

Newfound Rituals:

Music and Movement in Pina Bausch's and Shen Wei's
Rite of Spring

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The Rite of Spring:

Part One: The Adoration of the Earth

Introduction

“Auguries of Spring (Dance of the Young Girls)”

“Mock Abduction”

“Spring Khorovod (Round Dance)”

“Games of the Rival Clans”

“Procession of the Wise Elder”

“Adoration of the Earth (the Wise Elder)”

“Dance of the Earth”

Part Two: The Sacrifice

Introduction

“Mystical Circles of the Young Girls”

“Glorification of the Chosen Victim”

“The Summoning of the Ancients”

“Ritual Ancients”

“Sacrificial Dance (the Chosen Victim)”¹

At its inception, *The Rite of Spring* was intended to create a work that pushed beyond the boundaries of a traditional ballet—to speak to the people of the early twentieth century. What began as a project to encapsulate modernity became a symbol of the age and of modernity itself. It wasn’t just the choreography that shocked the Paris audience at the premiere in 1913, but also Igor Stravinsky’s music. Choreographers ever since have been entranced by Igor Stravinsky’s score, and even today, continue to reinvent and reinterpret it. Although the original *Rite of Spring*, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, had a linear narrative, other interpretations have gone so far as to create a piece devoid of narrative content.

The initial creative collaboration between Nijinsky, Stravinsky, and co-librettist Nicholas Roerich was so close that the narrative, the music, and the libretto became

¹ Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and his Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 207.

deeply entwined, as if each were the product of the other. Each part was created under the influence of the others. Two of the components in particular, the music and the movement, reflected the other's angularity and asymmetry. While those two seemed to reflect one another, the original music and the libretto were tightly meshed.

Of the more than one hundred choreographers who have created versions of *The Rite of Spring*, most acknowledge some aspect of the libretto or respond to the score's natural linearity. The music of *The Rite of Spring* possesses such a graphic quality—its climaxes, its sudden stops and juxtaposed rhythms and instruments—that it spurs choreographers to impose their own narratives on the score. The instruments seem to battle one another like singers trading words of combat, instruments and chords responding to one another in a way that seems almost operatic.

The original libretto that appeared in the program notes at its premiere in 1913 was more illustrative than what usually accompanies the music these days (which more or less labels each section in the score):

1^{er} tableau: l'adoration de la Terre. Printemps. La Terre est couverte de fleurs. La Terre est couverte d'herbe. Une grande joie règne sur la Terre. Les Hommes se livrent à la danse et interrogent l'avenir selon les rites. L'Aïeul de tous les sages prend part lui-même à la glorification du Printemps. On l'amène pour l'unir à la Terre abondante et superbe. Chacun piétine la Terre avec extase.

2^{er} tableau : Le Sacrifice. Après le jour, après minuit. Sur les collines sont les pierres consacrées. Les adolescentes mènent les jeux mythiques et cherchent la grande voie. On glorifie, on acclame Celle qui fut désignée

pour être livrée au dieu. On appelle les Aïeux, témoins vénérés. Et les sages aïeux des hommes contemplant le sacrifice. C'est ainsi qu'on sacrifie à Idrilo le magnifique, le flamboyant.²

The three collaborators intended for there to be a narrative flow and included more details within the libretto of the ballet. Perhaps it is because the sections are usually labeled (like most ballets) that choreographers feel they can take more liberty with its narrative quality. As the decades passed, choreographers began to stray increasingly from the elaborate original libretto and weave in personal interpretations. Pina Bausch, for instance, announced her “explicit intent to return to the motifs of the original libretto,”³ making her version a traditional yet contemporary version of the ballet. In contrast, Shen Wei’s version is completely abstract.

Of the myriad of interpretations of *The Rite of Spring*, I chose those of Pina Bausch and Shen Wei for close analysis, because I find these two, in general, to be in the highest echelon of musical and technical accomplishment. After viewing their versions of *Rite* several times, I wanted to find out how the score’s inherent libretto might evoke similar choreographic themes in these two versions—one being a more narrative approach while the other is abstract—in order to understand how each choreographer implements these same themes differently. My question became: what kind of similar themes do both choreographers develop, and how do they implement these themes? More importantly, does the music make certain themes unavoidable?

² Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 100.

³ Susan Manning, “German Rites: A History of Le Sacre du Printemps on the German Stage,” *Dance Chronicle* 14, no. 2/3 (1991): 145.

Each allows the music to lead them in certain directions. Bausch, having chosen the full orchestral version, uses the score's musical structure in order to heighten the physical drama. Later I will explore how Bausch implements Stravinsky's use of rhythm and timing, but applies them in a way that gives the trajectory of the piece not only drama but additional layers of hesitancy to delineate the psychological journey the dancers go through. Shen, on the other hand allows the abstract quality of Fazil Say's fourhanded piano version of the score to influence his entire piece. Everything in Shen's piece, then, is abstracted, from the movement vocabulary to the costuming. There is absolutely no allusion to the narrative or to the original libretto in his *Rite*, unlike Bausch's version. In Bausch's words, "The starting point is the music,"⁴ but this applies to both choreographers; it just happened to take them to two different destinations.

