

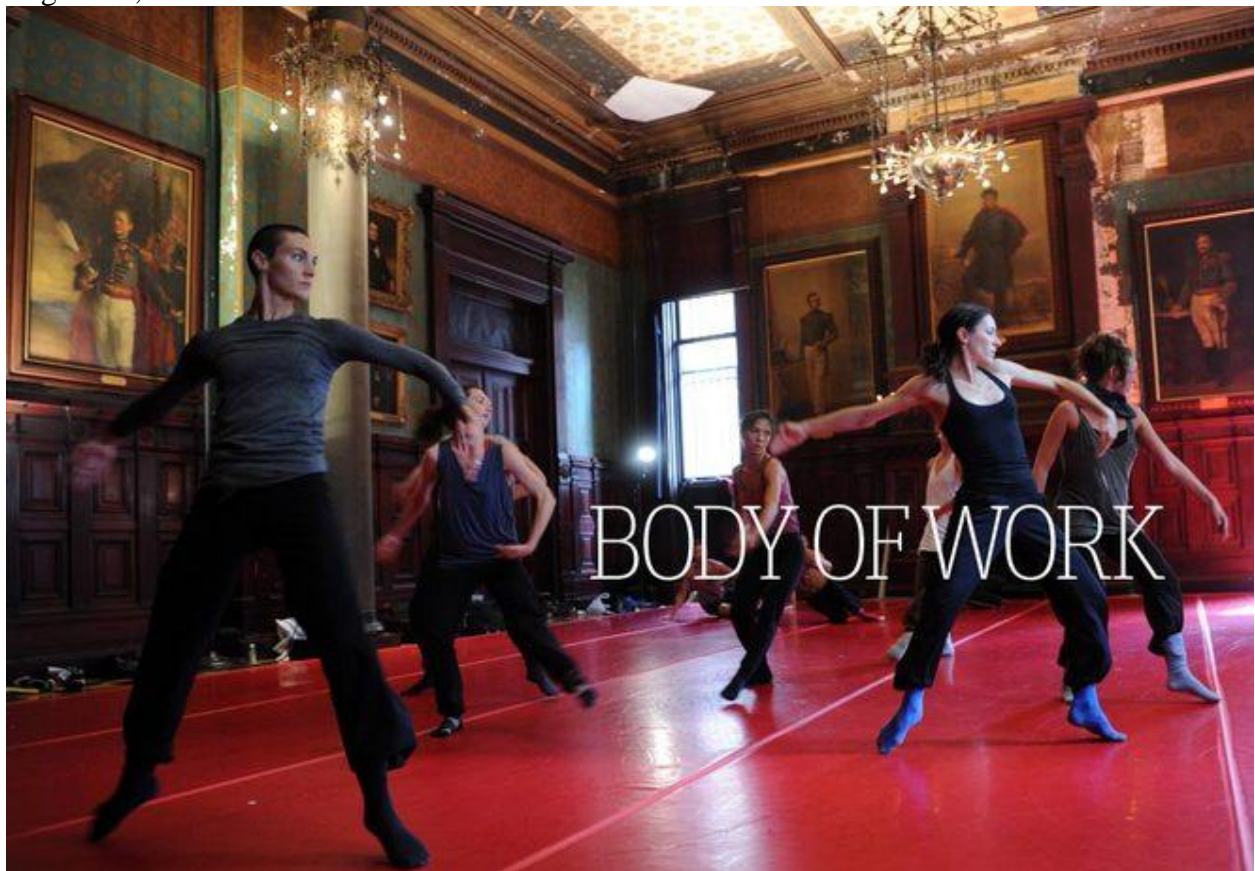


## BODY OF WORK

Chinese choreographer Shen Wei pushes dance – and dancers – to the limit

By Clemency Burton-Hill

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In a rehearsal studio at New York City's Park Avenue Armory recently, the air conditioning was failing, spectacularly. As a creaking fan whirled unconvincingly in a corner, a group of dancers, their bodies seemingly as fluid as water, made no complaint as the sweat trickled down their faces and backs. Members of Shen Wei Dance Arts, a New York-based company founded in 2000, these dancers were used to working hard and subjecting their bodies to a degree of physical rigor unimaginable to mere mortals. This was one of their final rehearsals before they embark on an international tour that begins at Edinburgh International Festival this week, and they weren't about to let a little HVAC malfunction get in the way.

