



14th of October 2016

SHEN WEI DANCE ARTS IN 'NEITHER' AT NEXT WAVE



Shen Wei Dance Arts in *Neither*

Chinese-born choreographer and visual artist Shen Wei has won accolades and honors – including in 2007 a MacArthur fellowship – for his unique melding of the visual and kinetic art forms. His visual art shows strongly the influence of calligraphy; one of his large, black, white, and gray works, “Untitled No. 12-1” has been enlarged to serve as front curtain for his latest work “Neither,” inspired by the 1977 so-called “anti-opera.” Morton Feldman composed the score, and Samuel Beckett’s “libretto” – originally a radio play – consists of eleven cryptic lines of text that refer to light and shadow, sound and no sound, self and other.



Ryan Schlegel in *Neither*

Shen Wei’s dance style is like kinetic calligraphy, consisting of sweeping, continuous motion that winds sinuously along the ground and through space. In it, one can see traces of classical Chinese alongside American modern dance. Upon arriving in New York in 1995 from culturally oppressive China at the time, he studied at the Alwin Nikolai Studio and American Dance Festival, where American modern dance styles converge for six weeks each summer.

As the curtain rises on his hour long work, we see three trios of dancers scattered across the stage, a man (Zak Ryan Schlegel) writhing on the floor at the front, and a woman (Cynthia Koppe) sitting in a chair that’s mounted on the wall about six feet in the air. They’re wearing monotone pajamas, crafted by Jenny Lai in white, black, and gray. To Feldman’s contemplative music – rumbling percussion and strings under shrill pipes – the dancers echo each other’s phrases in canons.

Shen Wei’s lush, wave-like movement style is more appealing when it’s surging and rolling on the ground. Standing, it turns into somewhat amorphous modern dance tropes without enough dynamic or tempo variation to maintain tension. But he has a keen eye for spatial density onstage, and the entrances and exits through nine virtually invisible archways in the stark, white-walled set keep the hour-long work visually fascinating.



Two striking passages are the section, in which dancers in a line remain connected, their arms forming a chain that keeps them bound together. It resonates with the expressive power of Martha Graham's early dances for her women's company and the abstractly suggestive work of Alwin Nikolai or the deeply politically inspired expression of works by Helen Tamiris or Sophie Maslow in the 1950s.

Another is a long unison passage near the end by the whole troupe in the nude costumes they're now wearing. Their extended limbs slice the air, seen through a

transparent fourth wall that descends at the proscenium, turning us into voyeurs, watching some private bacchanal.



Russell Stuart Lilie and Jennifer Rose in *Neither*

Brilliantly modulated lighting by Jennifer Tipton sculpturally etches the bodies in space and maintains a mysterious murkiness without obscuring the action. Bursts of light that flood the floor, when the doorways slowly swing open, are like sunlight gradually flooding into a darkened room.

Feldman's texturally varied music has a rebellious tone of rumbling strings and a relentlessly high soprano voice, singing the text – which is also projected on the back wall at the start of each new section – and shrill wind instruments. The score is at times grating but keeps

the choreographically somber piece from becoming morose. It's an intriguing choice of sound to support Shen Wei's spectacle. No stranger to large-scale productions – the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony and the Park Avenue Armory – Shen Wei's unique blend of visual and kinetic art has captivating expressive impact.

Photos by Stephanie Berger

Gus Solomons jr, © 2016

Gus Solomons Jr. is a renowned choreographer, dancer and dance critic.