Though the music led them to choose aesthetically disparate environments for their versions, a similar theme emerges from both. I will elucidate how, whether a narrative is present or not, both versions contain themes influenced by the society each choreographer comes from. The individual versus the mass, or the ensemble, becomes a prominent theme in both Bausch's and Shen's version. Bausch's, since it contains direct ties to the original libretto, focuses on the trauma of singling out an individual to die and the repercussions that the living must endure in the process. Shen, while not recreating any sort of narrative, instead creates a new ritual to perform: the repeated submersion of the individual back into the whole of society. As opposed to Bausch's version, Shen's ritual may not be obvious because he accomplishes it passively, through dance and with no overt dramatic element.

⁴ Quoted in Alan Riding, "Using Muscles Classical Ballet Has No Need For," *The New York Times*, 15 June 1997, H29.

In comparison to the original *Rite*, both Pina Bausch's and Shen Wei's versions are non-traditional. Bausch, in her program notes, elaborates on her use of the libretto as it was structured in the original program notes quoted in French above:

Here one sees the original libretto as if viewed from afar: the adoration of the earth, the veneration of the forces of nature, the glorification of life at the beginning of spring; the angst of the sacrificial victim in the face of death, the power that radiates from the executor of the group will (the oldest or the wise one or the chief); the relentlessness of the group that is damned to sacrifice in order to live; finally the breaking out of the forces of nature within us and around us (the spring); and not least the purpose that the living give to the sacrifice and that the sacrificial victim gives to those who survive.⁵

Bausch starts by enumerating the landmarks or sections of Stravinsky's score, delineated by the libretto. She then asserts an all-inclusive voice by involving "us," the social body. Her *Rite* becomes a commentary not only on the society she creates on stage, but also on society throughout history. The violence and fear perpetuated within her choreography resonates in all of us. Nature, then, represents not only a rebirth and rejuvenation of the earth, but becomes an entity in its own right. It is in a constant flux of life and death—it must kill itself in the winter in order to be reborn in the spring. This idea is reflected in society and in the ritual of *The Rite of Spring*.

⁵ Quoted in Manning, 146.

For many choreographers, the staging of a *Rite of Spring* is sign of choreographic maturity; hence, the need to reinvent the original formula and even to change the story. Bausch returned to the Stravinsky libretto, asserts critic Norbert Servos, but went “beyond any previous concept of the ‘interpretation’ of librettos. She did not ‘choreograph material’, but took instead individual elements from the plot as a point of departure for her own wealth of associations.”⁶ In this way she separated her *Rite* from the original. Instead of “lifting” the storyline from the original libretto, she decontextualized it by placing it in contemporary times to accommodate a critique of modern society. In addition, she took the core idea of violence from the original as her own point of departure. Violence is not isolated in the act of the sacrifice, but the process of choosing the victim and the stress felt throughout the social body is manifested as violence against one another and to oneself. Although her version still has only one victim, the social body she creates on stage is condemned by the same “social ills” that Roerich and Stravinsky had decried. Bausch, like Roerich and Stravinsky, suggests a similar “cure” by “show[ing] a ritual on stage, invoking the spirit of primitive life as a balm for the ills of modern urban society.”⁷ Instead of making a comment on modern, urban society, Bausch sets *Rite* in a nonspecific contemporary context and “concentrates events on the cool yet universally valid core of the ritual.”⁸ The cure is not the sacrifice, but it is in the act of taking a hedonistic ritual from the past and placing it within the

⁶ Norbert Servos, *Pina Bausch Wuppertal Dance Theater or The Art of Training a Goldfish: Exersions into Dance* (Cologne: Ballett-Bühnen-Verlag, 1984), 19.

⁷ *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, ed. J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca. New York: Norton, 2006, 928.

⁸ *The Search for Dance: Pina Bausch's Theatre with a Difference*, dir. Patricia Corboud, 29 min., Inter Nationes, 1994, videocassette.

context of the twentieth century. *Rite* holds a mirror up to society to show the cyclical violence that we continually perpetuate.

Rite was the last “pure dance” work that Bausch choreographed before embracing the Brechtian-influenced montage assemblages of Tanztheater.⁹ *Rite* was her last piece to have a linear narrative, and perhaps because she was on the verge of a new choreographic style, she approaches social issues in a raw, unadulterated fashion, drawing out the most physical and emotional aspects of the music. While restaging her *Rite* for the Paris Opera Ballet, Bausch commented, “There are so many feelings in it; it changes constantly. There is also much fear in it. I thought, how would it be to dance knowing you have to die? How would you feel, how would I feel? The Chosen One is special, but she dances knowing the end is death.”¹⁰ Bausch goes beyond choreographing for dramatic effect and applies the same compositional techniques as Stravinsky to enhance the drama.

“The Procession of the Oldest and Wisest One—the Sage”¹¹ demonstrates how she utilizes the music in a multi-dimensional way, melding Stravinsky’s juxtaposed rhythms and repetitive melody to heighten the dramatic quality. Shelley Berg outlines this scene in relation to the libretto and Nijinsky’s version: “A clearing is prepared at the center of the stage....An orchestral tutti signals the gathering of all the people. The Sage lays himself spread-eagled face down on the ground and bestows his sacramental kiss on the earth in

⁹ Amanda Smith, “New York City,” *Dance Magazine*, Sept. 1984, 35. Reviewing Bausch’s first New York season, Smith wrote: “*The Rite of Spring*, made in 1975, is the only pure dance work Bausch brought to America.” Many other critics not only comment, like Smith, that this is the last “pure dance” piece that she brought to America, but also that this is her last “pure dance” piece, in general.

¹⁰ Quoted in Riding, “Using Muscles.”

