

Fall-Winter 2019

# *Ballet Review*



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# White Light at Lincoln Center

Karen Greenspan

The ninth year of Lincoln Center's White Light Festival continues its thought-provoking exploration of the power of art to illuminate our interior and communal lives. The festival offered a thoughtfully selected array of cross-genre dance works. These very powerful, collaborative projects demonstrated the creative impulse within the globalized context of our time to transcend disciplinary boundaries and canonical structures to locate new, fluid, and fluent modes of embodied expression.

The White Light Conversation gathered a panel of leading thinkers in the fields of religion, sociology, technology, and the arts to wrestle with ideas about "Community in the 21st Century," moderated with thought and skill by John Schaefer host of WNYC's *Soundcheck*. As essential building blocks of society, communities define who we are and who we are not. Today, technology has created a universe of communities that we can opt into in an instant with little or no personal commitment.

The conversation turned to address whether the arts can be a gateway for building community. Akram Khan, whose solo dance work *Xenos* would be featured later in the festival, grapples with this question and creates dance events with the intention of making contemporary dance an inclusive act. In fact, the discussion had opened with a ten-minute film clip of one of these very dance events – *Kadamati* – a free, outdoor, mass performance of hundreds of dedicated strangers. The 700 movers – dancers and non-dancers of many generations, backgrounds, abilities, and disabilities – came together to participate in a collective, creative endeavor. They performed a ten-minute, naturalistic, communal ritual incorporating gestures of cleansing, praise, pain, isolation, galvanization, and

hopeful connection – all coordinated to breathing cues with the emotional sweep of Nitin Sawney's epic music.

*Kadamati* means "clay" in Bengali, and the title as well as the choreography communicates the idea that we are all made of the same matter. The idea behind this communal dance ritual is that the effect can be experienced both in the performing as well as in the viewing – connecting people in a meaningful, shared experience. The work was commissioned for the First World War centenary and has been performed in large public squares at the Edinburgh International Festival and in Paris at the Théâtre du Châtelet and Théâtre de la Ville. There are currently negotiations for a performance in New York.

John J. Thatamanil, Associate Professor of Theology and World Religions at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, offered, "We imagine that we are individuals who opt into communities. But according to spiritual wisdom, that is not the case. We are originally and primarily community. Our notion of community is not nearly big enough."

\*

Lincoln Center opened its 2018 White Light Festival with a reprise of the boundary-blending dance work *Sutra* by Belgian-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Although the piece had its world premiere in 2008 and U.S. premiere in 2010 at the inaugural White Light Festival, *Sutra* is deeply affecting in a timeless way. The riveting, collaborative performance piece incorporates a dynamic set design by British sculptor Antony Gormley, a soulful score by Polish composer Szymon Brzóska, and the precision-trained warrior monks from the Shaolin Temple in Songshan, China. These Buddhist monks cultivate their minds and bodies for spiritual awakening through hours of daily training in Chinese martial arts as well as meditation practice.

*Sutra*, a Sanskrit word, refers to a scripture, or discourse, of the Buddha. In Hinduism, the term denotes a short, religious teaching on how to live an ethical life. Either way, a *sutra*

guides the follower along the *dharma* – the path of awakening. Cherkaoui's *Sutra* is a fascinating journey along a path of rebirth.

Two years ago I had the opportunity to speak to Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui – about many topics, including *Sutra*.

BR: What was the purpose of your visit to the Shaolin Temple?

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui: I was in a bit of a crisis. In 2007, I wanted to quit everything. I no longer liked the art world. For eight years I had been struggling as an artist and I felt misunderstood and no longer cared about any of it. There was this producer, a friend of mine, who asked, "What do you care about?" I said, "I care about yoga, martial arts, and singing. I care about music and, of course, movement."

He said, "Come to the Temple. You will see something else." He knew they were interested in developing their martial arts in other ways. They were interested in meeting poets, writers, and photographers. He said, "I think as a choreographer you could mean something for them." When I was there, I found two monks who were willing to teach me their moves. I started to rearrange the movements and connect them in different ways to create new forms and sequences and they really liked that because they had never done that before. For me it was so natural because that's what we do.

BR: Was this a retreat?

