

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui

Wayne McGregor

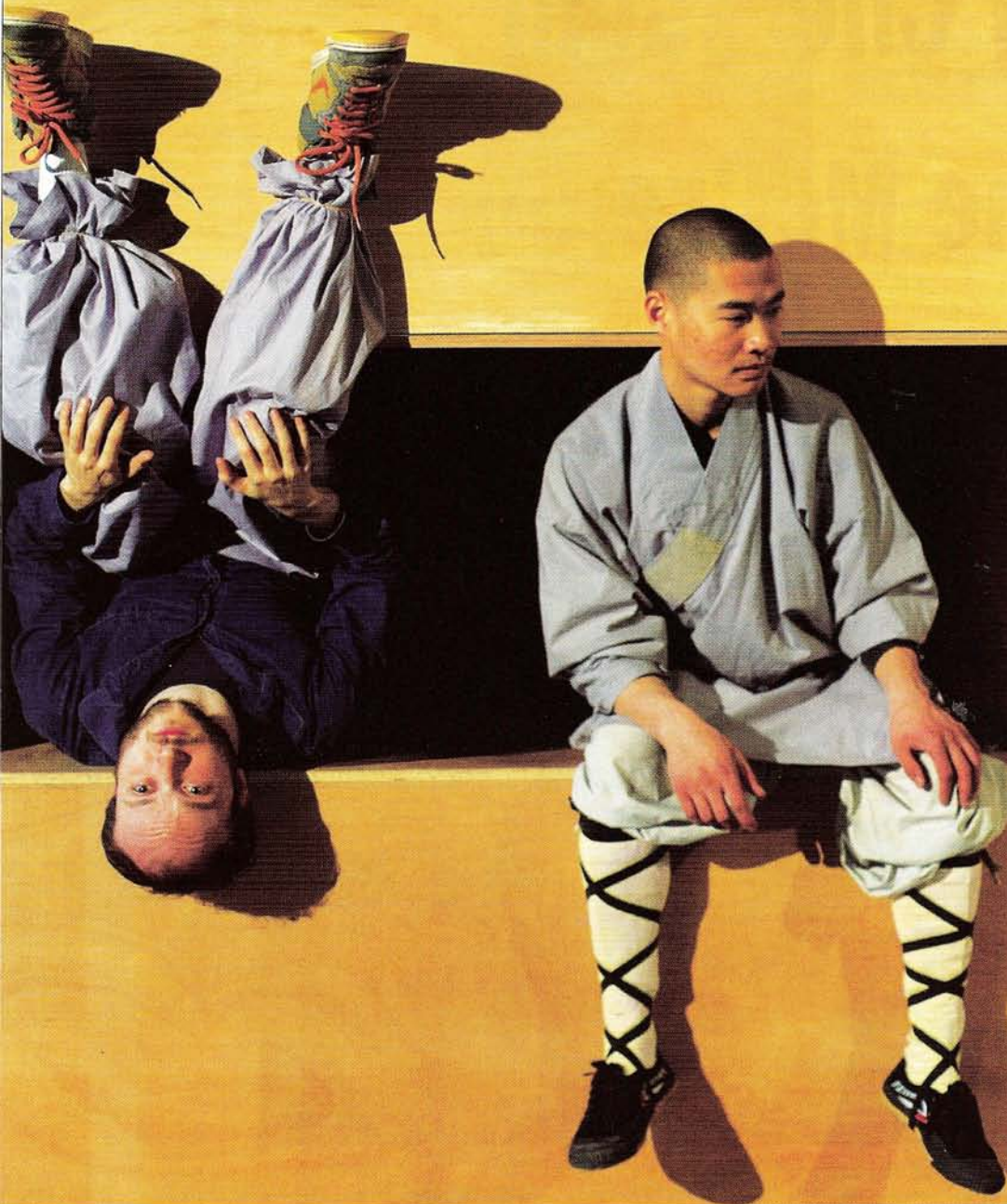


Wayne McGregor | Random Dance - Odette Hughes and Anh Ngoc Nguyen in *Entity*. Photo: Ravi Deepres

MALCOLM ROCK looks at dancemakers inspired by medicine and monks

Histrionics would likely greet any ordinary choreographer's request for dancers to inhibit their sense of coordination by strapping prisms to their eyes ("what if I break an ankle?"), but for the out-of-the-ordinary Wayne McGregor and his fearless troupe at Random Dance such suggestions are welcomed in the name of science. "Curiosity is engendered in the dancers," McGregor declares. "Like me they are interested in how these kinds of interventions affect their work and how the body as an interface can be challenged." When McGregor premieres *Entity* at Sadler's Wells this month he will be continuing a line of choreographic questioning that has brought him into collaboration with some of the world's leading minds in neurological science. The aim: to discover an alternative dance vocabulary and maybe even some new ways to overcome the debilitating effects of stroke. "We did a series of experiments with a scientist from the University of Birmingham who specialises in motion control and the rehabilitating of people who have suffered strokes," McGregor explains. "By testing the accuracy of dancers as they repeated an exact action he was able to learn a lot about how the brain communicates with the body."

