



SHEN WEI ARRIVES AT SAN CARLO: MAGICAL CARMINA BURANA

Teatro

by Carmelo Antonio Zapparrata // published August 3, 2013

The recovery of Teatro di San Carlo in Naples during the last few years is restoring the theater's role as a leading player in the Italian and international dance arena. Last April there was an historic agreement between the superintendent of the theater and union representatives on a "three-year plan of the Corps de Ballet". In contrast with the other operatic and symphonic foundations in Italy, the San Carlo is stabilizing and expanding its dance company, with a commitment to employ 39 dancers in the company by 2015, and a plan to promote an increase in performances and touring. Another winning move of the company, directed by Alessandra Panzavolta, is the inviting of artists of international caliber to perform in the theater. Following presentations of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, Teatro di San Carlo welcomed the creative talent of Shen Wei for a world premiere production of the *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff, which opened on July 21. After being approached in 2010 to choreograph dances for Rossini's *Moïse et Pharaon* for the Rome Opera, Shen Wei created a work of "total art" for San Carlo. In progress for almost two years and in production since last April, *Carmina Burana* has employed all the artistic forces of the Massimo partenopeo (the Neapolitan Opera house): Chorus, Children's Choir, Orchestra and Ballet. This last, joined by seven Shen Wei Dance Arts dancers, properly rendered the sinuous universe of the New York-based Chinese choreographer, giving life to a scenic cantata with a taste of the Greek god Pan, forged in the watery reflections of the Gulf of Naples.

In agreement with Shen Wei, four anonymous and unpublished *Cantiones profanae* (*Iste Mundus Furibundus; Michi Confer, venditor; Curritur ad Vocem; Veris Dulcis in Tempore*) were interpolated into sections of the *Carmina Burana* and orchestrated by conductor Jordi Bernácer. They were drawn from the same thirteenth century codex in the Abbey in Benediktbeuern, Germany* that inspired Carl Orff's work. The project first arose in the mind of the eclectic choreographer in 2004, but only materialized thanks to an invitation from Alessandra Panzavolta to create a new production for the oldest and one of the most prestigious opera houses in Italy.

The entire scenic environment and staging of the *Carmina Burana* was conceived and designed by Shen Wei, including lights and video projections, restoring to the *Carmina* the lightness and vital *elan* that feed Orff's music. Fortune, variable as the moon, is invoked at the opening; mistress of fate and goddess of 'atmospheric phenomena,' she rises in mid-air, naked with long tresses, surrounded by rotating video projections in the style of Tarot cards. With images sublime and terrifying at the same time, Fortune introduces the world of the "vagrant clerics"—an almanac of the human condition in its entirety.

* Editor's note: The *Carmina Burana* takes its name from the ancient "I' Bura Sancti Benedicti", hence the term "Burana"

Abstract backdrops, evoking dancing figures, appear as soft evanescences in pastel colors, the same pastels also costume the dancers, when they are freed from their long capes and black cloaks. Green and two-toned red and white costumes contrast well with the black garbs of the chorus, arranged - as in La Scala's *Europe Recognized* directed by Luca Ronconi (2004) - between the stage apron and a platform upon which the dancers perform.

With ample skirts, the dancers float in circular and spiraling movements on varied spatial planes. They are reminiscent of the elegant and refined figures already investigated by Shen Wei in *Folding* (2000) and *Near The Terrace* (2000), while their harmonious dynamism, without the stillness [of these earlier works] enlivens the 'aire de jeu' amplifying the captivating energy. Inclined mirrors, divided into different sections, reflect the rose-colored paint marks traced by the dancers, recalling the "calligraphy" of *Connect Transfer* (2004) and a strange satyr-like figure (countertenor Ilham Nazarov, who sings the "Roasted Swan" song in the Tavern section) cuts through the scene with a primordial flavored walk. The Children's Chorus, housed in the large proscenium boxes in the second ring, completed Shen Wei's desired staging, taking the eye on a visual journey, dominated by a seeming calm that sweeps across the entire scenic picture.

Sculptures bulky yet soft, armour the consistency of clouds, costume the vocal soloists (Valdis Jansonse and Angela Nisi), who are always accompanied by "shadows," doppelganger-like figures draped in dark cloaks or animating strange tubular shapes ala Alwin Nikolais. An origami in the shape of a bird, red as in the color of passion, is carried in a priestly procession. All three choruses sing hymns to the beauties of the Court of Love before Fortune completes her ascension up a flaming stairway. Darkness arrives unexpectedly on the stage and Fortune quintuples herself offering her nude form to the viewer, who is seized by a strange thrill that subsides only once the curtain is lowered.

Thanks to Shen Wei, the *Carmina Burana* is magically liberated from the stereotypes that result from the score's fame. Instead, the production reveals worlds of ineffable beauty and rich emotions; the fruit of a unique mind able to provide the right balance between East and West, aware that the new can only be born through the organic knowledge of the past. Finally, another merit of the San Carlo is the exporting, for the first time in Russia, the poetry of Shen Wei with a tour of *Carmina Burana* to the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, from September 23 to 26, the fruit of a cultural exchange between the two theaters that will find the Corps de Ballet of the Mariinsky (formerly the Kirov) in Naples, from September 17 to 22, performing *Swan Lake*, in Konstantin Sergeyev's version, at the opening of the Autumn Dance festival.



Carmina Burana (reg. S. Wei); (© Luciano Romano / Teatro di San Carlo)



Carmina Burana (reg. S. Wei); (© Francesco Squeglia / Teatro di San Carlo)



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Carmina Burana

Cantiones profanae cantoribus et choris cantandae comitantibus instrumentis atque imaginibus magicis

Music by Carl Orff

Four *Cantiones profanae* by Anonymous

Orchestration by Jordi Bernácer

Design, choreography, sets, costumes, lighting and video projections by Shen Wei

Orchestra, Choir, Ballet and Children's Choir of the Teatro di San Carlo

World premiere

Teatro di San Carlo, Naples, Italy

July 21 - 26, 2013

Tour

Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, Russia

September 23 - 26, 2013