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Dance Review

Shen Wei Dance Arts, mastering the flow of time

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Still and awe: Shen Wei Dance Arts, here rehearsing for its Kennedy Center performance, evokes both beauty and fragility in its subtlest movements. (Katherine Frey – The Washington Post)

Time is so difficult for a performing artist to conquer, but Shen Wei brings it beautifully under control. His program of three interconnected works at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater last Thursday and Friday had the steady flow of sand through an hourglass. Even the most still and meditative moments had a sense of progression.

The smooth currents of Shen's "Re-" Parts 1, 2 and 3 should not be all that surprising. There was a marked unity in their construction and concept. Shen, as is his custom, created not only the choreography but also the visual projections and simple, monochrome costumes for these works. He also recorded the ambient sounds that are sprinkled in with the musical accompaniment.

The triptych sprang from his travels to Tibet (Part 1, performed here two years ago), his native China, which he left in 1995 (Part 3, which is performed second), and Cambodia (Part 2, which comes last).

Let it be said that the evening's only awkward elements were the confusing ordering of the sections and the program's truncated title, which derives from such terms as renew, rediscover and repair. In the 10 years since Shen founded Shen Wei Dance Arts in New York as a mix of Western contemporary dance and Eastern aesthetics, audiences have come to expect a harmonious blend of movement, color and sound. But even by Shen's previous standards, the "Re-" series hits a new mark.

In Part 1, the dancers sit around a Buddhist mandala pattern created on the stage from blue and white confetti. When they rise and shuffle through it, the bits of paper drift and flutter like snow. The dancing echoes this airy softness; it falls somewhere between collapse and updraft.

The most extraordinary moment is at the end, when the eight dancers stand in a circle in silence, facing out so they cannot see one another. At the same instant, without looking around, without the merest sound cue, they sink to their knees as if each had been sucked into a hole. It was a deeply moving sight, and a mastery of timing.

Part 3, which followed, was different; inspired by Shen's recent return to Beijing, it was fast-paced, the dancers marching in rigid columns, peeling off one by one for solos. This was all about dense group formations and lyrical individual expression, and it felt the most tied to the modern world.

Part 2 returned us to the realm of spirituality and poetry that Shen created in Part 1. There was a huge photo of the jungle overgrowth around the Angkor Wat temple, the sound of children hawking trinkets. The dancing was tense and agitated. Then, a new photo: a close-up of the roots of the banyan tree, white and tangled like headless bodies curled up together. A nude dancer emerged onstage from the shadows, her body powdered white; she reclined on her side, letting her head drop back and out of sight, so she looked like one of the ropey tree roots projected behind her. A couple more naked dancers joined her in quiet, motionless rest, forming a captivating still life. And as we pondered this evocative and poignant tableau, and the beauty and fragility of it all -- time simply disappeared.