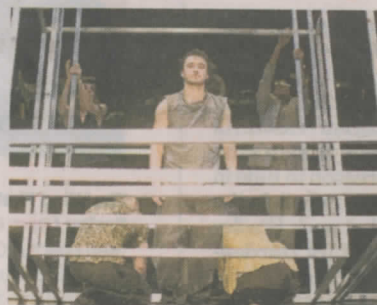


DANCE

Babel (words)

Sadler's Wells, London

☆☆☆



Lively: 'Babel (words)' KOEN BROOS

Flemish-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui is known for his collaborations. He's recently worked with Akram Khan, with Shaolin Temple monks, with the sculptor Antony Gormley. Gormley is back for *Babel (words)*: Cherkaoui's multi-cultural cast argue in a mix of languages, framed by steel Gormley shapes that suggest towers or cages.

In one scene, people queue up at an airport barrier, to be scanned by a robotic woman. Having checked them out, she drops a mechanical curtsy and wishes them a good journey in their own language. Ulrika Kinn Svennson makes a brilliant android, teetering in high PVC boots,

with a different public-relations croon for every speech.

The scene is lively, meandering and deliberately repetitive. That's characteristic: Cherkaoui has funny scenes that go on too long, bright ideas and a wandering structure. *Babel (words)* drifts through ideas about language and communication, before deciding, rather predictably, that we're all human together.

Cherkaoui's recent works have stressed movement and stage design. With *Babel (words)*, he returns to the physical theatre of his work for Les Ballets C. de la B., with a similar mix of music, speech and movement. Cherkaoui spends time pointing out the arrogance of American English, with Darryl E Woods holding forth about the language's power and range. Later, we see Woods as a beggar, remembering when English was the most powerful language in the world. That feels obvious, but I loved the spin Cherkaoui later puts on it. We see Woods, and English, as a stomping monster, a human Godzilla. The other dancers become his reaching, stamping limbs, banding together like a Transformers robot.

In another sequence, a philosophical Frenchman gradually becomes a caveman as he crosses the stage: hunching over, language becoming grunts and gestures. When he moves back, his Neanderthal crouch becomes an urbane stroll again. **ZOË ANDERSON**

Ten best dance events



The Merchants of Bollywood Tue to 5 Jun
With dances by Bollywood choreographer Vaibhavi Merchant, and more than 1,000 costumes, this musical charts the history of the world's biggest film industry. *Peacock Theatre, London WC2*

Michael Clark Company Tue, Wed, Fri & 22 May
Come, Been and Gone is Clark at his best, an exuberant response to 1970s rock stars David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Lou Reed. *Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, Tue & Wed; Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield, Fri & 22 May*

Cruel tonight, Tue, Wed, Fri & 22 May
The Brazilian choreographer Deborah Colker mixes dance and acrobatics, using knife-throwing and a hall of mirrors to explore cruelty in relationships. *Touring Birmingham, Sheffield & Edinburgh*

Romeo and Juliet today
Scottish Ballet's production moves the story to 20th-century Italy. To show the Montague-Capulet feud as a cycle of violence, choreographer Krzysztof Pastor puts scenes in different eras. *Eden Court Theatre, Inverness*

The Royal Ballet today
Asphodel Meadows is Liam Scarlett's first work for the main stage. Also featuring Christopher Wheeldon's *Electric Counterpoint* and Mats Ek's *Carmen*. *Royal Opera House, London WC2*

Babel (words) Tue & Wed
The choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (*left*) collaborates with the sculptor Antony Gormley in a work about communication and interaction. *Sadler's Wells, London EC1*

Richard Alston Dance Company Tue
A programme including Alston's *Shuffle It Right*, a series of bouncy social dances to music by Hoagy Carmichael. *Theatre Royal, Glasgow*

Entity Tue & Wed
Wayne McGregor draws on his research with leading cognitive scientists in this recent work. McGregor's Random Dance Company are sleek in his fast, full-out choreography. *Festival Theatre, Edinburgh*

Hofesh Shechter tonight, Thur & Fri
Sneak preview of *Political Mother*, the first evening-length work by a choreographer in demand from contemporary dance companies. *Theatre Royal, Plymouth, tonight; Brighton Dome, Thur & Fri*

Candoco Dance Company Thur
The integrated company of disabled and non-disabled dancers in *Renditions*, a triple bill of new works by Wendy Houston, Emanuel Gat and Sarah Michelson. *New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth*

ZOË ANDERSON

Dance

CHOSEN BY

MARK MONAHAN

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Damien Jalet and Antony Gormley

The two choreographers and Turner Prize-winning sculptor reunite after 2008's marvellous *Sutra* for a new piece, *Babel*. The conclusion to a hugely ambitious triptych that has already included *Foi* and *Myth*, the new piece tackles the issue of communication and is liable to do so with no small amount of intellectual or physical imagination.

