

# The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW

## A Stream Of Images Inspired by Surrealism

By ANNA KISSELGOFF  
Published: July 4, 2001



At the end of "Near the Terrace," a dance work unlike any other, which the Chinese-born choreographer Shen Wei presented at the American Dance Festival here on Sunday, a woman clad only in a purple skirt stands atop a stagewide series of steps.

Chin up, arms stiffly held back, she appears headless and armless, the Winged Victory and Venus de Milo rolled into one. Below the steps, a sculpture garden of chalk-white bodies (wrapped in pink) blooms in a variety of curved shapes.

To explain this image is hazardous. It is essentially the climax of a stream of other images: this is dance that must be savored moment by moment. The effect on the viewer is cumulative, but the instant can often be more resonant than the whole.

Nonetheless, Mr. Shen alludes to art with a purpose. Part 1 of "Near the Terrace," which had its premiere at the festival last year, was largely inspired by the Belgian Surrealist Paul Delvaux. On Sunday at the Reynolds Industries Theater at Duke University here, the festival's summer home, Mr. Shen interpolated a new solo for himself between that section and the premiere of "Near the Terrace," Part 2.

Mr. Shen plays with references to Surrealist painting and classical statuary. And since he is both a painter and choreographer, it might be best to regard him more generally as an artist, rather than just a choreographer or just a painter.

The haunting strangeness of "Near the Terrace" is not without arbitrariness. Mr. Shen seems as carried away by a free association of images as he wants his viewer to be. He has no overt message in his slowly shifting landscape. But the images describe a universe in which art and humans are indistinguishable: there is no civilization worthy of that name without art.

At 33, Mr. Shen has spent most of his life as a performer, first in Chinese opera and then as a founding member of the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, which was formed in collaboration with the American Dance Festival's directors, Charles L. and Stephanie Reinhart, as China's first modern-dance company.

Invited to choreograph at the festival here in Durham in 1995, shortly after he settled in the United States, Mr. Shen has moved progressively toward a more painterly sensibility in his recent works. Although he draws upon the contemplative or slow sense of time found in Chinese opera and some Asian theater, his style is syncretic and thus original.

The score for Part 1 is by Arvo Pärt; the music for Part 2 is gamelan music from Indonesia; and Mr. Shen's solo, linking the two sections, was danced to a score by Benjamin Lobst that uses Tibetan chants.

The piece is performed by Shen Wei Dance Arts, a company Mr. Shen has recently formed with dancers he has recruited mainly from the festival and from China. To say they hardly move is to pay tribute to their muscular control and nuance. To change position imperceptibly, especially at a tilt, is difficult. All the more startling when Mr. Shen deliberately breaks the mood. When a man squats, a woman near him suddenly throws herself sideways into his arms. Just as startling within the first part's grayness is the eruption of color. At one point a nude woman, arching her back to the extreme, steps like a show horse across the top of the steps, trailing a red cloth.

In the second section, the figures in pink often seem joined at the hip, part Siamese twins, part centaurs. Yet when the gamelan music speeds up, they become head-lolling dancers, delicate and polished.

The difference in tone between the two sections is clear, although the stage remains gray throughout, with the same white-sprayed curved plants (bromeliads) positioned among the dancers. David Ferri's lighting in the first section tends toward a celadon gray-green, with an occasional stripe of red on the backdrop. At the end, the dancers slowly ascend the steps and sink behind them, only to return in a striking moment. Slithering head down in front, they seem to spill down the steps like human lava.

More color fills the backdrop of Part 2, and the pink fabric wrapped around the dancers' white bodies lends a rosiness to the final image, with its unreachable goddess at the top of the steps. Nothing is more literally colorful than the bright red of Mr. Shen's silken scarlet skirt as it flows down the steps behind him. There is a fluency to his own dancing, with its rotating wrists, that is denied his fine dancers. One looks forward to the time when his own brilliant performance style can be integrated with the ensemble's concentration and play with near stillness.

The committed cast included Maria Arias, Brooke M. Broussard, Vanessa Fassié, Cheri Paige Fogleman, Jessica Harris, James Healey, Zhuo Nain-Nain, Sara Procopio, Kana Satoh, Shi Xuan, Jesse Zaritt, Hannah McClure, Alexa Kershner and Vicki Skinner.