figures ascending to heaven in "Folding," Mr. Shen says something about life and death. When breath expires, we die.

Yet he is anything but a message choreographer. This "Rite" is a response to the music. David Ferri's splendid lighting contributes to a sense of an ice-cold place. But it is an animated changing space as the dancers swivel on their backs, tumble and spiral to the floor.

The first half of the work, seen last year at the American Dance Festival, has now been completed by a second part that propels a few soloists out from the ensemble. The best section is a brilliantly choreographed passage for a trio, a quartet and a soloist, Brooke M. Broussard, who repeatedly fold their limbs and torsos into collapsible sections.

Like American modern-dance pioneers, Mr. Shen is creating his own vocabulary, and movement is very much a part of his integrated theatrical vision. In "Folding," he performs a remarkable solo, using an active torso that is both fluid and compressed. Elsewhere it is how the dancers in red skirts float around and where they go that create a poetic beauty. When men wrapped in black carry women who seem to grow out of the same body or trunk, the strangeness only adds to a sense of ever-flowing eternity in an incomprehensible cosmos.

The superb company includes Jessica Harris, Kennis Hawkins, James Healey, Alexa Kershner, Tony Orrico, Sara Procopio, Kana Sato, Vicki Skinner, Hou Ying, Jesse Zaritt and Nian-Nian Zhou.