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Breezes Waft, Branches Sway and Bodies Scatter and Swirl Shen Wei Dance Arts at Celebrate Brooklyn!

By GIA KOURLAS | JULY 18, 2014



Credit Karsten Moran for *The New York Times*

As a choreographer, Shen Wei is driven by nature. In both his dancers and in his structure, it's all there, just transplanted in bodies: a leafy branch swaying in the breeze, an insect scrambling across a dirt path, powdery clouds floating across a clear sky.

It's arresting how viewing Mr. Shen's work in a natural setting — at least a verdant edge of Prospect Park — heightens that body-to-nature awareness. Perhaps it has to do with being in open air, surrounded by trees: As dusk fell on Thursday at the Celebrate Brooklyn! festival, the same breezes that brushed the skin seemed to activate the swirling dancers onstage. For the outdoor event, Shen Wei Dance Arts performed a reimagined version of “Map” (2005) and “0–12,” a solo from “Collective Measures” (2013).

In “Map,” set to selections from Steve Reich's Minimalist score “The Desert Music,” Mr. Shen investigates aspects, or blueprints, of movement: rotation, bouncing and rebounding, isolation and, ultimately, flow. At first, giant balloons with mysterious markings scrawled on them rested on the stage; once released, they hovered near the top to give the band shell the look of a kooky hot-air balloon.

The mercurial Kate Jewett, her curls bouncing as she folded herself into crisp shapes or curved her torso like a bow, guided the others in pelvic tilts, rocking buoyantly from side to side. The unbroken flow of her dancing, even in more staccato moments, galvanized the whirling sensation of the group. Throughout the five sections of the dance, the performers converged and scattered — whether using their legs to stroke the floor like paintbrushes or standing erect, shoulders rolling and twitching — like a pulsating organism.

While much of the movement's delicacy was lost in an outdoor setting, its power was not: Jordan Isadore, with his furious full-bodied twists and sinewy extension, wiggled his hips as if he were being lit from within. But the real heat came in the final moment when the dancers, surging as one, flowed around the stage like a ribbon.

Ms. Jewett returned for “0–12,” which used paint, shadow and video to frame moments from 12 roles she has danced with the company over the years. Performing on a white square filled with pools of paint, she shifted from sharp poses — a flat back, flexed wrists — to sensual ones that elongated her form. The longer she danced, the more colorful her body became. When she finally stepped off the square, two stagehands lifted it and held it behind her; suddenly her stage was a canvas, and Ms. Jewett, standing in front, was a natural wonder.