• Sadler's Wells, London EC1
(0844 412 4300), Tues, Wed

Royal Ballet

Last two chances today (mat & eve) to catch RB dancer Liam Scarlett's first piece of choreography for the Covent Garden main stage. Set to Poulenc's blistering Double Piano Concerto, it's a musical, muscular and sensuous creation. Also on the bill are Christopher Wheeldon's *Electric Counterpoint* and Mats Ek's *Carmen*.

• Royal Opera House, London WC2
(020 7304 4000)

Hofesh Shechter

• See feature on page 9

■ **Babel (words)**

Sadler's Wells, EC1

★★★

Stimulated by his own mixed race, the Flemish-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui often focuses on themes of ethnicity, identity, cultural differences, conflicts and boundaries. His latest, *Babel (words)*, co-choreographed with Damien Jalet, centres on language — verbal and physical — drawing on the multinational range of his 17 dancers and musicians (13 countries and 15 languages between them). The music is a fascinating mix of Indian, Japanese and Turkish. Integral to the action are Antony Gormley's "props": five huge three-dimensional metal frames, which the dancers are constantly reconfiguring to suggest towers, temples, rooms and prisons, psychological as well as physical spaces. Fragmenting and conjoining kaleidoscopically, the work is crowded with incident and vignettes, through which I found no clear path, but a satire on stereotypes is maintained. Ulrika Kinn Svensson is a Swedish dominatrix in thigh boots, hilarious as a blow-up doll or a crushing interpreter at an airport customs queue. Darryl E Woods lectures on neuroscience, sends up architectural jargon and pronounces on the superiority of English (drowned out by a gabbling multilingual chorus of counterclaims). Francis Ducharme's suave talking of "amour" reverts to the grunts of animal lust. Some of the jokes and business seem pointless, but Kazutomi Kozuki and Shogo Yoshii, in a conversation of hectic Japanese, are extremely funny even if — or perhaps because — we don't understand a word. The choreography is eclectically styled, reflecting multinational influences: vigorous, propulsive and frequently gestural, always watchable. Cherkaoui aims at seeking unity out of division (the chaos of Babel), but I am not sure if this emerges from the melting pot, and at 100 minutes straight through, I found the journey rather a stretch. *DD*

John Peter, David Jays, Maxie Szalwinska and David Dougill

★★★★★ KO ★★★★★ A-OK
★★★ OK★★ So-so ★ No-no

dance A tower of self-indulgence

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's new work is little more than multi-lingual jabber



LOUISE
LEVENE

Babel ★★☆☆☆

Royal Ballet: Triple Bill ★★☆☆☆

ROH, London WC2

(020 7304 4000) to Jun 11

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's ambitious new collaboration with sculptor Antony Gormley, **Babel**, premiered at Sadler's Wells last week. Most of us would rather reline the pond than attend a lecture on multiculturalism and linguistic imperialism, but dance theatre can sugar any number of pills.

Besides which, Cherkaoui made new friends with *Sutra* – an international hit featuring the Shaolin monks and a Gormley installation of 16 coffins – and sales for *Babel* (its multi-tongued jabber, notwithstanding) were brisk.

This time the Turner Prize laureate has supplied five aluminium frames that can be clustered, nested and separated by the dancers like giant dice, to conjure cityscapes, puzzle boxes and prison cells on an

otherwise bare stage.

The polyglot score was a flagrant *pot pourri* of medieval polyphony, Indian singing and Japanese drumming, and the set and music created a magical space: unfortunately it was inhabited.

The multi-national cast was dominated by Darryl E Woods (part chorus, part puppet master) aided and abetted by Ulrika Kinn Svensson, a scary brunette catwalking robotically in thigh-high boots. Francis Duchame stole the show when he morphed from an urbane figure musing (in French) on Eighties Belgian choreography to a grunting Neanderthal, but although these vignettes were enjoyable, they couldn't redeem the self-indulgence let alone the inexcusable running time of 100 minutes.

THE FINAL OFFERING of the season from **Royal Ballet** is a trio of works by Wayne McGregor, Christopher Wheeldon and George Balanchine which opened last weekend. Not a well-balanced programme,