Cherkaoui: I would call it "a saving." *Sutra* changed the way I choreographed. I met one of the monks of the Shaolin Temple who was an artist; he was a calligrapher, musician, and martial artist. He asked me what I did, and I told him I was a choreographer. He said, "What does that mean?" That was the first time that somebody asked me this question. I said, "I organize people onstage with movements; how they come in and go out of the space." He said, "How would it be if you did that with some of our younger monks who are practicing martial arts? Could you apply choreography to martial arts?" I said, "Of course. It's a language."

As the curtain rises, Cherkaoui and a young eight-year-old monk sit cross-legged opposite each other atop a wooden platform in the downstage left corner. By their posture, they appear to be contemplating an important move on a board game. Upon closer inspection, it is actually a set of toy-sized wooden blocks. Suddenly, a gray-clad Chinese monk emerges atop another platform made up of wooden boxes pushed together in a long row. He wields a shiny silver sword as he turns about and gestures.

Cherkaoui leaves the child and leaps off his miniature perch and across to the large wooden platform and uses a long bamboo staff to pry a monk out of one of the individual boxes. The monk surfaces, takes the rod from Cherkaoui, and then "fishes" another monk out of a box. Each of these monks jumps out of a hollow, coffin-sized box to balance on the container's rim and perform a precarious solo wielding the bamboo pole – one of the many weapons used in their kung fu fighting forms.

Cherkaoui, meanwhile, has returned to his game with the little monk. The two are paired together throughout the piece, implying that the young child is an aspect of Cherkaoui – his "beginner's mind" (the Zen Buddhist concept referring to an attitude of openness and lack of preconceptions) – indicative of his state of mind upon meeting the monks at the Temple. Cherkaoui and the child are masterminding a reorganization of the miniature wooden blocks that is simultaneously borne out by the grown-up monks with the full-sized boxes amidst much jumping, knocking, and banging. It is a noisy business.

The genius of Antony Gormley's set of twenty-one human-sized, open, wooden boxes is how they are used to activate and constantly re-create, or re-choreograph, the space. He has said in published conversations, "I think of architecture as being a second body." And Cherkaoui, who moves quite comfortably with his own body using many different dance languages, is naturally predisposed to play with, interrogate, and investigate how he can

move this “second body” as well as move within it.

Cherkaoui enters an upright box and explores the many ways he can position his body within its interior. Soon the little monk crawls in to join Cherkaoui forming complementary and assisted shapes together. The box topples over and buries Cherkaoui (with a bang). This cues the monks to drag the boxes, wearing them like hooded capes, into a circular formation with the little monk seated atop a vertical box in the center performing a prayerful gesture sequence.

Gormley's set of boxes has just transformed the stage into a *mandala* (Buddhist meditational blueprint) with a baby Buddha as the central deity. The gesture choreography is one of Cherkaoui's signature contributions to this collaborative dialogue. But it looks perfectly natural performed by the Buddhist monks, as some schools of Buddhism use a gesture code of their own as part of prayer and ritual.

The upright boxes, grouped together in a tight circle, are then opened back in a controlled fashion – like the blossoming of a flower. The shifting set creates an embodiment of the Buddhist view of the impermanent nature of all phenomena. You actually experience this through watching the performers move within the ever-changing environment.

In another solo, Cherkaoui steps into a horizontally placed box and limps about the space with one foot in and the other foot outside the box in a humorous, sad-clown portrayal of an outsider. He inhabits a contrasting reality from the perfectly coordinated and neatly boxed monks.

In addition to rearranging the set, the seventeen monks leap, twirl, flip mid-air, balance while clinging to a vertical bamboo rod, and land in crouching animal poses as they perform choreographed variations of their fighting form. They shout and move with a precision honed in a discipline that harnesses the breath along with physical, mental, and spiritual techniques to develop the *qi* (pronounced *chi*) – one's inner life force. They train to con-

vert the *qi* into explosive energy necessary for fearlessness – both in battle and in life.

The Shaolin Temple was originally founded by monks from India in 495 C.E. as a center for Buddhist learning and scriptural translation. The Temple prospered as a result of its large agricultural tracts so that by the sixth and seventh centuries, it required protection against marauding bandits. The monks adapted their bamboo brooms for weapons and practiced a method of self-defense that combined Ch'an Buddhism (a form of Chinese Buddhism strongly influenced by Taoism), ancient Chinese martial arts, and Chinese healing arts. Over the centuries, the Shaolin monks' fighting skills have become legendary.

