

H.T. Chen & Dancers
Dance Theater Workshop, NYC
June 14–17, 2006
Reviewed by Emily Macel

In his newest work, *Shift*, H.T. Chen brings Vijay Seshadri's poetry to life in a five-part visual interpretation.

Seshadri begins "Street Scene," a poem from *Wild Kingdom*, with the lines: "The job of redemption, with its angels and lawyers, / runs late into the morning"; Chen too begins with these characters. We first see the angels and lawyers, dressed in white and black respectively, reading newspapers to the sounds of street life—cars and trucks, incomprehensible voices, and extraneous noises.



Kayan Lam (center) in Shift
Photo by Carol Rosegg, courtesy H.T. Chen & Dancers

Shift digs below the surface of everyday life and weaves between realism and surrealism. Chen's choreography tells a story, but one that is not so clearly defined that it blocks out audience interpretation. Angular yet fluid movements create an oceanlike rhythm. The dancers seem to be part of one organism—an amoebic, ever-changing shape—taking impulses from each other's movements and from the music, Fitz Patton's mix of sound effects and synthesized rhythms. The title perhaps refers to these shifting variables: the character roles each dancer plays; the props, which move between actuality and symbolism; the waxing and waning of the music; and the feeling of perpetually changing seasons of life.

A set of four long, white benches, beginning upstage as a place to sit and read the newspapers, are moved through the space by the dancers. Like living sculptures, the benches and dancers create towering shapes, at times defying gravity. Joe Doran's lighting design, with its unidentifiable projected shapes and designs, gives yet another level of intrigue. Is it a street? A body's internal, systematic maze? A boardwalk at the beach?

At times the use of props verges on redundancy or oversimplification. In a section titled "pigeons of every color," the black-and-white costumes take on colored skirts; they add energy to the stage but fail to enhance the dancers' mundane movements. Yet Chen's dreamlike, symbiotic exploration leaves one with the satisfied feeling of having created a personal interpretation of both the poetry and dancing. See www.htchendance.org.