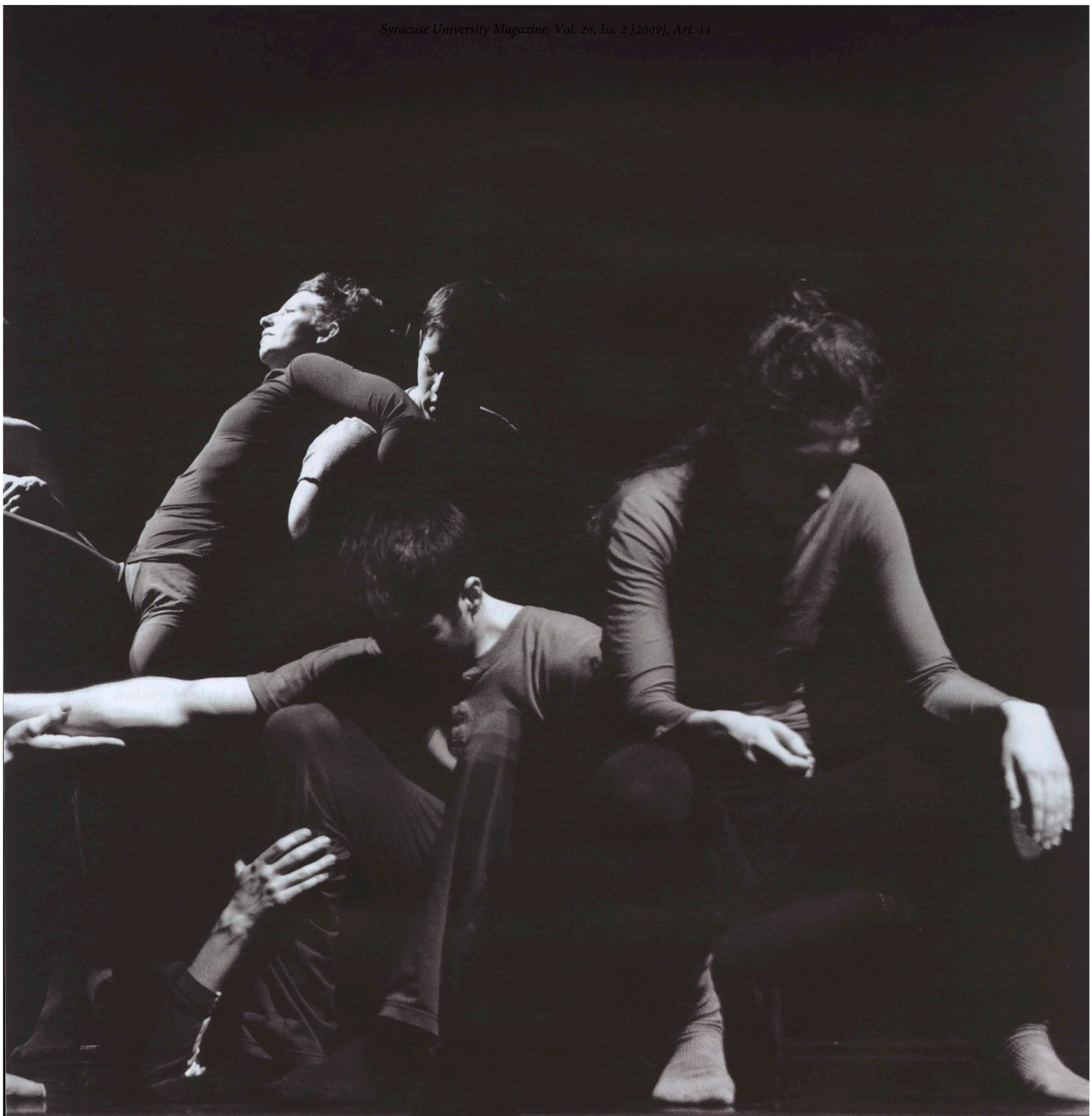


# THE MOVEMENT OF SHEN WEI





ACCLAIMED CHINESE CHOREOGRAPHER  
SHARES HIS ART WITH SYRACUSE COMMUNITY

BY JENNIFER DAVIS

PHOTO BY ALEX PINES

A CLUSTER OF YOUNG DANCERS HOLDS SINEWY POSES FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS AS a small, slender man observes, making slight adjustments to the placement of a foot or the turn of a head. In the afternoon light of a third-floor gymnasium at the former Cathedral School in downtown Syracuse, the Shen Wei Dance Arts (SWDA) troupe is rehearsing the third movement of the *Re-* triptych, a piece inspired by choreographer and visual artist Shen Wei's trip to Cambodia in 2006. The six male and six female dancers, in T-shirts and baggy sweatpants tucked into wool socks, break from the huddle and glide across the black, padded floor. "That looked nice," Wei says. "That worked."