One monk dances with the animal antics of a monkey. Perhaps it is a reference to the mythical Monkey King, Sun Wukong, who acquired his supernatural powers through Taoist practices. Other fierce martial solos display the Shaolin animal forms – praying mantis, tiger, eagle, and snake – sequences in which the monks mimic the movements, strategies, and spirit of these particular animals in the most amazing ways. The animal energy and grace pervades their horizontally splayed leaps, multiple aerial flips, and fearless full-body landings. They rebound to move about the stage swiftly in creature crouches, eventually balancing in stillness with hands or a foot in the representative animal gesture.

Cherkaoui: I asked them why kung fu is so violent. They said, “It's not violent. It's a form of protection.” A lot of the gestures are to block and protect yourself – from other human beings and from animals. It's also a way to keep fit. If the muscles are fit, then you can meditate – sitting even for four hours – because the muscles are aligned. So the training is to prepare them to meditate.

Insistent, primitive drumming drives a dramatic fighting sequence, in which flashes of shiny silver blades slice through the air. Then, wielding bamboo rods, the monks intensify the combat with kicks, spins, and jumps that land with a loud clacking of rods in a blocking position that throws everyone to the floor.



Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Sutra*. (Photo: Richard Termine, Lincoln Center)

Four musicians play the music live onstage behind a dark, sheer scrim. Though not Eastern, Brzóska's score effectively heightens the emotional energy of the choreography and is perfectly consonant with the arc of the piece.

Cherkaoui: The hardest thing – well, there were many hard things – was musicality, because they have no music.

BR: Do they have sacred chanting?

Cherkaoui: No, they just recite their sutras. And they have meditation. I was allowed to go there once. First you walk around and around in a circle. Then at some magic moment, you stopped and went to sit down and meditate for about an hour and a half.

I spoke with twenty-nine-year-old monk Jiahao Huang before the opening night performance. He told me that he had entered the monastery at age fifteen of his own choice as a way to further his kung fu practice. When I asked what it was like to dance to music for the first time, he responded that it was a new and challenging experience. I tried to ascertain further how the experience of moving to music might have impacted the monks, and was keen to a moment during rehearsal when a couple of them were just waiting around and

naturally started moving to the music being played.

Throughout the piece, either Cherkaoui or the little monk returns to the miniature blocks to assemble the forthcoming architecture. The act of building with toy blocks is, of course, a type of child's play – a rehearsal or practice for adult life. And, in no time, the larger construction is realized onstage. The wooden boxes are lined up vertically in a long diagonal with a monk standing inside each. In a resounding demonstration of interdependence, the little monk topples the furthest box that knocks each successive box over in a domino effect – and catapults Cherkaoui, who inhabits the last box, out into the audience!

The toy blocks are reassembled and form a perfect replica of the series of three-piece archways the monks have built that frame each warrior as he moves through a fighting sequence with energetic shouts. The movements evolve into a flowing tai chi form performed by the full cast. The architecture shifts incredibly several more times as the music builds in energy and tension. The monks regroup entering and exiting in myriad formations until they and Cherkaoui dance a final fighting

form en masse. In other words, the dance ends with a training practice. The journey is the practice.

BR: So *Sutra* is what made you want to choreograph again?

Cherkaoui: It's the only thing I know how to do. It's all I had to offer. I don't have anything else.

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui has choreographed almost fifty works since *Sutra*.

\*

Akram Khan is a masterful storyteller. His vernacular is his singular blend of kathak Indian dance and contemporary dance. He employs these embodied expressions in partnership with an exceptional group of artistic collaborators to tell his personal, as well as universal, stories with enthralling emotional impact.

In recent years, becoming a parent has changed the stories Khan feels compelled to tell. The narrative is no longer just his own, as in *DESH*, Khan's 2011 solo that plumbed his personal connection to family and homeland. Instead, Khan is now telling those stories that have for various reasons been stifled.

