

Dance or We Are Lost: The Tanztheater of Pina Bausch

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Ditta Miranda Jasjfi in *Vollmond*, from Wim Wenders's film *Pina* (Photo © Neue Road Movies GmbH. A Sundance Selects Release)

When Wim Wenders's film on Pina Bausch and Tanztheater Wuppertal was released in 2011, it had become a tribute to the late choreographer who did not live to see this visually opulent 3-D documentary of her work. The German director had known her for some years, and both had developed a plan for a film centering round a handful of her most well-known works including the classic pieces of the 1970s, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *Kontakthof*, and *Café Müller*. But days before the shoot was due to start, in June 2009, Bausch died suddenly, shortly after being diagnosed with cancer. When this unimaginable event occurred, the project was cancelled, since Wenders had projected Bausch as the central figure. He would have followed her into rehearsals where she used to pose questions to the dancers. Wenders

also had planned to go on tour with her to Asia and South America, perhaps dreaming of the peculiar kind of road movies for which he had become known (*Paris, Texas; Until the End of the World*), even though his most important work, *Engel über Berlin (Wings of Desire)* in fact addresses the scarred historical past at home— Germany’s haunted dividedness, with the angels watching over the Wall and desecrated zones left empty during the Cold War.

Yet eventually, filming went ahead, and while footage of Bausch’s dance works performed on stage was still to be a main element, Wenders shifted the focus onto her dancers, letting them speak and remember, making them her voice, turning her own method of constantly asking her dancers questions into the method of the film. This method did not lie at the beginning of her directorship of Tanztheater Wuppertal. In 1974 (*Iphigenie auf Tauris*) and 1975 (*Orpheus und Eurydike; Le Sacre de Printemps*), Bausch created large-scale choreographies still based on through-composed music and influenced by her ballet and modern dance training (at Folkwang Schule in Essen and in New York). This gradually changed with the premieres of *Die sieben Todsünden* (1976) and *Blaubart. Beim Anhören einer Tonbandaufnahme von Béla Bartók’s Oper ‘Herzog Blaubarts Burg’* (1977), and when I first saw her work in 1978, nothing was the same anymore. All concepts people had had of stage dance seemed to be breaking down with *Er nimmt sie an der Hand und führt sie in das Schloss, die andern folgen* (1978), a turbulent psychotic nightmare of guilt and obsessive denial, inspired by a forgotten stage direction in *Macbeth* and acted out in a cluttered space gradually filling with water. More than half of the infuriated audience had left before the end.

During the creative storm of the next few years, which were also the last years of her partner, stage designer Rolf Borzig (he died in 1980), Bausch revolutionized dance in Europe, even if a distant echo of German expressionism (preserved in the Folkwang pedagogy of Kurt Joos) reached back to the early years of *Ausdruckstanz* (Mary Wigman, Gret Palucca) and the underground burlesque scene of Weimar Berlin (Valeska Gert). But this echo had rarely been heard since World War II, when Germany’s and most other European countries’ national and regional theatres were dominated by the classical ballet repertoire. The political unconscious was largely covered up by beautiful, elegant diversions of romantic ballet and lavish productions of 19th century opera (most ballet companies in Germany worked closely with the opera houses) – and with hindsight a break with the escapist spectacle must have seemed inevitable. Bausch founded the company in 1973 and began rehearsing in a converted 1950s cinema, next to a McDonald’s. The provincial Westphalia town of Wuppertal commissioned

her to work for both the opera and municipal theatre. What could not have been expected was the raw emotional and sheer relentless unraveling that Bausch's *Stücke* (pieces) – often unnamed yet on the night of the premiere – precipitated. The unraveling was psychological, with the dancers' body language, gestures, and stories crashing through the surface realism into a stark, almost bottomless series of excavations, an unpeeling of the many protective layers we all know to exist in our everyday lives, hiding our intimate desires and fears, our longing for love and acceptance, envy of others or aggression turned against those others and our own damaged selves, insecurities, obsessive denials, vanities and suppressed hopes.



