

Sutra

★★★★★Sadler's Wells, London

Judith Mackrell
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[The Guardian](#)

The Shaolin monks put on a five-star performance just by being themselves. It's not just the collective virtuosity of their kung fu heritage - their flying kicks, their backflips, their shadow-boxing. Practised as part of the monks' spiritual discipline, these maniacally dangerous and beautiful moves also carry the aura of compelling ritual.

For choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and his collaborators, the artist Antony Gormley and the composer Szymon Brzóska, the challenge of working with 17 monks from the Shaolin temple is to make convincing dance theatre out of an already incredible show. They have succeeded in spades. Sutra combines dance, music and design in ways that intensify the mystery of the monks' prowess, even as it opens up new views of their agility.

For those expecting straight physical fireworks, the opening minutes may seem muted. On a stage lined with coffin-sized wooden boxes, Cherkaoui and 11-year-old Shi Yandong sit and face each other. Cherkaoui gestures delicately to the boy, as if trying to communicate in sign language. Then the adult monks rise out of the boxes; as each performs a tiny vignette of martial-arts brilliance, they seem to come from a very alien world.

These are the two threads that run through Sutra: Cherkaoui, a fascinated, interrogative westerner trying to find a way into the monks' culture, and the enchantingly alert, fearless little Yandong, who leads him on his quest. Their journey is a maze of episodic dance stories, each revealing the monks in a different aspect. The stacked boxes, conceived and designed by Gormley, are both functional and miraculous. They can be arranged to resemble the petals of a lotus flower, upon which Yandong sits like a little Buddha, or they can be upended to become a forest of skyscrapers, upon which the monks stand gazing as if on their first trip to the city.

Brzóska's music gives each episode extra emotional colour and gathers the work to its powerful conclusion. Cherkaoui, having choreographed the monks into a climactic ensemble, also reaches the end of his quest, his pale, supple, questioning body finally dancing confidently among them.

It is not just Cherkaoui who has made the journey: the audience, too, gain some kind of privileged intimacy with the monks. This unique, profoundly imagined work takes the concept of cultural exchange to a new level.

• Ends tomorrow. Box office: 0844 412 4300.