In his 2016 work *Until the Lions*, Khan adapted Karthika Nair's book that explored the epic *Mahabharata* from the perspective of its unsung female heroine. In *XENOS*, his third production to appear at the White Light Festival and Khan's final full-length solo piece as a performer, he offers the story of a foreigner in a foreign land forced to fight a foreigner's war. More specifically, he re-creates the untold story of one of the 1.4 million Indian colonial soldiers who fought and died for the British in World War I – a tale of unbearable devastation.

*Xenos* means “foreigner” in Greek and Akram Khan takes us to that particular hell of being a stranger in a strange land and losing every last thing that is familiar – including your own body. In telling the universal, Khan finds a personal point of entry. He chooses to imagine the story of an Indian dancer forced to serve in the British forces during the First World War. His highly trained body – an

expression of his Indianness – may be the last familiar connection available to him in this deadly war, and even that must be sacrificed for the colonial power that dominates his people and homeland.

The stage is visible as you enter the Rose Theater at Lincoln Center. An Indian vocalist and drummer sit cross-legged on the stage floor performing a series of ragas in various Indian traditions. It becomes clear that their music goes beyond an entertainment-while-you-wait and is a meaningful scene-setting device, as they improvise a song that incorporates an English ditty, demonstrating how the battlefield is sometimes a bizarre melting pot.

The two musicians sit amidst Mirella Weingarten's set – a trench in a war-torn no-man's-land with a tattered string of bare bulbs for light. A few Indian cushions and woven mats lie alongside some ropes and dirt. The stage surface slopes steeply upward as you move up-stage creating the physical experience of a trench – the pervasive space from which the First World War was fought.

As the musicians sing and drum with skill and precision, periodic explosions are audible in the background accompanied by a momentary loss of electricity onstage. During these moments, we can no longer hear the musicians, though they keep playing. We are embedded in the scene and suffering a loss of hearing from close-range shellfire.

Suddenly, Akram Khan tumbles onto the stage as if blasted out of a canon. He uncoils a thick rope as he makes his way across the stage toward the musicians. A big explosion causes a total blackout with complete silence. Khan strikes a match while crouching in the darkness and whispers, “Do not think that this is war. This is not war. It is the ending of the world.”

The bare bulbs throw off a dim light as the musicians strike up another song. Khan dances in the kathak tradition spinning within the confined space of the trench punctuating his phrases with gestures of urgency. The drummer sets a rapid pace both with his drum-

ming and *nattuvangam* (enunciated rhythmic syllables) that sound like artillery fire. Khan spins furiously while repeatedly looking back over his shoulder chased by constant danger. He eventually stumbles about, falling and recovering to perform repetitive soldiering tasks – digging, lifting, pulling, loading, and soon. I have never seen the kathak idiom molded to such expressive use.

In the most heart-wrenching scene of the dance, Khan unties his *ghungrus* (anklets



Akram Khan's *XENOS*. (Photo: Jean-Louis Fernandez, LC)

formed of a string of jingle bells, which are used to accentuate the rhythmic aspect of the dance and given to a dancer by the guru in a special ceremony upon coming of age as a dancer). He unwinds the lengthy strands from both legs, stripping himself of his culture, lineage, and identity. He lifts the strands like heavy chains that hobble him from his attempts to walk. A dissonant bowing of stringed instruments cues the musicians to exit while Khan, in a poignant act of submission, crisscrosses the ropes of bells over his chest, evoking the image of a colonial uniform, and stands at attention. The doomful sound grows louder as all of the stage furnishings are dragged uphill and disappear in a cataclysmic upheaval.

Another blackout transitions to a vision of the ensemble of five musicians lit so that they

appear from behind the opaque black scrim which, for most of the action, hides them. The two Indian musicians now join three classically trained Western musicians to perform the original music score by Vincenzo Lamagna that, along with his sound design, creates a viscerally intense environment.

Explosions and blackouts catapult Khan into endless landscapes of horror. Khan has the supreme choreographic, acting, and dancing skills to communicate his story with searing humanity. He climbs up the incline and dance/mimes a sequence portraying a sleep-deprived soldier on guard duty who shakes himself awake from the sleep that keeps overtaking him. He goes on to convey the physical discomforts of filth, lice, boredom – all through remarkable danced action.

