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Somewhere In Between

“Neither”

Shen Wei Dance Arts

Brooklyn Academy of Music, Howard Gilman Opera House

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by Martha Sherman

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Shen Wei Dance Arts Cast in "Neither." Photo © Stephanie Berger

Entering any Shen Wei work involves embracing some edge of dream state, a liminal spot at the edge of consciousness. The Samuel Beckett poem that served as inspiration, libretto, and set design for “Neither” lives just in that borderline place – “from inner to outer shadow.” Eleven dancers, dressed in shades between white and black, moved on a cerebral gray stage set, where nine arches were lightly etched, and – in fact – did sometimes open, to admit or release a dancer, and to pour an occasional flood of light into the space. Finding a way in, and a way home, was the audience's challenge, as Shen Wei offered hints and puzzles.

Shen Wei is a polymath of an artist: choreographer, painter, set and costume designer. Probably best known for the dramatic opening ceremony he created for the Beijing 2008 Olympics, much of his work is almost diametrically opposed to that enormous scale. He inhabits quiet, internal mindscapes, in worlds of continuous motion – that space is where “Neither” lives. The new work is situated, first, in his painting, an enormous work covering the stage curtain and evoking classical Chinese landscape in pen and ink, but dripping with great smudges of black that roll down the edges as if escaped from the artist's discipline.

As that image rose with the opening curtain, three trios of dancers stood facing each other and a harsh score and moaning soprano erupted. Morton Feldman composed the music for the 1977 “anti-opera;” the libretto is the 16-line Beckett poem, “Neither,” whose lines periodically flashed onto the back of the set. On a wall, suspended on a chair, sat a motionless dancer. Downstage

from the trios, another lone dancer, Zak Ryan Schlegel, writhed, oozing his long limbs along the floor, knotting and unknotting himself in a snaky, sinuous solo. Behind him, the grouped dancers were all discipline and fluidity; each trio dipping and folding their bodies in parallel.

Each dancer in this troupe must be made of pure muscle. Shen Wei's choreography offers no quarter – the movement is relentless. In “Neither,” the trios started in relatively gentle parallel motion, sweeping long arms that led their torsos into low bends and curves. The pace and the demand, though, continued to escalate, the dancers breaking in and out of individual contortions. When they came together again, they were entirely linked, train cars connected by angled elbows and synchrony.



Unexpectedly for Shen Wei, whose troupe generally performs as a single, shifting organism of many equal parts, “Neither” had lead performers who separated themselves from the crowd, before being sucked back in. The fluid Cynthia Koppe danced the tortuous central solo. As her body slid through advancing rolls and knots, every part of her was in continuous motion. It was beautiful and, eventually, agonizing to watch. In shifting duets, Alex Speedie joined her,

becoming a new plane for her rolls and twists as he slid her up and over him, at once a heavy toted sack – and then a Christ figure. Schlegel also came back to partner Koppe, and to guide her up a large ladder (a stairway to Paradise?). When Koppe returned through one of the arched doors, it was silently and almost without notice. She was back among the faceless crowd.

Mysteries abounded. The arched doors seemed to emerge from blank walls; when would they open? Why? And what happened to the dancer in the suspended chair? Our eyes moved across the stage, trying to hold Koppe's breathtaking solo as well as the unending activity around her, and the shifting scenery behind. When words emerged in the background, they added not to clarity of conscious awareness, but to soft obfuscation.

From the heavens, large clouds of cellophane drifted onto the stage. The dancers pulled and wrapped themselves in the shimmering colored texture. The dancers – and the stage – were newly layered, newly lit. Dancers extended their legs at long angles to wrap and unwrap themselves, like glints of flashing jellyfish. Unwrapped at the end, the dancers stretched up their arms, surrounding tall Schlegel. They created a flame -- “Unspeakable Home” flashed on the wall behind them.



The dreamscape of Shen Wei's work is mesmerizing. We lose ourselves in the dancers' unending, loose-limbed patterns, but eventually, we don't bother to wonder where it's headed "from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither." Nothing here is black and white, but endless shades of gray.

Photos © Stephanie Berger

Top: Cynthia Koppe and Alex Speedie in "Neither."

Bottom: Shen Wei Dance Arts Cast in "Neither." Photo © Stephanie Berger

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