



REPEATS 6/14: American Dance Festival 2013 Opens With Shen Wei

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Since he founded his company as an American Dance Festival student in 2000, Shen Wei and Shen Wei Dance Arts have made regular appearances on the ADF summer schedule, giving regular festival attendees an unparalleled opportunity to watch the development of the complex art of this undeniable genius. Once again, SWDA opened the ADF's intensive annual season at the Durham Performing Arts Center, this time presenting a new work commissioned by the ADF with support from its angel, the SHS Foundation.

Collective Measures will probably be seen in the future as the first dance of Shen Wei's mature period. It is not his most overtly ambitious, but it draws something from each previous work. It is as if he has been inventing an alphabet and a syntax, and can now get into the tales to be told. But the magisterial mystery of his movement style remains, following not the brittle logic of words, but the inarguable logic of flowing water.

Like 2011's *Limited States*, *Collective Measures* explores life in the crowded contemporary (urban) world. While it looks at isolation, crowding, aggression and more

tender connections, it does so in a way less hostile to the audience. The sound includes an original score by Daniel Burke (clicking, static-y burrs) and music by Asher and by Jerry Feller. None of it makes you want to run for the doors, and eventually the clicking comes to feel like an urban frog song. Shen Wei is as visual as he is kinetic, and he has designed the lighting (with Matthew F. Lewandowski II) with which he paints; the video and animation which at times create lively backdrops with which the dancers visually interact; and the costumes (with Austin Scarlett) that clothe the sinuous bodies in what appear to be Nijinsky's rags, worn to sheer tatters, from *L'Après Midi d'une Faune* (the choreography includes a gorgeous, funny, quote from that dance).

One can also pick out shapes and sequences from Shen Wei's own work, from early pieces like *Near the Terrace* and *Folding*, to *Connect Transfer*, *Map*, *Re-*, and on to *Limited States* and *Undivided Divided*. But *Collective Measures* has a new authority, a confidence based in experiential wisdom, which makes the work less obscure and more compelling. It begins gently, the gestures soft. The movement becomes more definite, the gestures sharper. There are sequences of greater aggression than I've seen before in Shen Wei's work — mostly carried out by the hands — but aggression becomes conciliation, and the isolated human fragments become one merged band by the end. It is easy to follow the dance's progression, yet each instant feels as fresh and mysterious as those of *Near the Terrace*.

The program opens with that attention-riveting work from 2000. It is just as wondrous as memory would have it; I don't think one could see it too often. Shen Wei has said that it was inspired by the paintings of Belgian Surrealist Paul Delvaux, but perhaps there are other references, such as Beijing's Forbidden City, with its steep flights of steps, and even the terraces of Duke Gardens, with the koi pond at the bottom. Certainly, *Near the Terrace* has a watery feel, and a dancer in glistening body dark body paint who behaves very much like a koi, while pale figures glide and pour themselves around the stage and up and down the steps running side-to-side across the stage. Under Jennifer Tipton's cool even lighting, the delicious movement is carried out to music by Arvo Pärt — until the very end, when the only sound is that generated by bodies in motion, rippling headfirst down the steps in a human waterfall.