¹¹ Shelley C. Berg, *Le Sacre du Printemps* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 49.

time with the chord of string harmonics.”¹² Here, Bausch has followed both the libretto and Nijinsky’s structure.¹³

Right before the Chief lays himself down, as the full orchestra plays one of the repeated, more lyrical melodies, the women gather in a loose clump on stage left. They begin to repeat a short phrase in unison consisting of three components that resemble self-flagellation, all the while keeping a very steady rhythm. Audible breaths sound in time with the rhythm as the dancers contract, receiving blows from some invisible force—one to their left side, the other to their right side, accompanied by a jutting of their elbows into their abdominals. With the entire orchestra playing, it is initially difficult to isolate the rhythm that possesses these women, but gradually the rhythm becomes more insistent until the full orchestra drops out and all that is left is the repeated rhythm, punctuated by the dancers’ short, staccato breaths. On the other side of the red slip that marks center stage and the dividing line between the groups, the men gather and repeat a phrase of their own. The men’s phrase comprises of two parts and is danced to a new, “square” rhythm introduced by Stravinsky. These contrasting rhythmic qualities determine not only the choreographic choices—the men’s phrase, like the “squareness” of the music, is composed of four main components while the women’s phrase is in six parts—but also the stage configuration and the clashing emotional states of each group. At last, the Chief, the only calm presence on stage (other than the red slip), proceeds down the aisle formed by the two groups.

What makes Bausch’s version powerful is not just how the emotions in the music are reflected in the choreography. She also applies to the choreography compositional

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *The Rite of Spring*, prod. Harro Eisele dir. Pit Weyrich, 35 min., ZDF, 1978, videocassette.

devices present in the music, although she does not necessarily use them as Stravinsky would. Two such devices are stillness and repetition. By stillness I mean the contrast between passages of dynamism and relative quiet. Sometimes, the musical cacophony is severed by moments when a sustained note is held by a single instrument, what Burkholder and Palisca call “unpredictable rests and attacks.”¹⁴ Sometimes the stillness occurs as a suspended movement, a moment when Bausch has the dancers hold a position amid a frenetic phrase of movement or music. At other times, she will contrast an individual’s stillness with the mass flurry of the ensemble; for instance, one of the women will pick up the red slip—which the Chosen One will later wear to her death—and have a personal aside while the ensemble is involved in something else. These “aside” moments, as in a Shakespeare play, are a way for an individual character to relate her personal thoughts and emotions to the audience. In the same way the women present themselves to the Chief in the final selection process of the victim, when they pick up the red slip, the women seem to be reflecting on the meaning of the object. Essentially, the red slip represents death; each woman, by picking it up, assesses her own strength to bear the responsibility of becoming the Chosen One.

Bausch choreographs as Stravinsky composed, surprising us with sudden rests and attacks. Yet, rather than tightly choreographing, she physicalizes moments of musical silence or cacophony by having her dancers inhabit space through stillness. A natural effect is created by the release of bodies from physical trauma, like plucking a violin string and watching its reverberations slow until they finally stop. Instead of gradually becoming still, though, the stillness is sudden. Much of what makes this piece

¹⁴ *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, 930.

theatrical has to do with Bausch's ability to physicalize the score through the variation of momentum (in terms of the piece's entire movement trajectory) and breath. At some times, stillness is an indicator of change, especially if Bausch is shifting from one section of the libretto to the next. This usage of stillness is apparent in the beginning before the men are present onstage.

In the introduction, women rush onstage, individually or in pairs, and then pause, first sporadically, then steadily as the number quickly multiplies. Once all of the women are present, the section usually known as the "Auguries of Spring"¹⁵ brings them together in a clump unified by the pounding rhythm of the score. Their bodies convulse in breast-beating gestures of self-flagellation—they seem to do penance before a religious act, bodies trapped by the incantatory music. The music suddenly changes, and a crowd of men ambushes the space, dispersing the tight pack of women in the center. Then all are still. The presence of men brings a powerfully different intensity to the stage. Whereas the women had trickled in like timid does, the men arrive en masse and immediately transform the stage configuration. Their entrance is announced by an orchestral holler that devolves into a steady rhythm—they begin to dance through the clump of women, who remain motionless, as if in fear. A moment of stillness immediately follows the percussive outburst, which allows the audience to absorb the shift in dynamics as the piece moves on to the next section in the libretto, "Ritual Abductions."¹⁶

Bausch, like Stravinsky, establishes certain rhythms and melodies to repeat throughout the score, and sets up a bank of movement motifs to pull from. Once the piece reaches the halfway mark, hardly any new movements are introduced; the existing

¹⁵ Berg, 48.

¹⁶ Ibid.

motifs are then repeated by the ensemble, male groups, female groups, individuals, and the Chosen One. The motif Bausch uses most frequently is self-flagellation, with the dancer either jutting the elbow into her stomach or breast-beating. She uses her motifs repeatedly, sometimes removing a single feature and splicing it into another phrase or altering the timing. A prime example is a double-repetition found in the second Introduction. Bausch uses repetition to reveal how dancing “to the point of total exhaustion [is] a central metaphor for the well-rehearsed behavior of men following the rules of society and selecting women as sacrificial victims, even as the women themselves envision and anticipate the selection.”¹⁷ Every poignant action or moment is repeated: the flagellation, the selection of the sacrificial victim, the asides each woman has with the red slip. Violence, in Bausch’s *Rite*, is inflicted through these gestures of self-flagellation and repeated so many times that it nears the point of desensitizing the viewer. Like any apparently meaningless religious ritual act, the flagellation becomes another routine. In Bausch’s view, violence becomes a religious act and as religion is a taboo subject, it remains harbored from social criticism in modern society; thus, the violence inflicted on women or any member of Bausch’s society goes unchecked.

