

EdFringe 2025: Practice of ZEN

Fringe Review

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A show delivered in Chinese that touches the mythical themes of Wuxia, the fictional world of martial arts, mixing folklore with the spiritual essence behind these legendary tales. Abiding by the Shaolin-Zen principle of determination, the actors deliver a performance which is at times emotionally charged and would have much more power if they had the courage to bypass the barrier of language and jump straight into the dark abyss of physical experimentation.

Practice of Zen is a play by Theatre Ronin, a theatre company from Hong Kong.

Whereas other Hong Kong productions played in large European festivals in mainland Europe, like Avignon Off for instance, mainly tend to experiment in the purely physical realm, Practice of Zen remains a text-based play, although rich in physical elements.

The core of the play is the world of Wuxia, the fictional world of martial arts which for at least a generation was the driver that enabled Hong Kong cinematography to be exported all over the world.

However, instead of giving a shallow representation of these mythological Chinese tales, Practice of Zen opens a door that enables us to dive into the spiritual essence of Wuxia.

All myths have a spiritual element that works as a pillar around which the myth is built. Said myths define a civilisation. For Southern Europeans it may be the feats of Hercules or the jealousy of Zeus for the nymph Cynara; for Northern Europeans it is Thor and Loki fighting in apocalyptic battle and the end-of-the-world cycle of Ragnarök. Even North Americans have a mythological superstructure which is incessantly presented to us in the myriads of Marvel and DC Comics films, where the good-evil duality is unconsciously depicted in black and white, emanating from the spirit of Puritan America.

The legends behind Wuxia are initially seen from the perspective of a child being told a story, where the four actors on the stage reproduce different mythical characters climbing the spiritual ladder of awareness through personal emotional struggles and fights with foes.

The invisible elements of this spiritual world are sometimes depicted with puppets (a bird flying amongst the protagonists) and evoked by the protagonists with reference to karmic and magical themes. It is a world where elegance, integrity and virtue are to be rewarded rather than the sheer display of strength; where the collective prevails over the individual; where the world is not seen as a battleground between good and evil but rather as a training field that moves us to discover a higher self, bowing to the instructions of the greater spirit that has created this universe.

Overall, Practice of Zen does have the elements to become a much more universal play; however, two things prevent the play from fully taking off emotionally.

The first is probably the fact that it would need a larger stage, as the movement of martial arts requires larger breathing space to be fully appreciated.

The second is the use of subtitles. Unless they are carefully positioned within the field of vision of the spectator, subtitles are a big distraction. In this case we were oftentimes forced to look away from what was happening on the stage in order to look at a TV screen placed in one corner of the room.

This would require the courage to probably get rid of subtitles altogether.

Given the strong interest in Asian theatre in general, and Chinese theatre in particular, the audience could be willing to accept the lack of subtitles in exchange for a more profound theatrical experience. Two recent examples come to mind. In 2024 the Shanghai Theatre Academy staged “The Legend of the White Snake” at Avignon Off without subtitles. It was a conscious and meditated decision, as subtitles would have distracted the spectator from what is indeed a great *mise en scène*. Instead of relying on subtitles, the company opted for a short oral introduction to the whole play, explaining to the audience what they were about to see.

Said linguistic problem is also present in other countries such as India. In 2024 we reviewed a show ‘Agleyum Cliyopatrayum’ performed in English and Malayalam at the 2024 Pune Festival

(you can read the review here: <https://fringereview.co.uk/review/fringereview-india/iapar-india/2024/agleyum-cliyopatrayum/>).

Once again the director abstained from using subtitles (bear in mind the show was performed in front of an Indian audience that could not understand Malayalam) and opted for a short presentation before staging the play.

In both cases the result was a much more absorbing emotional and theatrical experience. Furthermore, there is something in the tonality of the Chinese language (whether Cantonese or Mandarin) that makes it pleasant to hear and does not tire the audience as other much harsher languages do.

Getting rid of subtitles can sometimes be a difficult decision, but if done consciously, having seen the results, it does pay back.

<https://fringereview.co.uk/review/edinburgh-fringe/2025/practice-of-zen/>