

The Herald

Shen Wei Dance Arts: Re-Triptych, Playhouse



Photo by: Roberto Ricci Controluce

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By MARY BRENNAN

★★★★★

As we file in, the dancers are silently completing the mandala-floor that is part of choreographer Shen Wei's design for Part I.

A cloudscape filters across the back wall, and the sonorities of traditional Tibetan chants soon underpin sequences of slow upward stretchings, scoopings and supple bends: the mood is one of calmly considered rituals.

But every footfall scuffs the careful pattern, and when the dancers's bodies connect with the floor, the paper sticks to limbs like sudden snow.

By the end, the mandala is no more and the skies at the top of the world are darkening over.

In Part II, Shen Wei's intensely personal journey has reached Cambodia, and again there is the elegiac note of intrinsic heritage being eroded, destroyed, by invading forces.

Rural fold traditions – a lovely, intricate chain of bodies twining in exuberant response to local music – have defied the Khmer Rouge, but the jungle has long claimed the temples at Angkor Wat.

Projections show walls gripped by root-tentacles. Onstage, semi-naked alabaster-pale bodies loll like fallen statues.

The choreography matches the mystical beauty of Tavener's Tears of the Angels, a reverie for man-made monuments brought low by time and nature.

Part III, located in Wei's homeland of China, echoes the momentum of change and as David Lang's commissioned score builds in abrasive volume, a lone woman – clad in spring-pastel silk – slithers like some elegant calligraphy among an edgy, black-clad battalion of almost militaristic modernity.

Shen Wei's dancers are a breed apart: lissome, precise, expressive – and totally at one with a choreographic vision that makes philosophical reflections into remarkable, affecting dance.

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