The self-flagellation phrase returns in the introduction to Part II (“The Sacrifice”). The music that accompanies it is different from the first introduction to Part I. In keeping with the foreboding quality of the music, the reiterated dance phrase is performed with greater hesitancy, slowed down, so that it loses the original punctuation. A woman runs to the front, begins a few movements, and then reaches out with urgency as if to grab the hand of someone who is walking away. Then she draws her empty hand back in by the

¹⁷ Johannes Birringer, “Pina Bausch: Dancing across Borders,” *The Drama Review* 30, no. 2 (1986): 92.

elbow, but doesn't contract in the same pained way as before. Another woman does the same thing, and even shuffles backward, away from this pleading hand.

Repeating the same phrases and movements instills desperation into Bausch's *Rite*: the women in this society repeat these movements throughout, almost like a plea for help or recognition beyond the proscenium. Though the phrases are distorted by changing the timing or by inserting them into different parts of the piece, there is something unsettling in the knowledge that the same vocabulary can become unrecognizable. This is especially true because upon first viewing, it is less obvious: in *Rite's* small world, barriers of limited vocabulary circumscribe daily paths and relationships. There are only so many ways to touch a person, to interact with someone, or to travel from place to place. The sacrificial solo becomes a culmination of these movement motifs, the ultimate plea of desperation. By repeating the movements that the ensemble has been executing throughout the piece, but in quicker succession and with more physical exertion, the dancer moves closer to death.

Although Bausch's version, like Shen's, remains invested in the unfolding of a single ritual event, her work invokes contemporary social concerns and relationships through a series of mimetic gestures and actions. Shen, however, shuns narrative, as most critics agree.¹⁸ He himself has said in describing his *Rite*: "In keeping with my interest in abstraction, it is only the melodic and rhythmic qualities of the music, rather than the story it tells, which inform the choice of movement vocabulary."¹⁹ Since the original intention of *The Rite of Spring* was not to tell a story but to create a ritual, Shen's abstraction actually underscores the work's ritual aspect. Even if musical as opposed to

¹⁸ For example, see reviews by Deborah Jowitt, Tobi Tobias, Pia Catton, and Anna Kisselgoff.

¹⁹ Shen Wei, Program Notes, 2003.

narrative considerations determine his choice of movement, his work still reveals both tangential meanings and links to the libretto.

Shen's decision to use Fazil Say's fourhanded piano version of the music underscores his goal of abstraction. The full orchestral score reveals many personalities and is rich in instrumental color, but stripping the score to its percussive essence, in contrast, limits the color palette. What is left is structure and line, much like a tree without its leaves: the sinewy lines are exposed, making the patterns and entangled branches visible. This idea of "[paring] the original orchestral piece down to its core essentials," in critic Karen Campbell's words,²⁰ influences not only the movement but also the costuming and set design. The costumes consist of simple, tight pants and shirts with a couple of dresses. Dancers wear variations of a monochromatic color scheme, with chalk stripes across their bodies reflected from the patterns and swirling forms on the floor canvas. Shen Wei has not missed a single detail when it comes to his thematic choices.

One way to look at these choices is as a distillation of the original *Rite of Spring*. In this way, instead of taming the score's ferocity, Shen presents it in its most concentrated form. Viewed in this light, Shen's version lacks overt ties to the libretto. Unlike Bausch, whose *Rite* inserts a social construct between the layers of movement and music, Shen removes the social construct, so that the body is reacting only to the music and not to a narrative theme. Although it is probably too much to say that the music dictates the gestalt of the movement, the score's emotional leverage definitely has a significant impact on what the movement is and how it is performed. Deborah Jowitt has

²⁰ Karen Campbell, "Hot Fusion: Energy Results when Stravinsky meets Shen Wei," *The Boston Globe*, 20 August 2004, <<http://www.shenweidancearts.org/article62.html>> (12 October 2006).

commented that “almost all of the many choreographers who’ve tackled Igor Stravinsky’s monumental *Le Sacre du Printemps* have acknowledged in some way the scenario built into the score.”²¹ One could say that until now, acknowledging the scenario has been unavoidable.

In the past, there have been variations on the original narrative and even new ones, but Shen’s *Rite* is different in its lack of a linear narrative. What does emerge, however, is a choreographic device that acquires the character of a quasi-narrative theme. Again and again, Shen uses an individual to introduce a movement idea, which is then generalized through repetition by the ensemble. Such repetition tends to diminish the initial novelty of the idea. Repeatedly, Shen dissolves the emotional impact of the theme by generalizing, repeating, and ultimately abstracting it.

In these attempts to achieve abstraction, however, certain elements have proven to be beyond his control. He states in his program notes that “in unstaged life, alongside that which is definite, there will always exist the coincidental, the uncontrollable, the chance happening,” and that this is especially true of performance. Is this perhaps a disclaimer? Few critics make any attempt to look beyond their own initial conclusions or deviate from the mantra that his *Rite of Spring* is an abstract interpretation, but one who does speculate about the work’s larger meaning is Anna Kisselgoff, in her review of the Lincoln Center Festival performance in 2003:

At the end when a flute usually signals the sacrificial virgin’s death, there is a trill and a bang.