Minds trapped in bodies. Animals ensnared in boxes. Monks limited by the demands of Western audiences. Art cornered by the expectations of critics. It may come as a surprise that the one thing both Cherkaoui and McGregor have in common is an appreciation for the liberation offered by their chosen profession.



Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and a Shaolin Temple monk. Photos: Koehn Broos

The project began in November when McGregor organised a think-tank for 15 cognitive scientists concerned with artificial intelligence. The group spent time scrutinising the Random dancers in rehearsal. "In order for scientists to find out what happens in people's brains they need a variety of test subjects. Their collaboration with us is mutually beneficial because they usually work with people who have something missing neurologically whereas dancers have an excess of kinaesthetic and physical intelligence for them to observe. At the same time the dancers and I are able to progress our own understanding of choreographic language in ways that are not dictated by traditional artistic forms such as music."

Entity, according to McGregor, harnesses the artificial intelligence of a computer interface to solve choreographic problems. "We don't have dancing robots on the stage but we are measuring how people work together and what happens cognitively when you share ideas in a creative context."

Though possessing unusually far-sighted objectives the hypothesis of *Entity* is consistent with Random Dance's past experiments, which have included placing prisms over the eyes of dancers to alter their sense of physical geography and commissioning a set of animatronic arms from the Jim Henson Creature Workshop

that "reshaped the bodies of dancers", says McGregor. "I think people were quite disturbed by that one because most people go to dance expecting the body to behave nicely. When the body doesn't behave nicely – such as when we decide to attach extra arms to it – they find it too aggressive and difficult to watch."

Some critics have called McGregor's work futuristic, a comment the choreographer is keen to dismiss. "My work is informed by current technology and current scientific information only. I worry a lot that certain critics feel that any scientific input becomes pretentious and out of the realm of creating art. Science, like choreography, is instinctive and visionary. Scientists test hypotheses based on a series of outcomes, which is similar to the rehearsal process. We also mustn't forget that traditional concepts of beauty are based in the science of math and geometry. There is nothing futuristic about it."

In another part of the world choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui chose to look toward ancient physical philosophies rather than science for his latest work, spending the better part of three months in the Chinese provincial town of Dengfeng sourcing inspiration from the nearby Shaolin Temple and its resident monks. His search culminated in *Sutra*, a collaboration with sculptor Antony Gormley and composer Szymon Brzóska that will bring the more delicate and overlooked aspects of kung fu to Sadler's Wells in May.

"I'd always been fascinated by martial arts and loved the kung fu movies I saw as a kid," Cherkaoui reminisces. "When a producer from Japan invited me to go to the Shaolin Temple last year I jumped at the chance." During his first visit Cherkaoui was introduced to the chief abbot, who explained the monks' approach to life and art. "They believe art can

be used to raise consciousness," says Cherkaoui, who was immediately moved to contact his friend Gormley with an idea. "Antony had already been studying Buddhism for two years and was totally into the idea of spending time at the Temple with the aim of creating something for the stage."

Brzóska's equal enthusiasm for the project led Cherkaoui to commission a new piano, percussion and strings score from the young Pole. Together, choreographer, sculptor and composer made several pilgrimages to the Temple. "The aim was to find the best way to give a real face to the Shaolin Temple because the image we have in the West is limited to what we see in Hollywood movies. When I arrived at the Temple the first time I breathed in a completely different atmosphere and discovered traditional forms of kung fu that were more subtle than anything I had seen before. The monks think Europeans aren't interested in anything that is not acrobatic and over-the-top, but I convinced them to bring their smaller, purer nuances to the stage."

According to Cherkaoui this purity of movement derives from a natural harmony with animals. "The monks have a powerful relationship with animals and animal movement is the most perfect, organic movement you can create. In the Temple they are all veg-

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etarians and I saw a dog running around that had no real master. It was the first time I had ever seen a dog that was totally free – nothing like the neurotic dogs we have in Europe that are always hyperactive and stressed. I thought ‘this is its essence, this is the freedom of movement I want to harness’. And so Cherkaoui had Gormley build 21 human-sized rectangular boxes that could be shifted and stacked on-stage to create simple, abstract shapes with which the monks would interact.

“At one point the performers create a monkey form inside the boxes, which could represent an animal in a cage, a soul within a body, or a body trapped in too rational a mind. It’s quite a powerful and universal image concerning spirit and body.”

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“Whether through science or other means contemporary dance is about exploring what happens when you make a physical choice,” McGregor asserts. “As a maker of contemporary dance I am trying to find something new about the body through a series of provocations and I am inspired by science in the same way some people are inspired by a poem, painting or piece of music.”

Says Cherkaoui: “I came into contemporary dance because it is a malleable and open-minded form that gave me space to express myself. All choreographers have a different point of departure but we are all still considered to be making contemporary dance, which offers freedom unlike any other art-form. It permits the broadest collaborations.”

Wayne McGregor/Random Dance perform *Entity* from 10 - 12 April;
Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui can be seen in *Myth* from 16 - 17 May and in *Sutra* with
Antony Gormley and Monks from the Shaolin Temple from 27 - 31 May.
All performances at Sadler’s Wells - www.sadlerswells.com



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