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## Shen Wei: ravishing, achingly gorgeous

Worthy of Worship

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The single most ravishingly beautiful moment of Spoleto Festival to date occurred midway through the second of three extraordinary performances from Shen Wei Dance Arts at last night's Gaillard premiere of *Re- Parts I, II and III*. Staged against a monumental backdrop of Cambodian jungle and crumbling ruins, one of Wei's impossibly tall dancers lay on the floor, painted milk white and clad only in a skin-colored loincloth. In a spotlight pool of brilliant white light, she bent her head back and arched her torso, legs crossed, so that she appeared to be sculpted from alabaster, literally statuesque, a figure that, had Michaelangelo carved it, would rightly have been worshipped for centuries. The work, *Re- (Part II)*, unfolded almost in slow motion, evoking the dilated passage of time at Cambodia's ancient Angkor temples and drawing heavily upon the choreographer's own experiences there.

It was an achingly gorgeous stunner of a moment in an evening that was packed with such moments. The first work had Wei's dancers rushing through a mandala on the floor comprised of confetti-like particles that resembled both sand and snow, a nod to the Tibetan culture it was meant to evoke. The stuff flew upwards with their passage with an audible swoosh and clung to their bodies when they rolled through it, reminiscent of another dance piece Wei presented here in 2004, *Connect/Transfer*, in which the dancers wore slipper-like paintbrushes on their hands and feet and painted the floor of the Gaillard stage as they danced.

The overall effect couldn't have been further from that created by Corella Ballet last week, with that company's exuberantly formalist, neoclassical style filling the stage with arabesques, *grand jetés*, glissades, and *fouettés en tournant*. Where Angel and Carmen Corella gave the audience an experience to lift the heart, Shen Wei supplied a more thoughtful, impressionistic trio of works, filled with moments of dreamlike beauty.

Despite the second work's focus on Cambodia, there was also none of the classical Khmer technique that provided the foundation for Emmanuel Phuon's *Khmeropedies I* and *II* in the festival's opening weekend. Like Kneehigh at the Memminger, Wei has stepped into the festival with a work sprung from a vision absolutely unique in its originality. How he resisted the temptation to add dancing gorillas and fireworks, only he can know.