²¹ Deborah Jowitt, “Spring Into Action: Stravinsky’s passion is transformed into Shen’s ardent design,” *The Village Voice*, 2 October 2006, <<http://www.villagevoice.com/dance/0640.jowitt,74611,14.html>> (12 October 2006).

There is no victim as such onstage. Instead, the 12 dancers face the audience and step slightly back, taking an audible breath.

In this direct moment, more transcendental than the image of figures ascending to heaven in “Folding,” Mr. Shen says something about life and death. When breath expires, we die.²²

Here, Kisselgoff is describing the ending, when the dancers move from a large circle to the center of the stage and then disperse in the final moment. What Kisselgoff seems to be alluding to is not a narrative component, but death as a connection with the original libretto. As the ensemble winds up tighter and tighter in little circles, the music pounds on until a final chord sounds. Unlike most dance pieces in which the moment of death is prolonged and dramatized, *Rite* ends almost prematurely.

For most choreographers, the face is usually unexplored terrain, but Shen makes use of it to further his abstract theme. Usually, facial expression is inconsequential to the piece, or the choreographer allows the dancers to use their faces as they wish. However, in Shen’s opening sequence, when the dancers make their entrance in silence, the faces maintain a catatonic gaze, trained on the floor. The dancers shuffle across the floor like pawns on a chessboard, shifting positions at the instigation of some unseen force. Their faces are no longer faces, but masks concealing emotional appeal and theatrical effect, oblivious to the music.

Critic Valerie Gladstone had the opportunity to watch one of Shen’s rehearsals in 2003, when the company was preparing for its appearance at the Lincoln Center Festival. “After the rehearsal,” she wrote, “Mr. Shen...offered the dancers criticism. He told them

²² “A Breakout For the ‘Rite,’” *The New York Times*, 25 July 2003, E1.

to be careful not to reveal their reactions to the music with their facial expressions.”²³ Since Shen was originally trained in Chinese Opera, where the face is an integral part of the acting, he was well aware of its potency as an instrument of expression.

Critics familiar with Chinese Opera recognize its influence on Shen’s work.²⁴ One important aspect of Chinese Opera is the makeup, and there are certain specific ways to apply it according to the role one plays.²⁵ Since in essence all of Shen’s dancers are playing the same part, he not only dresses them in virtually identical, monochromatic costumes, but also has them whiten their faces and darken their hair—except for a red-headed woman, who leaves her hair its natural color.²⁶ Though this might appear to be simply an aesthetic choice, it is in keeping with his theme: the feature that sets her apart from the group goes unacknowledged by them. One feels that if there were a way for the group to imitate this physical characteristic in order to mask the difference, they would, but since they cannot, they ignore it.

Masks can be used to hide an expression, but they also can serve as expressive devices in themselves. For example, Mary Wigman often used masks in her work. Yet it wasn’t that she felt the face should be hidden in order to avoid theatricalizing it; she believed that in performance, the mask became alive, undergoing a metamorphosis according to the emotions emitted by the dancer’s body. Wigman felt that the face

²³ Valerie Gladstone, “Playing a Serious Game of Twister,” *The New York Times*, 20 July 2003, sec. AR, 7.

²⁴ For example, see Anna Kisselgoff.

²⁵ *Aspects of Peking Opera*, prod. Northwood Institute and the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Theatre Arts (IATA), 15 min., Fordham University Press, 198-, videocassette.

²⁶ *Rite of Spring*. Choreography by Shen Wei, American Dance Festival, 7 July 2003. DVD. Note that Shen doesn’t necessarily use the same woman in later productions, as there was no red-headed woman in the production shown at the Joyce.

should not be decorative, because it was an essential part of the dance figure.²⁷ Though Shen does not use actual masks, he treats the face as a mask. In the course of a performance, the more fatigued the dancers became during the performance, the more difficult it became to keep the face frozen. By the end of the performance, I could see a loosening of these masks through glimmers of smiles or even a fierce stare that developed perhaps as overcompensation. These slight displays of personality only make Shen's intentions more obvious. Controlling the face minimizes emotion and transforms Shen's dancers into the depersonalized celebrants of a ritual.

In both Shen's and Bausch's versions of *The Rite of Spring*, there is an overarching, perhaps subconscious, interplay between the individual and the mass. In each version, however, the theme has different connotations. For Bausch, the violence perpetuated against the individual by society slowly decimates the whole of society (even though, ironically, the sacrifice is intended for rejuvenation and ensures the continuity of the community). Shen's version, on the other hand, deals more with the death of individuality. Since Bausch is making a more obvious social statement than Shen, the separation of the individual from the ensemble has implicit social repercussions.

A single body, segregated from the ensemble, appears very vulnerable. Drawing on the libretto, Bausch uses the act of sacrifice not only in its traditional context as a "rite," but also as a social event. In most *Rites* based on the original libretto, the victim is usually called "The Chosen One." In Bausch's version, as in a number of others, the chaos onstage creates ambiguity and confusion as to who the Chosen One will be. Ultimately, the Chosen One is the one who dons the red slip that has been present onstage

²⁷ *Mary Wigman: 1886-1973*, prod. and dir. Allegra Fuller Snyder, 41 min., Princeton Book Company, 1991, videocassette.

since the beginning of the work. A splash of bright color passed from woman to woman, the image is striking, and Bausch makes it a bold symbol. As the work opens, a woman hugs the earth, lying on top of the slip. From afar, it looks like a pool of blood beneath her still body sprawled on the ground. After the opening scene, once all the women have appeared, the slip gets passed from one woman to the next, eliminating any sense of recognition of who the Chosen One is.