A scene from Pina Bausch's *Blaubart* (1978). Photo: Ulli Weiss.

When Bausch's dancers are flailing across the autumnal leaves strewn on the stage of *Blaubart*, and the men are pushing the women up against the walls while the *Blaubart* dancer (Jan Minarik) frantically spools back the tape recorder with Bartók's music, again and again as if stuck in a traumatized replay of absurd male aggression and posturing, or when the ritual destruction of the "chosen one" is danced out to pure exhaustion on the heavy

peat covering the stage for *Sacre de Printemps* (Borzig, and later Peter Pabst built water, earth, sand and stony rubble landscapes for the dances, strikingly complicated, messy, often obstructive environments that form the terrains on which gender conflict and sociopathic behaviors play themselves out), *tanztheater* asserts its intensities in ways that are like a physical assault on our senses. Bausch abandons the decorum of theatrical form; her collages expose ruptured subjectivities in flailing bodies. Role-playing is turned inside out. Little tricks become threatening gestures, technique turns into travesty. Men and women wrestle with each other, women drop out of their clothes, men don women's costumes or prostitute themselves, in disheveled tutus, like body builders in a seedy world of debased freak-shows, parading "gender performativity" in an increasingly wide range of acute observations about traumatized masochistic or sadistic behavior. This is performativity on the edge. The scandal she produced was undoubtedly a kind of cultural violence. (And the term performativity had not even entered academic discourse on gender trouble yet.)

In *1980*, a lone male dancer opens the piece on a platform, eating spoonfuls of soup recounting the voice of a cajoling parent. Later a woman skips around the stage, waving a white scarf, persistently chanting "I'm tir-ed, I'm tir-ed" in a sing-song child-like rhythm until she begins to falter, out of breath. The word-actions exhaust, literally. With this dance, spoken language firmly enters into the social choreographies Bausch constructs through her collage method, interlacing revue-like sketches, overlapping story vignettes, strange confessions ("I'll keep my lips really wet just in case someone's behind me..."), and absurd questions ("What comes to mind when I say 'dinosaur'?") with larger ensemble polonaises, small gestural solos, and slowly evolving stage images, like *1980*'s exaggerated sun-bathing scene to Judy Garland's broken voice in "Over the Rainbow." The assemblage resembles a Felliniesque surrealist dream cinematography. In *1980*, many of the dissonant verbal cacophonies revolve around dancers each excitedly telling the audience about their personal fears, how they cope or how they pretend not to be afraid in the dark.

Bausch herself directed a film, *Die Klage der Kaiserin* (1989), which encapsulates many of her montage principles and also takes recourse both to her "naturalism" (the landscape settings – the film opens in a forest of trees) and distinct urban locales that form the petty bourgeois setting of *Café Müller* (1978), *Kontakthof* (1978) and *Bandoneon* (1980), meeting grounds of the lonely hearts who seek each other out to find a moment of intimacy in torturous embraces that fall apart as quickly as they are formed. By the mid-1980s, I had seen

most of the early Bausch works after an extensive retrospective at Venice (Italy); her vision seemed so dark and unforgivingly pessimistic (e.g. *Auf dem Gebirge hat man ein Geschrei gehört*) that the shocked reactions during her first US tours in 1984/85 hardly came as a surprise.(1) It is not easy to re-live the excitement of those early experiences as an audience member captivated by the work's brutal honesty, poetic strength and bitter irony, by this daring living theatre of no pretence but a relentless willingness to test how far a gesture and a physical-mental attitude can be pushed to reveal something, to alienate our conceptions of kitsch, banality and truth, sincerity and uncomfortable humor, straddling the porous line between anger and shame, the fear of violence and need for compassion. The famous love trio of forced/failed embraces in *Café Müller*, enacted by Dominique Mercy, Malou Airaudo and Jan Minarik, has been disseminated in countless video clips on YouTube.(2) It is a microcosm of Bausch's ability to analyze human behavior, stretch it literally until it becomes dissonant by building a deadpan scene of insistent accelerated repetition. Something goes irreparably wrong, when Mercy cannot carry out the embrace and a kiss with Airaudo, but needs to be forced into it by the third dancer who enacts the gestures for both male and female partner, enfolds and instructs them, so to speak, until they reach the point where they repeat the embrace/kiss automatically, interrupted by failure and the attempt to try again/fail again. Bausch's bleak existentialism, going beyond Beckett's, focuses on the potential of the bodies' gestures to hang on to a peculiar, often riveting stubbornness which can also turn painfulness into the opposite of despair.



