

Herald Sun

Shen Wei's something old, something new

by sbroili 08.01.10

A REVIEW

Shen Wei could be called the Lewis and Clarke of modern dance because like these explorers, he boldly ventures into new territories. Instead of writing about what he discovers, he shows it through movement. On his forays into the vast country of his imagination, the strange catches his eye. "Strange movements – that's the most interesting to me," the choreographer once told an ADF audience. Those who witness the results must keep their wits about them, be alert and, at the same time, go with the flow. American Dance Festival audiences had an opportunity to do just that when Shen Wei Dance Arts performed July 22-July 24 at the Durham Performing Arts Center. Two programs, that include the ADF-commissioned world premiere solo, performed by Shen, celebrate his company's 10th Anniversary, started right here at ADF.

The July 22 and July 23 program, which I saw, also features his 2005 "Map" and the 2000 "Folding."

In his 2005 "Map," his exploration yields a dazzling – and sometimes dizzying- array of ways to get from here to there but not in a straight line. In virtually non-stop motions, often from a seated position, dancers roll, spiral, rotate and bounce across the stage to pulsing, sometimes melodic music from Steve Reich's "The Desert Music."

According to program notes, other movements in two of the first four sections originate from inside each dancer's body. The notes do not explain just how they do this or how Shen came up with these often startling, mesmerizing locomotions. How do dancers make their arms and legs look extra long; their bodies so bouncy, fluid and flexible as noodles? How do they appear to flow and float?

It's a wonder they don't tie themselves into knots as they twist and turn their bodies along the floor. At one point, they resemble salmon after spawning, their bodies flipping this way and that – only they look more flexible than fish. Another time, their off-center movements resemble cruise ship passengers trying to keep their footing during a tropical storm.

Hands, held like spades, seem to transmit secret signals. Quick, heel-toe footwork, borrowed from Chinese traditional opera where Shen received early training and performance experience, make dancers appear to glide across the stage – a technique

used in some of his other modern dance work such as the 2000 “Folding” also on both programs.

The last section combines all four movement vocabularies in different groups that move to certain rhythms of violins and woodwinds and fill the stage with a collage of movements – exciting and overwhelming at the same time.

So, in some ways, it’s a relief to focus on only one dancer, Shen, in his world premiere, “A Solo By Shen Wei.” Seeing him perform makes clear how directly he draws from his own body to create dances for his company. (Often choreographers will incorporate movements dancers come up with in the course of creating a new work.) His movements flow and appear effortless despite the often unusual moves such as when he stands on one leg and turns his body around that leg as though his body were a vine, his leg a tree trunk. He rolls one shoulder, bends his elbow and his hand curls then snakes behind his back - a sequence that could look awkward but not when he does it.

The sound is another matter. A woman seated at a desk seems to be producing clicks, whistles and other sounds via a laptop computer. She also calls out various numbers and letters such as 32 F. Since he’s made a name for himself by creating works in which all elements combine to form one artistic whole, this element proves puzzling and distracting as does his response when he hears the word “liquid.” He stops dancing, walks over to the table, picks up a blue bottle and takes two drinks. This not only interrupts the flow of his solo but also prompts questions about what this is doing in his dance.

After his “water break,” he dances in silence and his solo takes on a more meditative quality.

“Folding” stands as a master work. It glows like a finely cut jewel that reveals many facets. Like figures in a dream, dancers with elongated heads and long, red skirts, glide in two lines along the furthest sides of the stage and disappear into the wings. In this beginning, low light and chanting of Tibetan Buddhist monks heighten the surreal and meditative quality of this strange, beautiful dance.

He draws on his training as a visual artist, performance experience in Chinese traditional opera and in China’s first modern dance company, the Guangdong Modern Dance Company to create this dance. He painted the backdrop with Chinese characters, calligraphy, a shark and two small fish after an 18th century Chinese watercolor by Bada Shanren. He designed the costumes – extremely long wrap-around skirts in red and black and head pieces.

These head pieces, made to look like dancers’ bald, bulging, very long heads, contribute greatly to the unearthly atmosphere. Dancers look even more alien when they lean their

heads way back. When they do this facing the audience, they look headless because we cannot see their faces.

The skirts become inventive elements in the choreography. A dancer seems to double in height, supported by a partner hidden under her long, voluminous black skirt. Dancers in black skirts also form symbiotic pairs conjoined at the hips. As one thrusts her chest forward, her partner leans way back and they slowly move as one unit. A seated dancer rides on the train of her partner.

This performance includes two new additions. Both take place on a ledge just below the same stage though not at the same time. In one, we see only one dancer's legs and feet twist and twirl. In the other, a soloist's quality of movement and expressiveness makes him look like Shen – or maybe it's because we've just seen Shen's solo before "Folding."

The dance concludes with the same breathtaking, surprising finish as eight heads appear to hover, disembodied in space (thanks to lighting that obscures dancers' bodies and the stairs on which they stand.)