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Sutra at Sadler's Wells

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Collaborations can bring out the best in artists working together from different disciplines. But *Sutra*, which reunites the Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and the British sculptor Antony Gormley in this new Sadler's Wells production, exceeds even our highest expectations. It forms a dazzling alliance of space and content that grants kinetic life to Gormley's art and conceptual discipline to Cherkaoui's philosophical choreography.

And yet there's even more going on here than two European artists making something amazing, for *Sutra* is performed by Buddhist warrior monks from the Shaolin Temple in China. An extraordinary group of 17 kung fu masters (including the 11-year-old Shi Yandong), they possess such a commitment to their faith and fighting skills that mind and body are joined in transcendent vibrancy. Cherkaoui, long fascinated by the flamboyant virtuosity of Bruce Lee, spent months working with the monks in China and is clearly in thrall to their stunning certainty and control.

Gormley's genius is the simplicity and versatility of his contribution. He provides 21 wooden boxes – big enough to house a grown man – which most strikingly resemble open-topped coffins. Cherkaoui's genius is knowing how to use them. The mutating set is constantly shaped by the monks acting as Gormley's proxy in his living installation. Meanwhile, on the side of the stage, a tiny toy version of the set mimics and presages what happens to the big one.

The boxes are rearranged to suggest secrets and traps, soaring man-made structures and beauties of the natural world. The monks lie in them as if they were beds, pop out of them like moles, disappear into them, build walls and castles, topple the boxes like dominoes (with the monks still inside). They die inside their coffins, are reborn, struggle to escape and seek solace within; they wield swords like soldiers on the ramparts. In one of the most resonant images, the boxes are upended to look like an urban landscape of office blocks and the monks, now garbed in cool black suits, scurry around them like hassled City workers. Perhaps the boxes themselves are the physical manifestation of minds in constant search for balance.

Cherkaoui weaves himself into his elaborate game like a wry Western observer, in awe of his exotic Eastern monks. And no wonder. Their grace, strength and bravery are awesome, the speed and ferocity of their punches, kicks, back flips and flying jumps astounding. Szymon Brzoska's score for percussion and strings wisely doesn't try to compete with the monks' inner rhythms; rather it seeks to surround them with soothing, even meditative sounds.

The atmosphere of *Sutra* is playful yet serious. For these monks, kung fu is as much about the mind as it is about the body, and the juxtaposition of inner calm and outward energy, the unity of thought and action in a community that embraces all living things, is the point of this striking show.