

Mesmerising and magical show

By Sarah Frater, Evening Standard 29.05.08



Pic: Alastair Muir

Wonder wall: the 16 Buddhist monks from the Shaolin Temple perform Sutra

There's not much to prepare you for what you see in Sutra. It's not dance, and it's not theatre, and although it includes 16 tumbling and jumping Buddhist monks from the Shaolin Temple in China's Henan Province, it's not kung fu either. It's certainly nothing like the gaudy kung-fu action shows that have visited London in recent years.

Sutra has no story, and no dialogue, and Antony Gormley's set is just 16 coffin-shaped boxes that the monks drag, push and throw about. They also climb into them like the trenches, turn them into the Labyrinth, and then stack them up like Japanese cubicle hotels. They morph into boats and catacombs, and in one magical scene, form concentric circles that open like the petals of a flower with the youngest monk as the stamen. In another scene, they become a barrier that reminds you of the Berlin Wall or the one that separates Israel from its neighbours.

You could call Sutra conceptual, or 101 ways with a wooden box, but the first is too clinical and the second too cynical, and neither conveys the work's gentle humanity nor its mesmerising effect. Admittedly, when the 75-minute piece starts, you wonder what Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui is on about.

The Belgian-Moroccan director-choreographer, best known for his work with Britain's Akram Khan, sits on one side of the stage and plays with a miniature set of boxes while the monks shunt the coffin-sized ones around. Then gently, quietly, and without anyone saying a word, you realise Sutra is an elegy and fanfare combined. It's a prayer for the meek and a cheer for the brave, be they mere taxpayers, battling bureaucrats or the dispossessed fighting for their lives.

The wonder is that Cherkaoui achieves such potent effect with just 16 Shaolin monks and his own Chaplin-esque stage presence. The monks tumble and leap, but Cherkaoui corrals their moves to trigger pictures that comment on our times. The Berlin Wall evocation is especially moving, as are the scenes that remind you of refugee camps and boat people.

Cherkaoui is called a choreographer, but he's really our conscience. True, Sutra is slow, and more than a little po-faced, yet this silent drama never browbeats and both its subject and means are truly innovative. Special mention for Flemish composer Szymon Brzoska, his five able musicians, and Adam Carree's lighting designs which add nagging shadows and bright linings.

Until 31 May. Information 0844 412 4300.