

## Shen Wei Dance Arts Brings Rite of Spring and Folding to Houston

By Adam Castañeda/ Monday, May 20 2013 at 9:00 AM



*Photo by Christy Pessagno, Dancers of Shen Wei Dance Arts perform Rite of Spring.*

### **The Setup:**

On May 18, in the Wortham Center's Brown Theater, a stage typically reserved for the artists of Houston Ballet, the Society for the Performing Arts presented Shen Wei Dance Arts and the company's riveting reinterpretation of *The Rite of Spring*.

### **The Execution:**

Shen Wei's Houston engagement came 11 days before the 100th anniversary of the infamous Paris premiere of Vaslav Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Wei's reimagining of the Igor Stravinsky

score is a decade old, but it's great to be able to see it so shortly after another major staging of the piece for comparison's sake. (I'm referring to, of course, Houston Ballet's spring engagement of Stanton Welch's version.)

Shen Wei strips the Stravinsky music of narrative theatricality and instead uses a minimalist, almost geometric sensibility to the choreography. Ten dancers take positions on opposing sides of a grid-like floor painting and then move onto it like pieces on a chess board. One by one, the dancers move into one another's space, causing them to react by readjusting their space on the grid. Then the music begins and the careful, strategic placements go haywire.

Despite the dynamism of the Stravinsky score, the movement is not dominated by it, but rather informed by it. The ensemble, which eventually swells to 14 dancers, scurries across the stage in minute steps and mini-*chassés*. When the music becomes more aggressive, the bodies hurtle to the floor and then shoot upwards in a dizzying relay of level changes. The intention of the dancers is strong, which is seen when they confront the audience in a single downstage line, their chests heaving for breath with faces of stone which underscore the power of this refashioning.

The choreography is at times flowery, harsh and disjointed at others. Much like the music, the movement takes many sharp turns. Because there is no story, there is a startling sense of ominous mystery that is exciting to behold, but what does it mean besides an attempted literal interpretation of the score? Wei's *Rite of Spring* is a math equation with many possible solutions.

*Rite of Spring* was the one half of the program that was heavily promoted in press previews, but it was the second dance, *Folding*, that held me spellbound. *Folding*, originally staged in 2000, uses Tibetan Buddhist chants to haunting effect. I've heard live Buddhist chanting in Dharamsala, but its calming effects are transfigured into more alarming sensations when paired with the bodies that glide across the stage. The dancers perform in head-to-toe white body paint and are affixed with otherworldly bulbous heads. Clad in blood red skirts, they shuffle onto the stage and off, and then move in unison in simple figure eights.

Black-skirted figures arrive in pairs, their full skirts distorting their dimensions to where it is impossible to discern where one body ends and the other begins. The pairs give the impression of occupying a single body, a folded body to be exact. The monastic movements are eerie and beautiful at the same time, their slow methodical movements suggesting sculptures brought to life. The final image is breathtaking: nine dancers ascend a staircase in the background, a single body is splayed on the floor downstage right and a lone wanderer repeatedly enters and exits the wings on the opposite side. I had the feeling that I had just witnessed a rapture of some sort.

### **The Verdict:**

Shen Wei's sparse and carefully structured *Rite of Spring* gives new meaning to Stravinsky's majestic score, but it is the hypnotizing *Folding* that caused a sensational flurry of conversation once the curtain fell and the lights came up. The dance has a pureness of movement and simplicity of design that can only be described as elegant, but its power is in its haunting images of large-skirted, ghost-white beings that are without question alien, yet, unmistakably human. *Folding* is dance that embeds itself in the audience's consciousness and stays there.