Café Müller (1978), with Jan Minarik, Malou Auraudo, Dominique Mercy. Photograph: Paulo Pimenta

This extraordinary social ritual falls into place with hundreds of similar scenes Bausch created with the dancers who often tell us directly, or show us, something of their actual life stories, their injuries, pregnancies, and hang-ups, their insecurities, unfulfilled needs and cravings, thus transforming what we had known as dance into performances of the subjective, private and public role of bodies and bodily composites, with their barely veiled psychic and emotional constrictions and anxieties on the line. Bausch's *tanztheater* also has an ecstatic dimension: we hold our breath when we recognize the banal logic of conventions and the absurd reproduction of power or sexual relations tied into the habitus of cultural behavior.

For many years Bausch worked with the same core ensemble of dancers whose personalities imprinted themselves onto the movement qualities for which the Wuppertal company became known throughout the world once they started regular and massive touring around the globe from the 1980s onward.⁽³⁾ The earlier impression of Bausch's virulently probing and taboo-breaking style of physical realism was later modulated. The company began to receive numerous invitations to develop and coproduce new pieces on location in different cities (Palermo, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Lisbon, etc), and Bausch's transcultural road work often tended to resort to a more poetically acquiescent, and even melancholic mood in her late work, as if her harsher outlook on life had become filtered through a more forgiving lens, or a desperate persistence to dance over unresolved and back-breaking contradictions. Her music collages, though still full of surprising contrasts, as well tended to become more consoling in her late work, tango and Japanese drumming, Billie Holiday and Purcell, waltz and bagpipe music entering into strange mixes encompassing an increasingly beautiful if haunted loneliness on stage where we now see a younger generation of newly cast dancers taking on roles we thought would forever be carried by Dominique Mercy, Lutz Förster, Malou Auraudo, Jan Minarik, Nazareth Panadero, Mechthild Grossmann, Jo Ann Endicott, Meryl Tankard and the others.

This generational change in fact is reflected well in Wenders's film, sometimes to stunning effect as in the scenes where he intercuts the current production of *Café Müller*, by a younger cast, with archival footage from the early version, after Mercy and Auraudo peek into a small maquette of the stage set, reminiscing over how all the chairs got piled in there and then had

to be flung out of the dancers' paths by a dancer. The archival footage features Bausch herself, moving upstage with eyes wide shut, in the only stage performance she continued to enact for many years. Helena Pikon confesses that she froze when Bausch eventually asked her to take over the role, and that she is haunted by her absent ghost.

The interviews are done indirectly. We hear the dancers dubbed over their silent, contemplative faces, which tends to be awkward at times as the younger members appear shy, inarticulate, prone to express banalities or speak of their fear of Pina's power as Übermutter: "Pina used to say, 'Be more crazy'; "Pina had the most penetrating eyes I have ever seen"; "I was lost, and had to pull myself up by my hair." We then see a dancer, filmed in a swimming pool, pulling herself up by her hair. Another speaks simply of missing Bausch, not just as a choreographer and guide but as a presence: "Pina, I still haven't dreamed about you," she says plainly. "Please visit me in my dreams." These ponderous statements mystify, rather than explain, choreographic labor, compositional process, and the ideas that drove the work. But the interviews with the dancers thus point to an underlying, fascinating question that also accompanied the trajectory of Tanztheater Wuppertal, especially during recent revivals of *Kontakthof* (two production-projects cast with senior citizens over 65 and with teenagers, here splendidly fused and intercut as we watch the professional and amateur dancers enact the same scenes) – namely whether the charisma of the company is not owed to the unique personalities of the dancers who originally worked with Bausch for many years and sustained the roles they had created collaboratively with the choreographer. Back in 1980 it seemed as if only these particular dancers had enabled Bausch