Bausch's version, like Nijinsky's, does not identify the Chosen One until a ceremonial selection occurs prior to the sacrifice. At the crux of the piece, a clump of women systematically pass the slip among themselves. The woman holding the dress presents herself to the Chief, in a trial for both the woman to test her willingness to become the sacrifice and for the Chief to assess whether he feels she is even worthy of it. The "bit" is repeated numerous times, not always in exactly the same manner, until finally the Chief violently grasps her shoulders. The selection process certainly highlights the acting skills of Bausch's dancers, as each one embodies the experience individually; probably they are relating their own fears and evaluating their own capacity to face death. The accompanying music then lifts into an uproar as the ensemble engages in a mass orgy. The only two who do not take part in this dance are the Chosen One and the Chief, who meanwhile prepare for the sacrifice as the Chosen One changes from her white slip into the sheer, red one.

Even though this is an ensemble piece culminating in the sacrificial solo, Bausch allows the individuals within the ensemble to create their own psychological weight. At the same time, she creates a sense of group psychological weight, so that the viewer sees and feels the angst of both the group as a whole and the individual who comprise it. At

the end, a single body stands against the mass; before this, however, all the women must dance as if they are going to die. Almost constantly throughout the piece, a woman holds the red slip, as if to test herself before she presents herself to the Chief. She might trudge slowly through the group during a chaotic dance sequence, with a look of fear on her face, clasping the slip. At other times, the slip is not involved; a woman pulls away and is chased down by a man. The music then lulls suddenly, and the two end downstage and form a human crucifix: the man's arms are outstretched, and the woman hangs from one of his shoulders, with both arms hooked behind her while her body hangs limply. Then a group of men slowly swarm around her, ominously, after she pulls out of the cross position. The same man who chased her down kneels before her and tenderly cups her breasts while she stares down at him.

In Bausch's version the Chosen One appears to accept the part voluntarily. For the spectator as well as the dancers tension builds from the beginning—one wonders if the Chosen One will simply be the unfortunate maiden who happens to be holding the dress at the climactic moment. In other words, is choice even a factor? The section where the victim is the section called "Naming and Honoring of the Chosen One"²⁸ (or 'Glorification of the Chosen One'), and is the clearest moment in the piece up to that point. Since the opening, we are never sure who the Chosen One is. This rules out any possibility of the victim's fate being anticipated by either the Chosen One or the Chief. In fact, according to critic Glenn Loney, it isn't only the audience that is left in suspense, but also the dancers, who don't know in advance who will be chosen.²⁹ The intermittent moments of stillness in this section are moments of contemplation as well as moments

²⁸ Berg, 50.

²⁹ Glenn Loney, "Pina Bausch: Germany's 'Wicked Fairy,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 27 May, 1984, sec. S47.

acknowledging fate. Since the group is never certain until the deciding moment whom the victim is, the group dances with the knowledge that its own fate could be death, only moments away.

In this case, death for a single victim is death for all women. In her program notes, Bausch outlines the relationship between the victim and the group:

The angst of the sacrificial victim in the face of death, the power that radiates from the executor of the group will (the oldest or the wise one or the chief); the relentlessness of the group that is damned to sacrifice in order to live; finally the breaking out of the forces of nature within us and around us (the spring); and not least the purpose that the living give to the sacrifice and that the sacrificial victim gives to those who survive.³⁰

Here Bausch describes the potential relationships that exist in society—the conflict of mass against mass, or mass against individual. She creates the dual presence of life and death. Once the victim is chosen, the individuals within the society who had previously shared the same potential fate coalesce into a single social body, representing life; the continuity of life is made possible by the single victim.

Bausch's works that followed *Rite* often dealt with the violence women endured at the hands of men, thus unveiling “the uncomfortable world of personal relationships (relationships between couples) and the manner in which women are used and exploited by men.”³¹ In *Rite*, she constructs a society in which the exploitation of women is both accepted and a way of life. This is a separate issue from the sacrifice. What is a tradition or “rite” in this onstage society may seem foreign to us, yet the sexual submission of

³⁰ Quoted in Manning, 146.

³¹ Servos, 14.

women is an everyday, if often ignored, occurrence. Bausch emphasizes this and confronts us by placing numerous couples in the same space, all repeating the same violent actions. After the One is chosen, the clumps of men and women merge and split up into couples. Then the orgy begins.

This self-contained world is a microcosm of how Bausch sees the entire world. Society has already submitted to the power of the ritual, and therefore, all of its members are victims—much like religion today drives us to kill in the name of blind faith. Men, while they are portrayed as inflicting violence upon the women, are victims in their own right; their fatal flaw is ignorance of the power they must reap from the death of a maiden, without which they cannot survive according to some unexplained religious doctrine. All are caught in this cycle of violence. Even the once-frightened women encircle the Chosen One in a predatory way along with the men.

Unlike Bausch, Shen keeps the “individual” buried within the group. In other words, where Bausch allows individuals to have aside moments with the audience, the connection between Shen’s dancers and the audience has a more neutral tone. Because emotion in Shen’s piece is actively suppressed, along with individual identity, what emerges is a single-minded group, with a collective, introspective focus on movement.