As the piece proceeds, Khan seems to die many times over. The desolation is punctuated by a scene in which Khan drags himself up the inclined stage gripping a rope, which he then coils around his neck and face. Now, with his face cancelled out like a dead man, he ekes out a lyrical kathak dance to a sad tune in Michael Hulls's cool, ghostly lighting. As the song ends, he unwinds the rope and uses it as a pillow to lay his head on.

In the final scene, the lighting paints a fiery glow on the battleground as the musicians fully orchestrate and sing the *Lacrimosa* from Mozart's *Requiem*. Khan, stripped down to a pair of simple white pants covered in sweat and grime, tries to stand up and make order out of the surrounding chaos – a stage covered in mounds of debris (pine cones) that keep raining down on him. The music builds as this destroyed soldier crouches amid the rubble.

The piece, unfortunately, suffers from multiple potential endings. Although that may be the true experience of war, in artistic expression one usually aims to give the audience the concentrated essence. As this portrayal of devastation pressed on beyond endurance, I longed to return to Khan's collective dance



Company Wang Ramirez's *Borderline*. (Photo: Richard Termine, LC)

ritual *Kadamati*. It seemed to offer the only antidote – a communal dance of hope and healing.

\*

A notable programming feature of the festival was the inclusion of two productions rooted in street dance – *Borderline* by Company Wang Ramirez and *Blak Whyte Gray* by Boy Blue. Both were presented at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College, which offers lower ticket prices and assured a packed audience of younger people – hopefully cultivating a new generation of dance performance-goers.

Hip-hop dance emerged, along with the music and poetry, in the late 1970s in poor, nonwhite, inner city neighborhoods. Hip-hop provided an alternative source of status, identity, belonging, and personal meaning to the violent and deadly street gangs that pervaded life in these neighborhoods. In so many ways the behaviors of gang culture molded the norms and vocabulary of hip-hop dance replicating its daring and competitive intensity. This energy spawned the fires of creativity that drive the fearless street dance community to perfect new moves and stunts – often

looking to other movement languages for additional material.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the collaboration of Honji Wang and Sébastien Ramirez. The intercultural couple (Wang is of Korean descent and grew up in Germany while Ramirez has Spanish roots and grew up in France) bring their B-boy and B-girl (hip-hop dancers) background and movement skills and expand the vocabulary using many other dance languages – contemporary, martial arts, flamenco, tango, and now rigging.

*Borderline* is an engaging series of vignettes that plays with the stunning movement possibilities from the hip-hop universe and contrasts that with the freedom and weightlessness afforded by rigging techniques. The harness, wires, and rigger allow for the fulfillment of every mover's fantasy – to defy the laws of gravity. This is especially dramatic in relationship to hip-hop dancing, in which so much of the movement is down on the ground. Watching the four talented dancers who join Wang and Ramirez in spinning on their heads and backs, flipping in the air, gliding across the floor with satiny grapevines, and rippling

their spines as if energized by an electric current is an eye-ful. The addition of aerial work is pure ecstasy and brings an inherent physical drama to the work.

The yearning for the ethereal is beautifully realized in Wang and Ramirez's duet toward the end of the work. Wang repeatedly moves toward the earthbound man (shirtless and in jeans) and just as they reach for each other, she (in her long, angelic, white skirt) soars upward and flies backward out of reach.

The drama created by the movement possibilities in that sketch was enough inspiration for making a dance. *Borderline* as a whole does not, however, equal the extensive thematic claims made in the program notes that imply a correlation between the printed (and narrated) long-winded, disparate texts and the danced vignettes. The scenes do not effectively portray the text, nor do they cohere as a unified entity beyond the movement vocabulary (hip-hop and aerial dance). In my opinion, an exploration of these contrasting dance styles would have been a sufficient stimulus for a dance.

During the Q&A session with the artists after the show, Ramirez explained that he came to experiment with rigging as a result of having friends who use the mechanism for stunts in the movies. Since both Wang and Ramirez reiterate they are self-taught dancers, which is common for hip-hop artists, I would suggest that they look into the rich history of dancers using rigging and other aerial devices to enable them to "lift off." In 1950, the team producing the Broadway musical *Peter Pan* hired a young Englishman, Peter Foy, to stage the flying sequences using his mechanical inventions and innovative techniques. Foy con-



Boy Blue's *Blak Whyte Gray*. (Photo: Richard Termine, LC)

stantly strived to develop new rigging systems to facilitate greater freedom of movement with safety, which he produced and offered through his company Flying by Foy.