Dancers performing *Kontakthof* in Wim Wenders' *Pina* (Photo © Neue Road Movies GmbH. A Sundance Selects Release)

to push the borders of dance and theatre, and Bausch herself told me once that she imagined them to grow old on stage, along with her. Some of them did, indeed.

The emotional artistry of this company and its search for a theatrical exposure of human fragility and strength in life thus also formulates a utopian project, dancing on to resist the cliché of ephemeral live art or the brutal laws of the industry requiring quick turn-overs of beauty and youth, building a sustainable aesthetic intensity of exacting cruelty (Artaud) directed at questions about life and the expressive energy with which we must venture to experience our corporeality as social subjects, as volatile and hysterical members of the societies into which we were born or into which we move. Bausch's ensemble, from the beginning, has been completely international; the critical perception of German *angst* in the work is a prejudice that would need to be parsed more carefully, and Wenders unfortunately plays too much on the idea of fear himself as he keeps eliciting hushed comments from the younger members rather than letting us thrive on the superb, Buster Keaton-like comedic skills and surrealist fantasies the dancers act out in the outdoor urban locations (there is an amazing "Japanese" robot sound performance by Regina Advento on the Wuppertal overhead tram; in another scene, a woman walks around a derelict pond with a 10-foot tree in her backpack).



Dancers under the overhead rail. A still from Wim Wenders's *Pina* (Photo © Neue Road Movies GmbH. A Sundance Selects Release)

On the one hand, then, Wenders's film does not address the presumed *angst* nor capture the collaborative creation process, nor offer a closer insight into the socio-political contexts reflected in Bausch's insistence on particular themes in her fragmented revue form of aesthetic and social dance. Bausch's broken syntax of modern dance vocabulary and of the chorus (a subliminal reference to Weimar culture's Tiller Girls and the mechanization of the principle of ballet), her subversion of gender roles, and her rendering absurd of the fetishization of female beauty or male possessiveness – along with her relentless exposure of physical vulnerability and the clumsiness of social intercourse – has left a major impact on the performing arts, both conceptually and formally. Later emergences of physical theatre, Konzepttanz and performance art in Europe are unthinkable without Bausch's cutting open the anatomy of the body and its psychic predispositions, and one would like to see the film probe the deeper layers of Bausch's existentialism and her attack on post-war compensatory sublimations (the era of "normalization" after the Holocaust). Wenders tries hard with his 3-D film to evoke the depth and sculptural quality of Bausch's stagings, and some of the scenes from *Sacre de Printemps* and *Café Müller* are breathtakingly rendered, while other scenes, staged outside around the environs of Bausch's home base of Wuppertal on traffic islands, in front of industrial backdrops or on top of a quarry, fail to tell us anything Bausch had not

already done in *Die Klage der Kaiserin* (in fact Wenders imitates that film's internal structure).

On the other hand, even if constricted by this sense of a pious homage to the late Bausch, Wenders's camera succeeds in the last twenty minutes to grip the viewer in a mesmerizing crescendo of dancing, on and around the rock and the water surfaces of *Vollmond*, a piece in which Bausch's younger cast goes full out to release an untrammelled energy of immersion, inhabiting the elements to the point of self-abandon. Drenched to the skin, they dance and dance. As a counter point to the opening ritual of *Sacre de Printemps*, and framed by the opening and closing promenade from *Nelken* performed by the older cast in understated ironic fashion (this polonaise offers an ironic comment on the cycle of the seasons), the over-dance of *Vollmond* succeeds in imprinting a sense of exuberant defiance within this dangerous slippery landscape, as if for a moment the thought of mortality could be plotted out and transformed into an unspeakable poetic sensory rewilding, in excess of any fear. The anxiety of forgetting is the insurmountable challenge, after all, for any company that survives their founding choreographer, facing the question of how to continue.(4)

Notes and Further Reading

The film *Pina: tanzt, tanzt sonst sind wir verloren* (*Pina: Dance, dance otherwise we are lost*), directed by Wim Wenders, 103 mins, was released in 2011 (Neue Road Movies).

