

The art of body language

Movements speak for themselves in Shen Wei's bold work.

By Phil Miller
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New York in unseasonable rain is still New York, and still enthralling.

Shen Wei would not change it for a second. The 43-year-old Chinese choreographer, director, dancer and painter, and resident, loves the city, and, with his brilliant creativity and pan-global viewpoint, is an ideal modern citizen of the Big Apple.

The five boroughs have been home to this quietly spoken “genius”, as he has been described since 1995, when he left a successful life in China to arrive in New York with only a few words of English and a few hundred dollars. Now he is one of its biggest artistic stars.

It was 10 years later, during a break from the city, that one of his great creations, the Re-Triptych of three dance pieces, which he is bringing to this year's Edinburgh International Festival, was formed. After a decade of success in New York, he needed a break. So the artist, born in Hunan in 1968, travelled alone to the mountains of Tibet. His feelings of solitude there formed the basis of a new work. It was based on the movements he discovered within himself in those remote areas. Once he returned home those movements became the first part of the Triptych, Re-(I), a piece set to haunting Tibetan chants. It is perhaps the most personal of the three works, the others musically powered by compositions from John Tavener, David Lang and field recordings of Cambodian folk songs.

“I put myself in a dark room all by myself, and just moved,” he says, as we meet in the wood-panelled walls of the Park Avenue Armory, where his company is rehearsing. “It was all about the breathing for me: you are alone in the dark, and you focus on the breath, and the effect that just one breath can have on your whole body. When I was in that room, thinking of Tibet, all the noise, all of New York disappeared. It's all about breathing, not the [dance] phrase itself. I don't care about the patterns, it's about the breath.”

The New York Armory is a former military building hidden away on Park Avenue. It has wooden walls, adorned with portraits of military figures. It is a dark building, filled with a sense of solemnity. On the fourth floor, in a large room dominated by dark beams, dancers from Shen company are stretching, moving on a large matt, lit by a candelabra and eyed beadily by portraits of soldiers and generals. The 13 dancers are preparing for the day's rehearsal, and are limbering up to a hip-hop beat, led by assistant Kate Jewett. Shen is smart and neat in a waistcoat, chinos

and boots. His clothes reflect him: precise, neat, controlled. He smiles when Edinburgh is mentioned. He performed as a dancer on the Edinburgh stage in 2000 in a piece called Folding.

“I love the city, it is beautiful, with the old part and the new part. It just felt amazing: you can see the ancient history at the same time as the new developments. I loved the mountain [Arthur’s Seat]. And of course the festival is one of the most important in the world. Most festivals only go in one direction. But Edinburgh does everything: contemporary, classical, visual art, it has a bigger range.”

Shen is excited to bring his work to Scotland, but the audience at the Edinburgh Playhouse will never be as scary as his biggest: the entire world, for the work he choreographed for the opening ceremony of the Beijing Games in 2008.

We watch the dancers run through the third part of the Triptych. He sits, alert and unmoving, on a chair beside the mat, making notes in a large notepad full of diagrams and shapes, Chinese characters and small notes in English. The dancers wear sweat-soaked T-shirts, tracksuit bottoms, leggings and shorts. After the lengthy rehearsal, he calmly but firmly gives them his notes, a list of comments and criticisms of their dancing. He wants the dancers to move precisely, firmly. “This piece is all about collective power, so your movements have to be more exact,” he says. “You need to clean it up.”

Audiences, he says, should be encouraged to think about the RE: prefix of the trilogy, and not just the dancing and the carefully designed stage materials. He says: “In 2005, I wanted to rethink everything. It felt like I was a fish, swimming in the water, not taking any notice of what was around me but just keeping on going. I needed to see what my life really meant, and, in the purest sense, who I am.”

When he had translated those contemplations into movement, he settled on that title for the trilogy, which was premiered at the Lincoln Center Festival in 2009. “It is not just about re-turn, re-think, re-place or re-do,” he says. “I loved the word in English, re, and why it is put in front of so many words. People ask me: is it about returning, rethinking? I say its about re itself.” But then, he admits, the title is still “just a label. If words can say everything about the dance, then why have the dance at all?”

Shen trains his dancers in new techniques he has developed to dance the moves he has created. It is a precise discipline. “They have to be a really good dancer first, but it takes at least a year to be good with the technique,” he says. “Movement does not lie.”

It is clear from the rehearsal that the dancers have to be exact, accurate in their movements. “This is the most difficult part of being a choreographer,” he says. “We are naturally sensitive to another human body. Choreographers and dancer have to be concerned with subtle shifts, which means so much, and it really is a mysterious language.”

Shen says dance and choreography are not just about emotion or expression. “It’s about your brain, your mentality, it has to be very rational, how to fix things, how to arrange things, it is just like maths. In the end, you are dealing with things that are not quite clear, but you have to organise them.”

The choreographer's mobile phone is constantly buzzing. He is a busy man – and multi-faceted: he is a painter and artist as well as dancer and choreographer. He shows me dozens of his paintings on his iPad, some with a Francis Bacon influence. He also designs sets and costumes.

“I have spent my all life in the arts. My first appearance on stage was aged six, and ever since then I have been in the arts. I will make a painting with the same feelings I make a dance piece. I use movements, transferring my energy onto the canvass,” he says. “In the old days, music and dance and film were seen as separate, but our times are different. People see me as a choreographer or dancer, but dance is just one of the things I am dealing with – I also connect with the songs, the designs, the energy. I make films, I do photos – my senses have developed in all directions. I don't focus on one category.”

He adds: “It's like New York, it is hard to categorise – is it American, is it European, it is Chinese, what is it? I am the same.”

Re-Triptych is on at the Playhouse, Edinburgh, from September 1-3.