Shen Wei at DPAC

BY SUSAN BROILI
Special to The Herald-Sun

DURHAM — When Shen Wei Dance Arts dancer Sara Procopio performs her solo about the past 11 years of this company, she knows every step by heart.

Her solo, “0-11,” appears in the middle of choreographer Shen Wei’s ADF-commissioned world premiere, “Limited States.”

The company performs this 65-minute work, without intermission, today through Saturday, at the Durham Performing Arts Center. Procopio knows all the references to dances created in this 11-year period because she was there from the very beginning in the summer of 2000 when choreographer Shen Wei founded his company at the American Dance Festival.

The ADF had commissioned a new work from the choreographer, who chose his dancers from ADF students. The dance, “Near the Terrace, Part I,” brought this choreographer recognition as a rising star in the modern dance world. In it, dancers wore skin-colored head pieces that made their heads look long and pointed. They moved forward slowly as they leaned back so far their bodies resembled the letter “C.”

“It was a transformative performing experience. It’s a piece that has a special place in my heart,” Procopio said. In preparation for working on this dance, Shen showed them paintings by Belgium surrealist painter Paul Delvaux that inspired the dance, she added.

ADF director Charles Reinhart also knew he was looking at the work of a gifted choreographer when he first saw a video of Shen Wei’s 2000 “Folding” created for the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, China’s first modern dance troupe. Shen was a founding member of that company in 1991.

“I can see myself in bed watching the video and

See ADF, Page C3
reaching for the phone. We almost literally said, ‘Hold the presses.’ We added him at the last moment,” Reinhart said in an interview earlier this week.

“I had never seen anything like it,” Reinhart said of “Folding” and then “Near the Terrace, Part 1.”

The way Shen melded East and West and grabbed attention with such unusual ways of moving such as when dancers arched their bodies way back signaled a great talent, Reinhart added.

Shortly after their performances of the dance in 2000, the group of students gathered for dinner with the choreographer. “He spoke to all of us about wanting to form a company that would travel all over the world. I was excited but cautiously optimistic,” Procopio said.

As it turned out, that’s just what happened. Shen invited almost half of the group to be in his company, now celebrating its 10th anniversary. Although formed at ADF in 2000, the company dates its anniversary from 2001 — the first year it performed as Shen Wei Dance Arts.

“It’s been an incredible, incredible journey. Performing, traveling and being part of a creative process has been beyond what I could have imagined,” she said.

For her, that journey is almost over as she soon embarks on a new chapter after performances with the company in December. She plans to teach more and work on small projects with other people, she said.

“I think this will be my last performance with the company at ADF,” she added.

Shen created the solo in the new work for her in celebration of her 11 years with the company.

She spoke of his creative process.

“He doesn’t have a piece all figured out in his head before he comes in the studio. He may have an idea, movement, visual image, sound quality,” she said.

Shen is a painter as well as a choreographer. He also draws from his experience as a performer of traditional Chinese opera.

Sculptures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art inspired “Internal, External #2,” the third part of “Limited States,” she said. Costumes — flesh-colored body suits with cutouts to reveal a different body part on each dancer — also provided inspiration, she added.

Videos of company members dancing project on a screen and on dancers throughout the new work. The musical score represents Shen’s most diverse score yet and includes NOAA weather reports, Asher’s “Traveler Pierced By Arrows: Landscapes Elsewhere” and Rossini’s “Moise et Pharaon.”

In three-fourths of his work, Shen also leaves room for dancers to improvise — including in this world premiere. “It keeps pieces fresh and looking different. As dance artists inside a work there’s that freedom to keep it fresh for yourself,” Procopio said.