(1) See Johannes Birringer, "Pina Bausch: Dancing Across Borders," *TDR* 30:2 (1986), 85-97. Reprinted in *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 132-45. For important early critiques of Bausch's oeuvre, see Norbert Servos/Gert Weigelt, *Pina Bausch Wuppertal Dance Theatre or The Art of Training a Goldfish* (Cologne: Ballett-Bühnen-Verlag, 1984); Ulrike Hanraths/Herbert Winkels, eds., *Tanzlegenden* (Frankfurt: Tende Verlag, 1984).

(2) See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WLazG0bQPI>; and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEQGYs3d5Ys>.

(3) For a careful interpretation of Bausch's evolving choreographic repertoire, her home base (Wuppertal) and world touring, see Jochen Schmidt, *Pina Bausch: Tanzen gegen die Angst* (Munich: Econ, 2002). See also: Susan Manning, "An American Perspective on Tanztheater," *TDR* 30: 2 (1986), 57-79; Marianne Goldberg, "Artifice and Authenticity: Gender Scenarios in Pina Bausch's Dance Theatre." *Women & Performance* 4: 2 (1989), 104-17; Gabrielle Cody, "Woman, Man, Dog, Tree: Two Decades of Intimate and Monumental Bodies in Pina Bausch's Tanztheater." *TDR* 42: 2 (1998), 115-31; Ciane Fernandes, *Pina Bausch and the*

Wuppertal Dance Theatre: The Aesthetics of Repetition and Transformation (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Leonetta Bentivoglio/Francesco Carbone, *Pina Bausch oder Die Kunst über Nelken zu tanzen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007); Valerie A. Briginshaw/Ramsay Burt, *Writing Dancing Together* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Royd Climenhaga, *Pina Bausch* (London: Routledge, 2008); Emily Coates, "Beyond the Visible: The Legacies of Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 32:5 (2010), 1-7; Royd Climenhaga, ed., *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook: The Making of Tanztheater* (London: Routledge, 2012).

(4) Headed by Bausch's son, Salomon, the newly created Pina Bausch Foundation holds copyright to her pieces and choreographies as well as Rolf Borzik's set designs and costumes. It also owns materials relating to over forty-six pieces: books of directions, production paperwork, technical plans, press clippings, programmes, posters, photographs, sketches and around 7,500 videos. Along with the Tanztheater Wuppertal, the Foundation is cataloguing this enormous inventory, examining all the material and evaluating it, now engaging in the digital archiving of the videos and all important papers. It also plans to support emerging artists as well as research activities. See: <http://www.pinabausch.org/>

Bio

Johannes Birringer is a choreographer/media artist and co-director of DAP-Lab at Brunel University where he is a Professor of Performance Technologies in the School of Arts. He has created numerous dance-theatre works, video installations and digital projects in collaboration with artists in Europe, the Americas, China, and Japan. His digital oratorio *Corpo, Carne e Espírito*, premiered in Brasil at the FIT Theatre Festival in 2008; the interactive dancework *Suna no Onna* was featured at festivals in London, and the Lab's mixed-reality installation *UKIYO [Moveable Worlds]* went on European tour in 2010. DAP-Lab's new production is a dance opera, *for the time being*, created as an homage to the 1913 futurist Russian opera *Victory over the Sun*. His books include *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism* (1989), *Media and Performance* (1998), *Performance on the Edge* (2000), *Performance, Technology and Science* (2008), and two edited volumes on *Dance and Cognition* (2005), and *Dance and Choreomania* (2011).