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LINCOLN CENTER FESTIVAL REVIEW; Movement Meets Canvas, Leaving a Lasting Impression

By ANNA KISSELGOFF | July 16, 2004



Rare is the artist who fits into no recognizable category or fashionable aesthetic. But Shen Wei, the Chinese-born choreographer who triumphed at the Lincoln Center Festival last year with his stunning abstract treatment of "The Rite of Spring," has returned to the festival for a run through tomorrow night with an even more strikingly original piece, "Connect Transfer."

As the mainly young audience recognized with its ovation at Alice Tully Hall on Wednesday night, Mr. Shen is pushing into new territory, exploring inventive and daring movement but also altering the way movement can be perceived.

It would be easy but misleading to see "Connect Transfer" as an animated canvas, part Chinese calligraphy, part American action painting.

The white floor cloth to which the amazingly disciplined members of the Shen Wei Dance Arts troupe throw themselves with seamless spirals and a variety of rolls is indeed the equivalent of a canvas. Eventually the dancers trace a continuum of scribbles, loops and circles on the floor with paint that is on their backs, feet and mittens.

But nothing is flat, pictorial or gimmicky. The first half of the piece is especially rigorous as the dancers move into groupings that take on architectural and sculptural shapes. Throughout the section, the choreography is based on a simple architectural principle, the use of three points for support.

A soloist uses three limbs to evoke a human tripod. Other dancers cluster in formations, always connecting at three points of their bodies, usually at the joints. This can make for odd linkages. (The neck of A rests on B's elbow.) The movement in and out of formation is slow.

Mr. Shen is too smart to keep the dancing evenly paced, and when the dynamics pick up, the white floor cloth is still pristine. Suddenly, one woman traces paint on the floor as her mittens remain connected to the cloth during a series of turbulent spirals.

She leaves behind a record of her movement, a fluid path of black loops. When a man, red paint on his back, leaves a similar floor plan after moving on his back, the stage begins to come alive in a new dimension.

Ingeniously, Mr. Shen has first introduced the dancing without any human paintbrushes. The viewer sees movement for its own sake. But then the eye sees it schematically explained by the patterns that the dancers leave with the paint. In a third phase when similar movements are performed again without paint, the dancing has a new clarity. It is viewed in its immediacy and simultaneously recalled by the painted trajectory still visible on the floor.

All this may sound as conceptual as it is. But dancing is the thing, ranging from the exceptional fluidity of Mr. Shen's two solos to the exciting dynamics of the 11 other dancers.

"Connect Transfer" is a good title for a work that has a great deal to do with the transfer of energy within the body and from body to body at connecting points. You can see energy course through Mr. Shen's rotating shoulder down through a turned-in hip and flow to the other side of his body.

Trained in Chinese opera and modern dance before he came to New York in 1995, Mr. Shen works out of a sensibility that owes nothing to systems of thought that have lingered in American postmodern dance since the 1960's. The basic training of Chinese opera explains certain extraordinary movements that his dancers, mostly American, have learned to do with such fearlessness on the floor.

Mr. Shen rarely uses a conventional dance step, but, paradoxically, it was a Chinese dancer, Hou Ying, who had the audience gasping at the speed of her chaîné turns with windmill arms.

Experimental composers of the recent past and the present were aptly chosen. The members of the Flux Quartet took up positions in two rear corners of the stage before the dancers, in black and gray tights, lined up along the black-curtained stage.

The white floor cloth gleamed before them under Jennifer Tipton's subtle lighting. The slow, amplified bowing of Kevin Volans's String Quartet No. 6 complemented the near static look of the first section. But just as these long notes and chords managed to succeed one another, so did the dancers change the shape of their linked, dislocated bodies. Alexa Kershner and Brooke M. Broussard were the duo in front, always in flux, with each of their positions affected by how one dancer manipulated the joint of another.

Stephen Gosling, a brilliant pianist seated to the left of the floor cloth, plunged into the hurried percussiveness of Xenakis's "Evryali."

The dancers shifted into a burst of leaps, turns and trots. For Mr. Shen's solo and the stream of solos with which the others painted the floor with their bodies before individual bows, Mr. Gosling, sharp and precise, shifted into a mind-clearing excerpt from Ligeti's "Sonatina."

"Connect Transfer" is an ingenious synthesis of dance, music and visual art, each element unpredictably linked to another.