Shen Wei, 41, is probably most famous for choreographing the opening ceremony of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. The son of opera singers from China's Hunan province, Wei immigrated in 1995 to New York City, where he later formed SWDA. The company has traveled the world performing original pieces, such as *Connect Transfer* (2004) and *Map* (2005), and a new interpretation of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (2003). Wei has received numerous awards for his choreography, including a prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and, most recently, a New York State Council on the Arts residence grant, which helped bring his company to Syracuse University.

SU doesn't have an academic program for dance, so opportunities to expose students to elite performances are welcomed. "There is an appetite for dance here," says University Arts Presenter Carole Brzozowski '81. "It feels like we have a responsibility to have events that honor dance as one of the historic art forms." Brzozowski worked with numerous faculty and staff to design a three-week residency for Shen Wei Dance Arts that engaged students and the community at large. From February 24 through March 16, Shen Wei dancers lived in Syracuse and rehearsed the second and third parts of *Re-*, a work in progress. Wei also led nearly 20 master classes open to students and community members, teaching his signature style of modern dance, which focuses on breathing and maximizing fluid movement.

As Wei explained in a University Lecture at Hendricks Chapel on February 26, *Re-* could have several meanings, such as "Rethink," "Redo," or "Remake." The dance triptych is a multimedia piece that features ambient sounds and photographs from Wei's travels in Asia. During the three movements of the dance, "Part I (Tibet)," "Part II (The Silk Road)," and "Part III (Cambodia)," Wei's stirring color photographs are projected on a screen behind the dancers.

These images are integral to the piece's choreography, and Wei familiarizes his dancers with countless photos from his journeys, often spread around the rehearsal space for inspiration. "Sometimes you can't use words to explain," Wei said during the University Lecture. "You use movies, pictures, books to explain the feeling to have when dancing." An accomplished photographer and classically trained painter, Wei integrates all these art forms into his creative process.

SWDA will return to Syracuse for two full-length performances of *Re-* on September 24 and 25 at the Landmark Theatre. The entire Class of 2013 will attend as part of orientation, and the company will perform a specially edited version of *Re-* for children from Syracuse city schools. Brzozowski hopes to introduce students to something new and thought provoking. "The most important thing about the arts is they are a portal to more inquiry," she says. "They are a point of access for discussion: 'What did you see in it? What do you feel about it? What did it evoke for you?' All of these questions are points of access for relationships with other people. The arts, I think, do that in one of the most poignant and real ways."

Despite his diverse experience and cross-cultural background, Wei views himself first and foremost as an artist rather than a cultural ambassador. "My goal is not to be a bridge between East and West," he says. "I want to create new art for our time."

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SHEN  
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Shen Wei (left) and Brett Egan, executive director of Shen Wei Dance Arts, hold a conversation at Syracuse Stage about Wei's Syracuse residency (facing page), his work on *Re-*, and the inspiration behind it.

The appearance also featured a showing of Wei's photographs and an excerpt of the piece that will be performed in Syracuse this fall. The event's audience included 200 students from the Syracuse city schools, SU, and dance studios who were involved in the residency.



## A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

ALTHOUGH PETITE AND INCONSPICUOUS IN STATURE, dance critic Anna Kisselgoff commands massive respect in the dance world. As chief dance critic for *The New York Times* from 1977 to 2005, Kisselgoff saw thousands of performances and interviewed some of the greatest dancers of the 20th century, including George Balanchine and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Kisselgoff was invited to Syracuse for a week as part of the Shen Wei residency, and interviewed the choreographer for "A Conversation with Shen Wei" at Hendricks Chapel in February for the University Lectures series.

Kisselgoff commented on how Shen Wei's work is always

evolving. Whereas he started off doing more emotionally evocative, surrealist-influenced work, his newest pieces focus more on form and abstraction. "When he was doing surrealist work, he was doing choreography to suit his concept," she says. "Along the way, he's developed his own specific type of movement. ... His dancers are phenomenal. They have learned his language."

Kisselgoff believes Wei is an original in the contemporary dance world. "He owes very little, if anything, to experiments of the past," she says. "He has drawn from his Chinese opera training to create a movement idiom that he uses differently in pieces that speak to us on many levels."

Photo by Steve Sartori

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