Since he moved to the United States in 1995, the dancer and choreographer Shen Wei, who was born in rural China during the Cultural Revolution, has built a reputation as one of the most innovative thinkers in global contemporary dance. His ambitious, interdisciplinary, cross-cultural works blend elements of Eastern and Western philosophy and aesthetics with references to contemporary visual art and sculpture, as well as ancient Chinese opera, a tradition in which Shen has been steeped since childhood. From the spectacular choreography of the work he created for the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 to the “Re” triptych that will tour to Edinburgh and beyond, Shen’s works are executed in a language that is somehow both figurative and abstract; a unique dance vocabulary that he has been developing for over a decade.

“I call it natural body development,” he told *The Daily* during a break from that sweltering rehearsal studio last week. “I have spent years creating this system; it comes from my understanding of human bodies and how they move.” On the desk in the studio, a book containing the studies of Eadweard Muybridge, the Victorian-era photographer who pioneered the possibility of capturing animal locomotion visually, looked well-thumbed. Like Muybridge’s horses, Shen’s dancers appear to move in a way that seems almost transcendent, as if he has somehow mapped out whole new planes of the body. The effect is mesmerizing.

“It’s a big challenge to take your body to its limits like this,” said Sarah Chiesa, who has danced with the company since 2008. “But he has an amazing intuition of how to push us to work harder and get even more out of our bodies.” Gulping down a bottle of water, she grinned. “It’s definitely not like working with any other choreographer.”

For every dance work that Shen Wei creates, he also designs the costumes, makeup and sets. But if this control over every aesthetic aspect of the show might seem to verge on the autocratic, his dancers are satisfied that their own instincts are being cultivated, too. “There’s a lot of freedom to put your own creativity into it,” admitted James Healey, a former gymnast who has danced with the company since its inception. “But Shen Wei demands you to be really specific. He demands that you communicate your own ideas very clearly.”

The “Re” triptych is a suite of three stylistically different but interconnected works. Part One reflects Shen’s experiences in Tibet, and the almost liquid flow of the choreography is set against the haunting soundtrack of a group of chanting Tibetan nuns whom, Shen explained, he chanced upon one afternoon in a highly rural part of the country. Part Two is about his impressions of Angkor Wat, Cambodia, “and the amazing, humongous temples that integrate with the nature of the trees — a combined force of human might and the power of nature.” And Part Three explores the very distinct cultures of East and West; perhaps no choreographer is better placed to investigate these tensions than the Chinese man who has lived in America for so many years. “In the East they are focused on the power of unity and the collective,” he said. “Then you look at the Western culture — take New York — and it is all about the individual. The cultures are so different, I find that really fascinating.”

If Shen Wei is still in tune with his own Eastern culture, he seems very much at home in America these days. The recipient of a MacArthur “Genius” grant in 2007, he also holds a clutch of other U.S. awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship. Asked if he felt less constrained here than in

his native country, he said, “Of course,” but seemed unwilling to be drawn further. It was an indication, perhaps, that although invitations like those from the 2008 Beijing Olympics committee were a flattering acknowledgment of how far he had come since leaving rural Hunan, a move back to China seems unlikely, at least in the short term. “Here I can express myself with total freedom,” he pointed out.

As with all modern choreographers, however, Shen faces a challenge in speaking to new audiences who might find the language of contemporary dance utterly baffling. But he is convinced that so long as the piece comes from a place “of passion,” it can touch anyone — even if they don’t automatically grasp what it is “about.”

“Art is all about inspiration and how it can give you something that you feel, but you may not completely understand,” he suggested, before summoning his dancers back to their sweaty business with a smile. “For me, that’s the purpose of art.”