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World-Class Dance in Durham

American Dance Festival

By Stephanie Miller

Photo Courtesy of RUBBERBANDance Group By Michael Slobodian



The pageantry of the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremonies – with its 2,008 drummers pulsating with unbounded energy – reflects the work of its principle choreographer Shen Wei, the only American on the creative team.

Wei's roots go back to his native China, where he worked in the visual arts and learned the lushness of costume and set design at the opera where his parents performed. And while still in China, Wei began his ongoing relationship with the far-flung American Dance Festival (ADF) in Durham, North Carolina.

Wei's teacher, Yang Meiqi, the mother of modern dance in China, spent time as a choreographer at ADF and asked for its help in bringing modern dance back to her homeland with its traditional dance roots. Wei was in the first graduating class to come from that partnership. Then, Wei, too, went on to work at ADF and founded his dance troupe Shen Wei Dance Arts while there in 2000.

With the introduction of Shen Wei Dance Arts, Wei continued his mission to use all aspects of production – sets, costume design, makeup – to enhance movement. "His painterly eye gives him another way to move dancers around the floor," says Alicia Adams of the Kennedy Center, who says Wei has quickly become one of America's best choreographers.

This year marks Wei's 10th Anniversary at the Festival, where he will perform at a grand gala on July 22 and close this 33rd season, which runs from June 10 through July 24, with two separate pieces, the second piece scheduled for July 22 to 24.

Another ADF offspring, Mark Dendy of Dendy Dancetheater, is also coming back this summer with his world premier, *Divine Normal*, the autobiographical story of a Southern boy who moves to New York City, from June 21 to 23. While in New York, the boy works with dance legends like Martha Graham, who mold him into the choreographer and dancer he is today.

"We all have strong characters in our lives who influence us," says Dendy. Known for his wit, Dendy breathes life into the Martha Graham character he plays. "In spite of all her seriousness," he says, "she could take a step back and laugh at herself."

These works are part of the summer's ongoing dialogue – "What Is Dance Theater?" – this summer's theme. "We're leaving it as a question," says Jodee Nimerichter, co-director of the ADF. "We want to examine it with the community. Do you think this [performance] falls within this title – Yes, no, why?"

During the course of the festival, ADF is running free panel discussions and post-performance talks with the artists, to address this question. "It's an opportunity to get more invested and more aware of what's happening in a different kind of way," says Nimerichter.

It's also an opportunity, as Nimerichter sees it, to involve people who might shy away from modern dance. "I think if someone is open to the huge range of what falls within modern dance – there really is, and I know it's a cliché, 'something for everyone!'"

ADF is doing everything in its power to engage the potential audience. When the viewer opens



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the website, www.americandancefestival.org, a colorful body in motion appears, along with easy-to-use graphics which direct readers to a page on each of the companies, complete with mini-reviews from national critics, video footage, photos and short bios. "We want to help address questions the audience might have before they even consider coming," says Nimerichter.

The mission of ADF is to support talented choreographers, those who have proven themselves over time – Paul Taylor Dance Co, Pilobolus, and others – as well as emerging artists from all over the world. ADF commissions as much new work as possible, while breathing new life into those classics in danger of dying before a new generation sees them.

ADF will expose the audience to emerging artists, such as Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak from Israel, who turn a Tim Burton (Alice in Wonderland) short story into a fantasy dream sequence that comes to life replete with human marionettes, acrobatics, and stunning sets and costumes. The principals, Pinto with a dance background, and Pollak with a theater background, represent one spectrum of the question, "What is dance theater?"

Another point of view will be on display with the work of Martha Clarke, who is being honored for her life's work in modern dance. "Clarke [a founding member of Pilobolus Dance Theatre] has a huge history of crossing the boundaries between dance and theater," says Nimerichter. Clarke collaborated with Alfred Uhry (Driving Miss Daisy playwright) on a piece (July 5 through 7) about the Shaker movement and its suppression of sexuality in order to maintain its religious fervor.

Parents may want to keep children away from Clarke's piece because of its adult content, but there is a wonderful opportunity to expose young people to dance with Argentina's Brenda Angiel Aerial Dance on July 8 through 10, which will perform a matinee program of a tango in the air while using the space on and above the stage to simulate flying. 8cho, in its U.S. premiere, will have live accompaniment and song. The New York Times declares the company

"A truly festive experience. The results are spectacular, sensuous, and breathtaking."

ADF – true to its mission – also wants to stay grounded in masterpieces from the past. One such piece, legendary for its dance theater, is Jerome Robbins' West Side Story Suite which will be choreographed by a "wonderful, talented young man," says Nimerichter, and performed by ADF dancers on July 19 through 21.

The history of the American Dance Festival is as diverse as its programming. Begun in Bennington, Vermont in 1934, Martha Graham, among other dance legends, was one of its leaders. Later it moved to Connecticut College for a period of time and was finally wooed to Durham in 1977 with the help of Terry Sanford, president of Duke University at the time. Durham was one of 13 finalists in a competition that involved proposals from across the country.

"Duke won us and fought hard to get us here," says Nimerichter.

In 2009, ADF began performing at the new Durham Performing Arts Center in addition to its Duke venues. In its history, ADF has premiered 622 works, 402 of them in North Carolina. It has hosted the likes of Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Twyla Tharp and dozens more of these internationally-known dance greats.

The American Dance Festival has a large international presence and hosts a school, consisting of 400 students who come from all over the world to study with its 50 teachers and work with the summer's performing artists. ADF, also, turned its attention to African-American choreographers with its Black Tradition in American Modern Dance projects, which "preserves, celebrates and creates access" to classic works by these choreographers. With all this diversity, there is truly something for everyone.

This summer, drive or simply do a series of grand jetes down I-40 and treat yourself to some of the world's finest "dance theater" in these parts – or anywhere. www.americandancefestival.org

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