

Shen Wei Dance Arts:
 "Neither" (ph. E. Hua)



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Anti-opera isn't anti-dance

Neither – chor. Shen Wei, mus. Morton Feldman
 Purchase, New York, Performing Arts Center, State University of New York

In his latest work, the choreographer Shen Wei has turned to *Neither*, the legendary anti-opera that had its première in Rome in 1977 as a loose collaboration between the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett and the American composer Morton Feldman. Shen Wei's new production, also entitled *Neither* (revised from his 2016 version) is filled with highly virtuosic solos and startling patterns of ensemble dancing.

The result is a haunting meditation on existence. In this sense, the choreographer, based in New York, remains true to his source but discards the concert-like staging for musicians and soprano of the 1977

original.

Shen Wei functions here as a third collaborator by adding layers of dance, and he has designed the striking austere decor: a green-gray room with three walls whose several arched doors open or close to let in light or frame a dark void. Beckett's short poem is occasionally projected onto the stage while a recording of the soprano's virtually unintelligible singing is part of Feldman's emotionally shifting sound.

The printed English text (which begins "to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow") with Beckett's gnomic references to life – or what does not lie beyond – is not a subtitle. Nor is the choreography a literal illustration. Instead, Shen Wei treats the same themes profoundly through his own language in dance, creating a sorrowful atmosphere that somehow radiates hope through the dancers' ferocious physical resistance to gravity and darkness.

During most of the performance, a woman sits on a chair that is suspended in the air, attached to a wall. This is not a Beckett character buried up to her neck in a mound or in a trash can. Nor is this Sartre's *No Exit* be-

cause the dancers enter or leave through the slowly opening doors. But where can they go?

That is the question posed by the astounding solo that opens the piece – an onrush of torment from Zak Ryan Schlegel, an extraordinary male dancer whose long hair flies through space as he thrashes on the floor with skeletal-to-surface violence: actually, he offers a full view of Shen Wei's idiom of weight-shifting high energy.

Two other examples stand out: Janice Lancaster Larsen, descending from the chair, plunges into dynamic desperation. Maria Volpe pours herself magnificently into a Sisyphean solo that repeatedly sweeps her up from the floor. The two women exit temporarily, each a shadow of the other. Jennifer Tipton's nuanced lighting design brilliantly translates Shen Wei's concept of a stricken universe. Yet Beckett's hint of hope leads Shen Wei into an unexpected transformation scene. The dancers suddenly appear in colored plastic sheets, which they shed in a golden glow. The effect is jarring. Or wondrous.

Anna Kisselgoff

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