While Shen explicitly states in the program that he chose not to integrate a narrative into his version, certain factors inevitably remain beyond his control. One concerns the associations that the audience brings to *The Rite of Spring* from previous versions or from a familiarity with the libretto. Another is Shen’s point: live performance always involves “coincidental” chance happenings. As much as Shen can, he attempts to eliminate these chance events without hampering the movement of the dancers. In large

part, this has to do with his treatment of the face as a mask, but as much as he tries to control the accidental, live performance tends to prompt unintentional occurrences like movements with the face or even a single look two dancers may exchange.

Shen carefully strips away markers of identity, particularly gender. On the other hand, gender is the fulcrum on which Bausch's *Rite* balances: from gender we can construe her social polity, the relationships it produces within the group, between any two individuals, a man and a woman, opposing groups, or the mass against the individual. Gender, in real life, is what determines the dynamic of a relationship between two people—the body language, words exchanged, how a person is able to relate to another, and so on. Thus, Shen's elimination of gender from his *Rite of Spring* bolsters his attempt to create a non-narrative work. What is left when gender and expression are stripped from a dance piece is simply the body in space.

Whether the absence of partnering in Shen's *Rite* is a direct result of his treatment of gender cannot be determined, but certainly there is no physical contact between the dancers or even obvious eye contact. The only concrete connection that occurs is between the bodies in space and the music, which keeps the group moving in the same trajectory. "It is as if the dancers' actions are being triggered by a collective internal force," notes Karen Campbell, "or, perhaps, something greater outside themselves."³² Stravinsky's score acts as this force to hold the group together—it is the conduit between the dancers that guides them through the piece. Without the music, the dancers could not function as an ensemble with a collective, introspective focus.

³² Campbell, "Hot Fusion."

Since Shen's *Rite* is almost wholly an ensemble work, whenever a single body is detached from the group it captures the audience's attention. These moments are very clear, and allow the viewer to absorb the movement. It may well be that Shen uses so much ensemble work because a solo tends to trigger stronger responses than a group dance. When gestures are performed as a solo, instead of the focal point shifting from one dancer to the next, it remains with the soloist, which allows the gestures to have a sequential flow. A sequence of gestures, whether abstract or not, tends to come across as pantomime (or at least mimetic to some degree). What makes it difficult to see most dance as completely abstract—in addition to the presence of the body—is the existence of colloquial gesture in everyday life. It doesn't matter that the viewer can't necessarily translate Shen's gestures; abstract gesture is equivalent to a person speaking a foreign language whose words wield a communicative power whether they are understood or not.

Shen's own solo in this *Rite* is the only time the audience perceives all the intricacies of his choreography. Since Shen is experimenting with movement qualities that can be evoked from the music, he generally uses solos as a landmark to indicate these shifts. Usually, when his ensemble performs together, the audience is overwhelmed by intricate movements that feel chaotic. Shen's groups seldom perform in synchronized unison, and even when they do, the directional variations between the individual dancers or groups blur the clarity of the movement. Despite this, Shen himself performs a solo that begins about ten minutes into his *Rite*. Even more, this is his first appearance on stage, which heightens his personal relationship with the choreography.

The introduction to this section begins with a high tinkling of the piano; then the low, lagging underbelly of the section surfaces. In the libretto, this section is known as

“Spring Rounds,”³³ and the melody takes on a languid quality, while the rhythm lags a bit behind it. During the tinkling, a group sweeps diagonally across the space from downstage left to upstage right, and then freezes. When the music shifts to the heavier rhythm, Shen emerges from the group. At this point in the music, though it continues to fluctuate dynamically, the longest lull thus far occurs. Though Fazil Say’s version speeds up in this section, the somber tone is still musically conveyed.

An invisible force pulls Shen backward, while the members of the group remain frozen. He curves around a frozen body performing the same small steps as in the opening sequence and faces front. The following phrase of hand and arm gestures is very authoritative: keeping his gaze level, he inserts a short stop after each gesture like a command. While he delivers these gestures, he twists and curves around his central axis. Throughout his solo, no linear pathways are created. If he is not stepping in small curvatures, he traverses the space by rolling or by a movement’s natural, fluid trajectory like stepping out of a turn. About halfway through, there is a brief interlude when the dancers facing away from him are reawakened and emulate these small, stepping curves; again, no linear pathways are made.

Then, the music shifts again. The same melody continues but is harshly pounded out on the piano. With the first chord, a dancer from offstage darts across, strictly following the lines on the canvas. It is only when the dancers follow these lines that you notice that Shen appears to be using the visual floor patterns to trace the movement trajectories of the dancers. In addition, beneath the lines, Shen has painted faint swirls that are most noticeable from a bird’s eye perspective; these resemble the same small

³³ Shelley C.Berg, 49.

curves of the walks. Not only are the dancers qualitatively contained by the music, but by their environment as well. Shen has made automatons of his dancers. With this idea in mind, the solos can be viewed as either the initiation of a new movement idea or the individual's attempt to break away from the group.

