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Sutra dir. by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (review)

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Performance Reviews

SUTRA. Directed by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Choreographed by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Shaolin Warrior Monks. 2008–2017.

In May 2007, award-winning Belgian-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, known as Larbi (I use “Larbi” hereafter to refer to both the choreographer/director and his role), was introduced to a small group of Shaolin monks in Antwerp and started working with them. Fascinated with Bruce Lee and kung fu since childhood, Larbi had developed a lifelong interest in the Shaolin school of *chan* Buddhism and had long dreamt of working with Shaolin monks. After an inspiring first encounter, Larbi traveled to spend several months studying kung fu and its spirituality at Shaolin Temple, and working with a larger group of warrior monks. Together they created *Sutra* (2008), a so-called “dance theatre” piece starring Larbi and seventeen warrior monks (one of them a ten-year-old child monk). It features an innovative set of twenty-one life-sized wooden boxes and one steel box created by British sculptor Antony Gormley, and a new score by Polish composer Szymon Brzóska.

Ever since its 2008 premiere, *Sutra* has and continues to tour, currently to over sixty cities across twenty-eight countries, with its most recent performance in January 2017 at the Teatro Municipal de Santiago in Chile. With its decade-long world tour, *Sutra* has become an exceptionally significant contemporary movement theatre piece filled with boundary-crossing imagination. It is epoch-making as the inaugural piece of what I call “kung fu dance theatre,” a new artistic form inadvertently created by the Shaolin monks and their European

collaborators. I will explore the concept of boundary-crossing behind the stunning visual aesthetics, and elucidate the ways in which the collaborative process obscured boundaries between kung fu and dance, initiating a new genre.

The most remarkable and effective material component used in the production was the twenty-one wooden and one steel body-sized boxes. The organic wooden boxes were associated with the Buddhist garb-clad Shaolin monks, whereas the steel one, slightly larger, was mostly used by Larbi, the non-Shaolin Other. All were neat rectangular boxes, resembling coffins with lids removed, making visible the going-ons inside when faced forward. During the performance, the space within and around the boxes unfolded limitlessly: as Larbi and the monks walked on the edges of the boxes, stepped in and out, climbed up or carried them around, the boxes gave free reign to the audience's imagination: transforming from coffin to carapace, from portal to barricade, from lotus flower petal to skyscraper.

Boundary-crossing is the central concept of the piece: seen through the change in the central character, Larbi, from an outsider to a Shaolin kung fu warrior in the end. Throughout the show, Larbi transformed from a puppeteer, an onlooker, a solo dancer, a playful adversary to a community member who is finally an integral part of the Shaolin kung fu world. Larbi's costume—top, a casual Western jacket, and bottom, Shaolin monk garb—signaled liminality. Before the performance, downstage right, palm-sized wooden boxes were laid out in the same arrangements as the actual boxes (Fig. 1). This created an illusion of puppet theatre: either Larbi or the little monk played puppeteer arranging the miniatures. The monks moved and executed that layout—sometimes even before the order was given, which playfully altered the manipulation effect. In sixty some minutes, the performers had to drag and lift the boxes into sixteen different installations. Memorable configurations included installation 5 where the boxes formed the visual wonder of a rapidly open lotus flower, one of the key symbols of *chan* Buddhism. Installation 6 mirrored the slow blossoming of a lotus, with the little monk sitting in the center (Fig. 2). In installation 10, upright wooden boxes slightly distant to one another resembled plum blossom stakes (Fig. 3), a style of kung fu practiced on top of the stakes, or skyscrapers.

From the beginning, Larbi played the role of the puppeteer who watched and distanced himself from the monks' movements. Instead of performing kung fu, he danced. His solo contemplative dance moments always came in after incidents of revolutionary resonances. His first solo dance, later joined by the little monk, happened after a



FIGURE 1. Larbi (played by Ali Thabet) and the little monk playing with the box models. (Photo: Courtesy of Shi Yanxuan and the Shaolin *Sutra* Team)

renegade monk threw the miniature box models off to the ground and carried the steel box to the center of the stage and in front of the line of wooden boxes (installation 5). His second solo dance took place after the boat scene (installation 8), in which the little monk pushed the steel box toward the center of the stage and invited the onstage monks who carried nothing but Shaolin staffs into the “boat,” as three bandits with broadswords and brown T-shirts came out of the pile of boxes in the corner upstage left to attack them.

Larbi joined the monks for the first time after the skyscrapers/plum blossom stakes installation (installation 10) during which Larbi taught the monks sign language. When a monk performed *xieziquan* (scorpion-style imitative boxing), Larbi joined as a playful adversary, imitating the monk’s movements, and turning it into a yoga position. As the monk’s *xieziquan* transformed into *hamaquan* (the toad-style imitative boxing), Larbi swiftly imitated the toad-style jumps. Then, when the upright boxes were lined up along the diagonal line of the stage, Larbi stood in the steel box and fell down like everyone else as the little monk pushed the first box and created a domino effect.



FIGURE 2. The lotus flower about to blossom. (Photo: Courtesy of Shi Yanxuan and the Shaolin *Sutra* Team)



FIGURE 3. Shaolin monks standing on top of plum blossom stakes or skyscrapers. (Photo: Courtesy of Shi Yanxuan and the Shaolin *Sutra* Team)