

The Star-Ledger

In 'Undivided Divided,' Shen Wei brings audience members and performers nose-to-nose

By Robert Johnson
December 6, 2011



Photo by Stephanie Berger, Shen Wei Dance Arts in "Folding"

NEW YORK—Choreographer **Shen Wei** has an appetite for scale. He likes to spread out, sprawling across the stages at Lincoln Center and working with grand opera companies. Shen led the dance-making team at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

So it didn't seem surprising, then, to find him last week at the Park Avenue Armory, where the cavernous, 55,000-square-foot Drill

Hall was designed for military parades with ordnance. Although the Drill Hall is old-fashioned, the interior feels big enough to swallow Lincoln Center AND the Beijing Olympics, even with stands of bleachers set up on three sides. Perversely, however, "Undivided Divided," the premiere that Shen created there during a 16-month residency, was a dance about intimacy.

With most of the space carved into 7' X 7' squares, plus a runway at one end, audience members were invited to ramble, shoeless, down narrow aisles separating compartments in which all-but-naked women and men thrashed and pivoted unpredictably. Hemmed in by the crowd, and close enough to tickle a dancer with your breath, viewers were forced to confront their own status as observers, or look away.

The membrane separating audience from performance never seemed so thin, but it grew thinner when the dancers began to roll their bodies in paint. The sticky colors rubbed off easily, as the performers demonstrated by smearing the panes of clear-plastic boxes and windows stationed at different points, additionally plastering themselves with loose tufts of hair. Even without getting daubed, it was impossible not to brush up against another person while negotiating the aisles clotted with bewildered, nervous art lovers. The most detached observer, holding his shoes primly in his hands, could not emerge from this experience without being touched. Projected videos of an echo-cardiogram underscored the sense that personal space had been invaded.

“Undivided Divided” reversed the usual situation, in which a viewer sits in darkness watching from a self-enclosed, mental cocoon. Here, ironically, the dancers were the loners, naked yet protected in their squares by a barrier of squeamishness that kept anyone from making physical contact with them. They remained isolated and distinct, while the viewers turned into a browsing herd. In this way, “Undivided Divided” continued the exploration of social mores in Shen’s “Re-III: The New Silk Road,” his 2009 piece contrasting Western individualism with China’s emphasis on the collective.

Standing outside the installation, or peering down at it from the bleachers, one might also make a connection between the crowd of viewers in “Undivided Divided” and the characters in Shen’s “Rite of Spring.” Like them, the audience’s passage through the space seemed directed by animal instinct.

“Rite” opened the evening, captivating once again with Shen’s vision of gaunt ruminants, who calmly conserved their energy until the instant when they burst into action. Although at one point they stood gathered, wrists and shoulders twitching, these mysterious creatures seemed to move not for pleasure or by habit, but out of hard necessity.

“Folding,” the middle work on the program, was pure spectacle, a ritual for gourd-headed aliens trailing red or black skirts and gliding dutifully across a vast, polished floor. The red ones hustled and bustled, but the black-skirted ones dragged themselves slowly, bunched together in pairs and apparently copulating during their migration. “Folding” looked beautiful, but viewers were lucky to admire it from a distance.