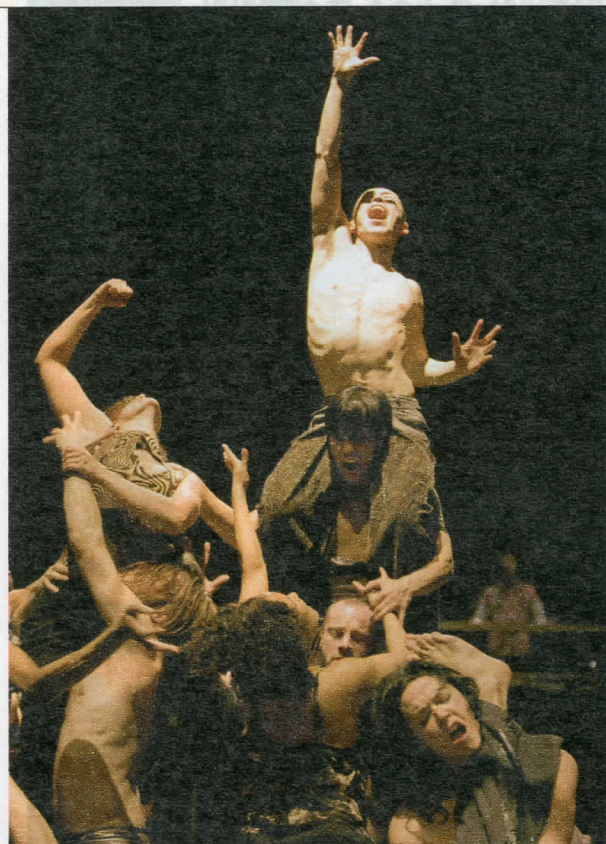
but it did showcase the company's finest talents.

McGregor fully exploits their gifts in 2006's *Chroma*, an osteopath's charter packed with gymnastic distortions. John Pawson's overpraised white set is resculpted by the warm glow of Lucy Carter's celestial lighting and by the white-hot intensity of Edward Watson, Melissa Hamilton and Sarah Lamb.

The play of Natasha Katz's lighting on Jean-Marc Puissant's set is one of the enduring pleasures of Wheeldon's *Tryst*, its Rothko-ish backdrop mirroring the mood in the central duet.

Both Saturday and Sunday's audiences gave the usual collective sigh at the dozen gleaming white tutus that open the *allegro vivo* movement of Balanchine's *Symphony in C*. That said, it isn't as *vivo* as it might be (the Thomas Beecham recording beats the current running time by a good seven minutes) and the female corps looked under-rehearsed – but it, too, was studded with stars.

Laura Morera breezed through the *allegro vivace*.



Too much chatter Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's 'Babel'

Steven McRae scorned gravity in Sunday's Third Movement and (on Saturday) unravelled heart-stopping pirouettes in the First.

Sarah Lamb dances sublimely in all three parts of the triple bill – she brings a soulful serenity to apparently abstract work. She glides through the monotonous

acrobatics of McGregor's pairwork with somnambulistic grace, and her shimmering *pas de bourrée* and swooning backbends give *Tryst's pas de deux* the magic and mystery of a vision scene.

Louise Levene's novel, 'A Vision of Loveliness', is published by Bloomsbury, £11.99

Dance Babel Sadler's Wells

★★★★☆

DEBRA CRAINE

When God punished the arrogant Babylonians by giving them so many languages they couldn't understand each other, it was a curse. For Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and his co-choreographer Damien Jalet, in their new production *Babel (words)*, our multilingual, multicultural world is a blessing too.

That's no surprise, for Cherkaoui has a mixed heritage — Flemish and Moroccan, European and Arab, Roman Catholic and Muslim — and his Antwerp-based dance company is the very embodiment of multiculturalism (18 performers from 13 countries). As a choreographer Cherkaoui has pursued art that is concerned with questions of identity and belonging. Here, with



ROBBIE JACK

Jalet, he takes that one step farther, into the very building blocks of our humanity: words unite, words divide.

There are plenty of words in *Babel* (a new commission launching the Dash Arabic Series). Some offer a fascinating discourse on the neuroscience of communication, some a wry anecdote

on the complexities of globalisation and some a nonsensical, irritating babble. We live in a world noisy with the means of conversation, but how well do we speak to each other? The physical language, when it comes, arrives like a frustrated outburst, rhythmic, visceral and determined. Movements are

shared and repeated, delivered like punches and then lured into a seductive and tender communality. As *Babel* progresses so does the choreography's desire to shape the dancers into a cohesive whole. If there is one defining message it is that the non-verbal level, the point at which bodies speak truer than words, is our one authentic avenue of communication. Dance, for all its stylistic hues, is more potent than dialogue.

The set is a ballet of rectangular geometry. Antony Gormley's giant aluminium frames are manipulated into all manner of shapes and suggestions — buildings, prisons, shelters — as the dancers move in, out and through them. Gormley (who collaborated with Cherkaoui on *Zero Degrees* and *Sutra*) has turned the simple shapes of *Babel* into the magic modules of its creators' intellectual imagination. The music is haunting, mesmerising, a taste of India, Japan and medieval polyphony. The show could do with tightening (it's too long) and its message needs more focus, but there's no denying its power to connect.

Babel (words)
Sadler's Wells



Tue May 18-19 Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui completes a triptych of works, with a little help from friends Damien Jalet and Antony Gormley.

Dance

Babel

Sadler's Wells, London

★★★★★

As the son of a Moroccan father and Flemish mother, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui knows in his bones how deep the divisions of culture can go. His previous