UNIT 12: CONTEMPORARY DANCE TECHNIQUE

PRACTITIONER: SIDI LARBI CHERKAOUI

SET WORKS: BABEL (WORDS) • SUTRA • ZERO DEGREES

SIDI LARBI CHERKAOUI

Who is he?
Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (born 1976 in Antwerp, Belgium) is a Belgian-Moroccan choreographer and dancer. His background and work reflect encounters between cultures, identities, movement traditions and artistic disciplines. He trained at P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels and began choreographing professionally in the late 1990s.

Career and companies
He worked with the Belgian collective Les Ballets C. de la B. and collaborated with artists from different disciplines. In 2010 he founded Eastman, his own dance company. He has created work for international dance companies, ballet companies, theatre and opera.

Recognisable choreographic interests
Cultural exchange; identity and belonging; communication and language; spirituality and belief; human relationships.

Movement approach
Cherkaoui often combines contemporary dance with movement influences from other cultures and practices. His choreography may include intricate partnering, lifts, counterbalance, contact, precise gestures, fluid transitions, changes of level, athletic movement and detailed ensemble patterns. Do not assume every feature appears in every work: use specific evidence.

Why is he significant?
His work demonstrates how contemporary dance can be created through collaboration across cultures and art forms. He challenges the idea that dance must belong to one recognisable style, and uses movement, design, music and performers' individual skills to explore complex ideas.

BABEL (WORDS) – 2010

Key facts
Choreography: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Damien Jalet. Visual design: Antony Gormley. Premiere: 2010. Company context: an important early work in Cherkaoui's Eastman period. The title refers to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, in which different languages lead to misunderstanding and division.

Stimulus and intention
The work explores language as a force that can connect people but also separate them. It investigates communication, cultural identity, territory, religion, community and the possibility of misunderstanding. Language is not only spoken: bodies, gestures, rhythms and movement styles also communicate.

Choreographic features to recognise
A large international ensemble; contrasting movement vocabularies; group patterns and shifting formations; moments of unison and difference; gestures and physical signs; interactions that suggest negotiation, conflict or connection; and the relationship between individual identity and collective behaviour.

Set, sound and design
Antony Gormley's sculptural design uses large box-like structures to create and divide

performance space. The structures can suggest boundaries, territories, barriers or places of encounter. Voice, language and rhythm contribute to the sound world, reinforcing the theme of communication.

Meaning and impact

Babel asks whether people can understand one another across differences in language, culture and belief. Its international cast and mixed movement languages make the theme visible through the body as well as through sound.

SUTRA – 2008

Key facts

Choreography: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Premiere: 27 May 2008 at Sadler's Wells, London. Performers: Cherkaoui and 19 Shaolin monks from China. Set: Antony Gormley. Music: Szymon Brzóska, performed live.

Stimulus and intention

The work grew from Cherkaoui's interest in Shaolin culture, kung fu and Chan Buddhist philosophy. It explores the relationship between body, mind, discipline, energy, spirituality and the natural world. The collaboration involved cultural exchange and learning between the choreographer and the monks.

Movement and performance features

The monks bring highly trained kung fu skills, precision, strength, agility, balance, speed and control. Cherkaoui's contemporary movement vocabulary sits alongside these specialist skills. Notice contrasts between stillness and explosive action, individual and group movement, grounded movement and elevated or acrobatic actions.

Set and spatial design

Antony Gormley designed 21 wooden boxes. They are moved and rearranged to form changing structures such as walls, bridges, rooms, temples or other environments. The boxes become active elements in the choreography, shaping pathways, levels, entrances, exits and relationships between performers.

Music

Szymon Brzóska composed a specially commissioned score for piano, percussion and strings. Live music helps shape atmosphere, timing and transitions, and interacts with the physical action.

Meaning and impact

Sutra presents a meeting between contemporary choreography and Shaolin traditions. It considers how discipline, shared practice and cultural exchange can create new artistic possibilities. The set makes transformation visible: the same objects repeatedly create new spaces and meanings.

Evidence to use in an answer

Select a sequence where the boxes transform the space; an example of a monk's precision or physical control; and a moment where Cherkaoui's movement contrasts with or complements the monks' movement. Link each example to the work's ideas.

ZERO DEGREES – 2005

Key facts

Co-choreographers and performers: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan. Premiere: 8 July 2005 at Sadler's Wells, London. Music: Nitin Sawhney. Sculptural design: Antony Gormley. Dramaturgy: Guy Cools.

Stimulus and intention

The duet explores identity, duality, belonging, borders, life and death, and the search for a point of balance or origin. The title refers to when something becomes something else.

Choreographic influences

The work brings together two distinct movement backgrounds: Cherkaoui's contemporary dance

approach and Khan's Kathak training combined with contemporary movement. Their different physical vocabularies create contrast, dialogue and shared movement.

Movement and performance features

A close duet structure; intricate partnering; mirroring and unison; counterbalance and weight-sharing; changes between fluid and sharply defined movement; repeated gestures; and physical relationships that shift between similarity, opposition and dependence. Analyse the actual sequence rather than listing features without evidence.

Set and symbolism

Antony Gormley's sculptural figures/dummies create doubles or alter egos. They can suggest another self, a body, a presence or an absence. Their relationship with the two dancers raises questions about identity, mortality and how people are seen or classified.

Music and atmosphere

Nitin Sawhney's commissioned score supports the work's shifts in atmosphere and emotional intensity. Consider how rhythm, texture, sound and silence shape the dancers' timing and relationship.