Alwin Nikolais, the modern dance pioneer of multimedia, in 1960, choreographed *Sorcerer*, a solo that incorporated aerial work using various mechanisms to amplify the drama of the physical body in relationship to its environment. His work inspired many of the aerialists (Terry Sendgraff, Bob Davidson, Lisa Giobbi, Timothy Harling, Jayne Bernasconi, Nancy Smith, and others) who have used track and harness, incorporating techniques from the circus and rock climbing to develop the genre. Aerial dance really came into its own in the 1990s. Honji Wang and Sébastien Ramirez are refreshing and gifted; they are not the first dancers to explore the use of rigging, but rather, the inheritors of a great legacy worth knowing about.

The London hip-hop company Boy Blue presented *Blak Whyte Gray*, a hip-hop theater work in three parts. The group, founded in 2001 by producer/musician/dancer "Mikey J" Asante and choreographer/dancer Kenrick "H2O" Sandy, aims to challenge and push

hip-hop's capacity for self-expression by embracing any style of dance and music. The order of the piece, beginning with Whyte, proceeding to Gray, and ending with Blak and the creative spelling of the words are part of the revolution the artists aim to bring about onstage.

The first section, Whyte, is a vision of oppressive distress – almost to the point of lifelessness. Framed by a white backdrop, three isolated figures in white, bulky, quilted pajama suits stand in a square of white light and barely move except for the slightest motion in their fingers. As harsh, loud sounds of machines erupt, the dancers' bodies reverberate with abrupt, disjointed, isolation-type movements. Even as they join together in unison sequences, their brittle robotic actions imply a deadened state of existence.

For brief moments, the dancers, as if overcome by a distant memory, are lit in a warm golden glow and faraway African strains inform the quality of their movement. Then we are again plunged into a picture of emotional pain indicated through the mechanical, disjointed movements, together with oppressive lighting and sound. Conceived with artistic vision and detail and pulled off with skilled precision, the "whyte world" is clearly a dehumanizing hell.

For the section Gray, the dancers arrive onstage sliding on their backs and arise to mount a revolt. Wearing heavy army boots and coarse street attire, they lunge, march, and cock and shoot imaginary weapons – seizing space, grabbing groins, and mimicking screams – in a physical demonstration of pure rage that is called *krump*. This aggressive and exaggerated style of street dancing that developed in Los Angeles as an alternative to gang violence is well employed to elaborate this pivotal section of the work. The fierce energy builds with acrobatic cartwheels and flips that move across the stage and coalesce into a

coordinated scene resembling a patrol squad entering a sniper's lair. Gray, the enraged response to Whyte, is a transformative process that leads to transcendence in Blak.

The final section opens with a central figure in a bowed posture on the floor. His bare black skin is a vivid statement in itself. Bells and chimes fill the sonic landscape as the rest of the dancers interact as a community – touching, lifting, catching, and supporting the central figure – eventually integrating him into the communal formations. In a staged ritual, the group robes the "savior" in lush, red fabric; but the music veers into cloying sentimentality. The finale further loses its way through an angry hip-hop sequence; a tribal stint with face and body paint in the company of large white masks descended from the rafters; and a final, feel-good, *Soul Train* party.

Too many ingredients found their way into the pot. If only they had sustained the tight compositional integrity they demonstrated in the first three quarters of the piece, they would have fully translated the hip-hop genre into concert dance-drama. The audience, however, was hugely enthusiastic and the eight dancers, which included the choreographer, gave a powerful performance amplified by Lee Curran's lighting and Ryan Dawson Laight's costumes.

The program notes mentioned the company's strong commitment to education and its outreach providing dance training for many youngsters in East London. This reflects Boy Blue's recognition of the saving grace and spirituality of their artistic expression and their obligation to offer opportunities to the next generation. Interestingly, hip-hop dance, as a literal means of salvation from the violence and death of the inner-city streets, may actually have been the most transformative expression presented at the White Light Festival of 2018.