Shen's attempts to keep his dancers contained for the sake of abstraction can at times feel like overcompensation. As stated above, Shen's use of abstraction in *The Rite of Spring* distills the score's inherent libretto, extracting the vehemence and the natural movement quality. The themes that Shen has distilled make the enactment of Shen's choreography a rite in itself. Unlike Bausch, who represents a ritual, Shen creates a ritual with the repeated submersion of the individual within the group. This theme not only reflects modern dance in China, but individuals' efforts to separate themselves from a homogenous and repressive society. Artists in China "harbour a...fear [of] greater censorship, a deemphasizing of the creativity associated with Western notions of individualizing of social realism as the only officially approved style of art."³⁴ Freedom of expression through art is a foreign concept to Chinese society, which is more apt to judge dance through a traditionalist perspective than an innovative one. It comes as no surprise that the government censors art that deviates from their traditional forms.³⁵ Since Shen experienced this firsthand, perhaps it was a subconscious decision on his part to suppress the individuals who stray from the group. Although he has been in the United States since 1995, he may well have channeled his experience of being an artist in China in his *Rite of Spring*. Resembling the social crisis of his homeland, a soloist repeatedly

³⁴ Roger Copeland, "The Bull in the China Shop: Modern Dance in The People's Republic of China," *Contact Quarterly*, Summer/Fall 1992, 25.

³⁵ Giora Manor, "Something Old and Something New, Something Red and Something Blue: Modern Dance Artists in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan Searching for a Synthesis of the Traditional and the Contemporary," *Israel Dance Tel-Aviv*, no. 5 (April 1995): 81.

breaks away and establishes a movement quality, which is then emulated by the entire ensemble, thus snuffing out any attempt at individuality. As with the mask, which eliminates the sense of individual character, any movement that might deviate from the group is suppressed.

Only once does Shen disrupt his own construct. During the second half of the program, about half the group is onstage; there is a brief pause, all are still, then there is silence. The other dancers walk on, and two lines assemble downstage, facing front. That is, the entire ensemble is assembled save a tall woman who remains upstage left, in the dark, facing the back wall. Once the two lines are formed, the musical pounding reaches a climax. The dancers remain stationary for more than a minute, eyes closed, each person twitching a body part, while the woman in the back remains calm. This section stands out because the masks have temporarily dropped; one dancer's face even twitches. Each dancer has an individual spasm uniquely his or her own. The automatons are finally humanized. Once their eyes open, they are released from this dreamlike interlude and return to their former selves. The music becomes very calm, and they back up slowly as the tall woman finally permeates the illuminated part of the stage.

Unlike Shen's earlier solo, which is gestural and percussive, the woman's solo flows from one movement to the next. All of her movements appear to be proximally initiated—her limbs twist from the socket, and through succession the rest of her body follows. She traverses the stage to the center of the space; meanwhile, the other dancers have reached the edges of the space and stand in the dark facing inward, just as she had faced upstage during their twitches. She continues to dance alone for almost a minute

and is then joined by some of the ensemble. More of the ensemble joins until all are onstage, forming a grid around her.

The woman that Shen uses for this part is extremely tall, which further sets her apart from the rest of the ensemble. During the twitching, her presence looms over them, even though she faces upstage, distancing herself physically and psychologically from the group. She exists on a liminal plane in comparison to the ensemble. It is not just a suggestion of differentiation, but an active effort to separate herself. She has become an individual by not participating, instead of initiating the new movement. Shen might have chosen this moment to allow her to exist, but in keeping with the ritual, her individuality is soon subsumed into the mass. She finds a place in herself in the space, but when the ensemble joins her, the grid that forms around her is like a cage: the spaces between bodies are even, and the lines intersect at right angles and run parallel. Her moment of freedom over, she then becomes one of many bodies twisting their limbs slowly through the space.

Repetition, as I have demonstrated, has certain connotations within both of these versions of *Rite*, but I have not yet discussed in depth the fact that dance itself is a ritual. What is ritual, if not the repetition of a certain action or the repeated re-creation of an event? A concert dance piece in itself is a ritual: rehearsing the same movements day after day, the formality of the stage (dancer and audience separated by proscenium), and then repeating the same motions night after night for an audience.

The Rite of Spring not only enacts a ritual on the stage, but in just under a century, has become a ritual of its own. The question that initially interested me in exploring *The*

Rite of Spring, even before I chose my choreographers, was this: why has Stravinsky's score become a rite of passage? How did it become a challenge that so many choreographers feel compelled to meet before they can call themselves accomplished? Attempting to answer this in earnest would be difficult, without interviewing multiple choreographers. There is something to say, though, about how people aspire to associate themselves with one of the first groundbreaking and controversial modern ballets. Can this be attributed to a desire to rile up society? To insult people for insult's sake?

I'd like to think that the score is more than just a symbol of modernity, but that it can also remind us that we share the same, primitive nature, that a dark side lurks in all of us. Why can't the fact that we all have the capacity to inflict violence or suppress the individual be what unites different cultures? That is not to say that *The Rite of Spring* necessarily supports these ideas, but it does shed light on what makes us all the same. The individual versus the mass: what else is life but the self against the world?

To my unanswered question: does the music make certain themes unavoidable? It is evident in the divergent ways that Bausch and Shen treat their theme of the individual versus the mass that other themes are certainly possible. Ultimately, I believe it comes down to the libretto and its unavoidable associations. Had the initial collaboration of Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Roerich not so deeply embedded the libretto within the creation of the score, then one could say with greater assurance that a piece like Shen's has no connection to the original version. That in retrospect is something we cannot say.

In both versions, the choreographers' voices empathize most with the victim and his or her death. For Bausch, perhaps because of her interest in portraying intense violence, she felt the burden of responsibility for giving the victim her voice. Repeated

movements kill the victim, but they give her a louder voice and longer resonance after death. As for Shen, whether or not he admits that his piece has a tie to the original libretto, his victim is everyone—at least those who attempt to separate themselves from the mass. Consequently, through death, Shen's and Bausch's newfound rituals allow the individual to express an aspect of their experience in this world that only dance could explain.

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