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The performers in Sutra, which saw its Australian premiere at the OzAsia Festival. OzAsia Festival

Sutra brings a state of grace to the stage

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Review: Sutra, OzAsia Festival.

Author



William Peterson

Senior Lecturer in Drama, Flinders University

Sixteen boxes, open on one side and lined up on stage, start flipping toward the audience – the heart-stopping, thunderous crashing of giant wooden boxes larger than a coffin. A dancer pulls a Shaolin monk from one of the boxes with a long pole, the delicate tension and release between them animating the monk. Suddenly, robe-clad monks fling themselves out from a sea of prone boxes, two at a time.

Children in the audience squeal with delight. We are witnessing magic.

Sutra, presented in its Australian premiere as part of Adelaide's OzAsia Festival, more than merits the critical acclaim heaped upon it. Touring in its tenth year, this spectacular work features 19 Shaolin monks flying, leaping and moving gracefully and purposefully across the stage along with giant boxes that become dramatic characters in the action.

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Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's fusion of the choreographic universe of contemporary dance with the kung fu techniques of the famed Shaolin monks is both masterful and unexpected. The 19 monks in Sutra are extraordinary acrobats, and we take great delight as they fly, spin, kick, leap, and somersault across the stage.

Many have seen the iconic, famous moves of these monks from China's famed Shaolin Temple in action films. But here we see those moves — the rapid, virtuoso work with sticks, the fight between two monks with poles topped with shimmering blades, the high kicks and near misses of flying bodies in combat — in a new way.

The boxes are equally the stars of the show. Shifted about by the monks from inside and behind, the boxes walk, crawl, slide, fall, moving much like humans. They are repositioned in an endless number of variations, at times with the complexity of a gigantic Rubik's Cube. Occasionally they border on the terrifying, as, for instance when they fall forward like dominoes, fanning out in two diagonal lines to the very lip of the stage.

Cherkaoui, with his fluid gestures and Gumby-like body, offers up a series of gentle, quirky choreographic intrusions into the sometimes frantic world of moving boxes and flying monks. Paired with him in a number of ingenious and occasionally lighthearted interventions was a boy monk, who possessed a cheekiness that clearly charmed the audience. While the boy skillfully imitated the movements of the older monks, he also played the part of a boy with his attention-seeking antics and sense of wonder. Indeed, Cherkaoui and the boy grounded what could have been a serious, technical performance in a world of play.



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Symon Brzóska's music, which accompanies much of the onstage action, also offers a different way of seeing. His spare and understated score, played by offstage musicians, at times supports a tension line between dancers with the single vibrating string of a violin or a cello. At other moments, the strings give way to a piano melody that ambles like Erik Satie's so-called "furniture music," in turn directing the action, responding delicately to movement.

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In one such moment Cherkaoui and the boy dance together in the box, clinging to the sides, repositioning themselves in an impossibly small space, the boy coming to rest hanging down from the top of the box, bat-like, as Cherokaoui assumes a mediation position below.

Sutra is work of movement, sound, and light, not colour, and both the walls of Antony Gormley's set and the functional costumes are in shades of grey, the only contrast being the golden hue of the wooden boxes. Directing our attention is his masterful lighting. This was a work with hundreds of moments when tight illumination is required not just on the stage, but well above it. At one such moment we see the interior of sixteen boxes, each in stacks of four, lined up like coffins along the back of the stage. And in each box is a prone monk, clearly and seemingly miraculously illuminated.

In Buddhism, the religious tradition that anchors the spiritual and kinesthetic practices of the Shaolin Monks, sutras are generally short, sacred texts that focus on a particular teaching. They are the collective threads of sacred knowledge.

Thus, this work can be seen as a choreographed sequence of threads, a segmented but seamlessly unified work in which every gesture is completed. We are taken in not just by the skills of these monks, but ultimately also their gracefulness. One does not have to be a Buddhist to feel that this collection of choreographed sutras collectively brought us into something that felt like a state of grace.





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Sutra was staged as part of the OzAsia Festival, Adelaide.



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