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Shen Wei's choreography shines in Costa Mesa

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Among the many dance fans watching Shen Wei's "Re- (I, I, III)" on Friday at the Orange County Performing Arts Center, the most frequently played game during the evening's two intermissions was Name That Influence.

The Chinese-born choreographer, who moved to New York in the mid '90s early in his career, seems to have absorbed all of European and American dance over the last half century: a little Alwin Nikolais here, a dash of William Forsythe there.

Wei's love of sharply defined, repeating phrases recalls Twyla Tharp. His sense of grand theatricality, especially his use of frozen tableaux against a huge musical and visual canvas, is reminiscent of the great European dance-theater masters, Pina Bausch and Maurice Béjart.

But Shen Wei's work defies easy categorization. By the end of the evening, as Jennifer Tipton's sublime lighting slowly faded on the dance's devastatingly sad, transcendently memorable final image, Wei left no doubt that he occupies a choreographic universe all his own.

"Re-" is based on Wei's journeys through different parts of Asia over the last few years. He traveled to Tibet, along China's fabled Silk Road and to Cambodia's massive shrine, Angkor Wat, taking photos and recording anything that captured his fancy – the voices of children, birdsong, the exotic cacophony of temple music.

The resulting evening-length work is as varied in texture, dynamic and mood as Wei's disparate sources. It's a remarkably well-integrated vision: In addition to providing pictures and sounds, Wei designed "Re-'s" costumes and co-created its many screen projections.

Introduced and supported by the otherworldly strains of Tibetan chant, the first movement was danced around and through a large mandala – a geometric pattern made of delicate materials that is used by Buddhists as an object of meditation.

As the audience entered, the dancers slowly and meticulously put the finishing touches on the mandala, working with multi-colored bits of paper that looked like dried flower petals.

Over the next half hour the performers cut determined swaths through the mandala, quickly reducing its carefully delineated planes and borders into a wash of riotous color and chaos.

The dancer's movements began slowly, languidly, focused around four tight circles of light, one in each corner of the mandala. The energy level waxed and waned, but by the end the sense of destruction was palpable. Petals stuck to the dancers legs and floated through the air like the shards of a shattered dream.

One suspects that, especially in the beginning of the movement, the paths Wei chooses for his dancers make dramatic sculptural statements as they systematically violate the mandala, but that was lost on anyone sitting in the orchestra. Our perspective simply didn't give us the height we needed to appreciate such an effect.

Part III, which was presented as the evening's second movement, employs a commissioned score by composer David Lang to explore the mystery and remarkable contrasts of the Silk Road.

Wei chooses puzzling motivic material for his dancers: a determined forward-backward walking phrase, thematically restricted yet elegantly developed, contrasted with a section in which the dancers paired off, leaning on one another at extreme angles and extending their mutual balance beyond the point of collapse.

Lang's music is relentless and more than a little tyrannical. It's accompanied by a projection designed by Wei and Daniel Hartnett that's constantly evolving and largely abstract, though it suggests several scenes: distant clouds, a river or winding road and, finally, an ultra-modern urban skyline.

The unsettled mood is resolved in Part II, which was the final movement on Friday. Set to composer John Tavener's haunting "Tears of the Angels," it's a ravishing fantasia based on Wei's impressions of the majestic, mysterious ruins of Angkor Wat and includes his photos and recordings of birds and other ambient sounds.

The movement took place in front of a giant black-and-white photo of a tree trunk growing out of an ornate temple. That image spoke volumes about the inexorable dominance of nature over man and the transience of all we hold dear.

Two dancers, bathed in white light and nearly nude, performed achingly slow and sensual solos as others, in dimmer light, moved with similar deliberation around them. (Lithe and superbly controlled Cecily Campbell was indisputably the star of this movement, though pointing that out seems like sacrilege in a company that wears its egalitarianism like a badge of honor.)

The scene ended in a frozen tableau that mingled horror and beauty: each body was caught in mid-writhe, seemingly in pain yet frozen.

Is Wei making a reference to Cambodia's tragic history, or something less tangible? It doesn't matter: the image is destined to stay with you forever. The essence of Shen Wei's gift is his ability to make such moments iconic, not melodramatic.

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