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DANCE

Before the Games Begin, He Has Moves to Make



Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

Shen Wei, late last month at the National Stadium in Beijing.

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THIRTEEN years ago Shen Wei was a dancer, a choreographer and a founding member of the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, the first of its kind in China. He was a rising star in his nation but craved to know more about Western dance than he could learn there.

In 1995 a fellowship from the Louis-Nikolais Dance Lab brought him to New York, where he has lived ever since. Now a citizen of the United States, he is returning to his native country as a principal choreographer of the opening ceremonies of the XXIX Olympiad, one of several nonresident artists invited to design and stage the three-and-a-half-hour event.

Given China's reputation for insularity, the decision by members of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games to look outside China for the ceremony's artists is notable.

"I'm surprised that they asked me to join the team," Mr. Shen said. "I left China a long time ago."

A visual artist as well, Mr. Shen makes dances that suggest a painter's point of view, with the stage serving as a multidimensional canvas. In one of his best-known works, "Folding," his dancers wear long red skirts, white face paint and conical headdresses as they skim across the stage, their bodies bending, or folding, in multiple directions. In the closing moments they ascend an invisible staircase to the chants of Tibetan Buddhists.

His movements combine Eastern and Western ideas, drawing from Chinese opera, martial arts, Abstract Expressionism and Western Modernism.

"We're very interested in our ceremonies in exploring the fundamentals of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics but presenting them in a very contemporary and modern way," said Jennifer Wen Ma, the chief visual and special effects designer for the ceremonies. "Shen Wei's work is definitely in line with what we're trying to do."

Though the details of the ceremony are tightly under wraps, organizers have suggested that more than 10,000 people will participate. And if Mr. Shen's concepts are an indication, there won't be a lot of Chinese dragons. "Most of the choreographers and directors in China, they have been in China for a long time," he said. "They don't have the chance, like me, to see what's on the international stage."

Mr. Shen was officially chosen to participate in the ceremonies in April 2007. Two years earlier he had been part of one of the 13 teams (chosen from 600) that were invited to give proposals to the committee for the Olympic ceremonies. From those 13 teams, 7 key people — all of them Chinese — were chosen to be part of a core creative team. Zhang Yimou, a film director, was among them, and he became the group's executive creative director. That core committee appointed Mr. Shen, along with many other artists, to create a cohesive vision for the ceremonies.



Mr. Shen's company performing "Folding" in Budapest.

Joining Mr. Shen in that effort are Mark Fisher, a British stage designer; Eiko Ishioka, a Japanese costume designer; and artists from Australia, France and Germany as well as China. "We wanted to gather as much talent from around the world as possible," said Ms. Ma, a member of the core creative team. "We see this as an international event, and we think it shows the strength of the country when you can reach out."

When meeting with the committee, Mr. Shen said, "I talked to them about what each of my pieces is about, my approach to body movement and how it's different from folk dance or classical dance and Chinese opera."

Ms. Ma said that Mr. Shen's work had a strong international appeal. "It's definitely contemporary and cutting edge, but it's rooted in Chinese philosophy," she said. "His work may not be overtly Chinese in style, but in philosophy and the principles of the Chinese aesthetics, he takes a lot from that."

After spending much of 2007 in China, Mr. Shen returned to New York briefly last fall to develop the choreography for his part of the program with dancers from his own company, Shen Wei Dance Arts. "Chinese dancers, they have no modern-dance training," he said, "and they have no understanding of my technique, my movement vocabulary."

Three of his dancers accompanied him to Beijing in December to help train the group of Chinese dancers that will be featured in the production. He has been working in Beijing with those dancers ever since.

In addition to his choreographic contribution, Mr. Shen is also serving as an unofficial adviser to members of the core committee, pushing them, he said, to be as forward-thinking as possible. "They have to think that this is for the international audience," he said. "The Olympic Games, it's happening in Beijing, but that doesn't mean it belongs to Beijing. It belongs to everybody."

Reaching out hasn't been a smooth process for the Chinese; the Games have already been fraught with controversy. Some European leaders, like President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, have threatened to boycott the ceremony; Steven Spielberg stepped down from his role as an adviser over China's refusal to pressure Sudan to stop the suffering in Darfur; and protests over the treatment of Tibet have met the torch relay around the globe.

Returning to China has been challenging for Mr. Shen as well. "It's a totally different country now," he said. "The streets, the buildings and the places where I grew up, they don't exist. I'm used to the Western system of how things work. It's so different. It's like the moon and the sun."

The changes he noticed on his return even influenced the work he did for the ceremonies: "In America we have so much privacy. In China people bump into you; they make contact with your skin. When you're standing in line, they're right up against your back. It's like you've known them for a thousand years."

The cultural divide can also be daunting. "You have to work in the Chinese way because we are still outsiders working in China," Mr. Shen said of himself, Mr. Fisher, Ms. Eiko and the other artists who live outside China. "It's big pressure for them too because they have to accept some of our comments. They have to start to think about change as well. They listen to me, maybe not 100 percent, but it helps."

Mr. Shen said he has always viewed his work as a kind of cultural exchange, and now with the Olympics he has a stage to match his vision.

"For the Olympics I'm trying to push things, make things more abstract, more international, to make sure things aren't too Chinese, not too many dragons or red lanterns or ribbon dances," he said. "Maybe it's their tradition, but we need to grow, and China is not that way anymore."