

Pina Bausch

Dancing Across Borders

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It is not too long ago that the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles, with its marathon program of more than 400 performances and exhibitions from 18 countries, went out of its way to demonstrate the seductiveness of spectacular consumption in the name of the arts. Or, rather, in the name of major foreign artists who were brought together so that corporate sponsors and multinational culture producers could speak of their art as a “universal language, a bridge of illumination that connects all of us” (the Olympic Arts Festival Catalog).

Whatever the hidden motives of such advertising, it is a gesture toward a kind of innocent and immediate consumption. But when Pina Bausch’s Wuppertaler Tanztheater, still unknown in this country outside of New York, opened the Olympic Festival with such emotionally devastating pieces as *Café Müller* (1978) and *Bluebeard* (1977), the Festival had its first unpredicted scandal.

With the hype surrounding Bausch’s return to the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s 1985 Next Wave Festival (she was there first in 1984), we entered a second stage in the reception of her “language” and in the critics’ predictable entrenchment. Whereas BAM can afford to be ironic by announcing that the West German tanztheater will help “deprovincialize New York City” (Lichtenstein 1985:4), it is somewhat more perplexing to notice how the critical writing on performance in New York City mimics the new provincialism by launching its defensive missiles against the challenge of Bausch’s ineradicable Germanness.

Anna Kisselgoff of *The New York Times*, for example, falls back into unwarranted clichés. She argues that audiences accustomed to the formalist aesthetic of the United States’ “pure dance” are necessarily startled when they see the innovative interaction between theater and dance in foreign works (such as those by Bausch, the French Groupe Emile Dubois, and butoh performers) that have pushed the borders of their disciplines by adding expression, feeling, and angst to the form (1985:HI4). When Kisselgoff asked Bausch whether she would be interested in working only with “pure form” and without the need to express feeling, the choreographer probably didn’t even understand the question.

I’m glad, however, that it was asked because its striking disingenuousness and incoherence intimate the more general breakdown of critical faculties and languages vis-à-vis a pluralistic and diversified culture. A cul-

ture in which there are no pure, autonomous forms but constant transformations, mutations, and recapitulations inevitably producing indifference to the specific borders (and ideological limits) of a work of art, of a performance. And occasionally, they also produce fashionable, self-stimulating controversies about equivocal meanings, as if the conditions for an unequivocal, adversarial avant-garde still existed.

The borderline in Bausch's tanztheater is the concrete human body, a body that has specific qualities and a personal history—but also a body that is written about, and written into social representations of gender, race, and class. We tend to take representations of the body for granted, whether we see them in advertisements, films, photographs, pornography, or in the beautiful, ethereal poses of ballet dancers. Every pose, every still, and every movement of the body partakes in the particular representational economy with which a culture directs and dominates what is perceived as reality.

Our physical conventions, like the “official” images of the sexual body, are part of that reality and that perception. In Bausch's works we are

1. Bluebeard (1977): *In Bluebeard's castle, male body-building prostitutes itself in front of a doll.* (Photo by Ulli Weiss)





confronted directly with the gestus of conventions and internalized norms we no longer see. In *Don't Be Afraid* (1976), the seducer repeatedly sings “Look at me—don’t be afraid” in a soft voice before he throws the woman to the ground and rapes her. The woman (Helena Pikon), who resisted the seduction for a long time, then gets up and joins a whorish company of men and women in colorful slips and corsets. They dance the hilarious, cross-dressed dance of victims who have grown tough and professional.

“We are the objects of your suave entrapment” (text from Barbara Kruger photograph, 1983): bodies are continuously dressed up and down, and the make-up spills all over. This leitmotif captures the thrust of Bausch’s staging of the Kurt Weill songs and Bertolt Brecht text in *The Seven Deadly Sins/Don't Be Afraid* (1976). The slipping of the subject positions—who is the “we” and the “your”?—is a crucial dramaturgical strategy in her work that should not be overlooked by us, the audience. We are members of the economy of onlookers.

That women pose and are posed as victims in our society is part of the problem, and Bausch confronts it head-on in her bitterly ironic treatment of Brechtian didacticism. Brecht was a powerful parable-maker and theorist of his own political theater. In *The Seven Deadly Sins*, he tried to raise critical consciousness by demonstrating, through the double image of Anna I/Anna II, how women teach themselves to be sexual commodities under capitalism’s obscene reversal of the “deadly sins” now proclaimed virtues if only they turn a profit and produce middle-class comfort. Larger social processes of contradictory self-education under capitalism are ex-

2. *Don't Be Afraid* (1976): *The would-be rapist, with hands in gloves, joins company with those who have already been victimized.* (Photo by Ulli Weiss)



3. The Seven Deadly Sins (1976): Anna I (Josephine Ann Endicott) smiles at the bright future promised to her. (Photo by Ulli Weiss)

posed, in other words, by re-imposing and re-hearsing the image of woman-as-victim.

In Josephine Ann Endicott's performance of Anna II we see that process of Brechtian image-making exposed, too. In all Bausch's works, from the early *Rite of Spring* (1975) to *1980* (1980) and *On the Mountain a Cry Was Heard* (1984), the authoritative male voice-over is replaced by an estrangement effect that makes itself felt through the skin. Often we see silent dances and strangely familiar rituals performed with such emotional intensity that the process of watching the scene makes us painfully aware of the conventions of watching. At the same time, Bausch's dancers acknowledge and investigate the presence of an audience. Frequently, the house lights come on, and the dancers stroll along the aisles or come downstage looking curiously at the on-lookers. Occasionally they serve a cup of tea, or, as in *Kontakthof* (1978), they may need to borrow a quarter from a spectator to operate the automatic hobbyhorse on stage.

In *Kontakthof* the "setting" in the theater is put under intense scrutiny. The actual constraints of public exposure/theatrical production are thematized and shown to overlap with the individually experienced complexes and fears of inadequacy. The dancers parade up and down the stage, accompanied by bouncy popular songs and ballroom music, sending up the concrete working situation of public performers. They display themselves in profile, show their backs, their teeth, their hands and feet. Embarrassed attempts to hide physical inadequacies—the breasts are too small, the nose too big, the dress never quite fits—intermingle with outbursts of



4. *Kontakthof* (1978):
The group rehearses social rituals, seeking contact across the borders of formality and convention. (Photo by Ulli Weiss)

5. *1980* (1980): *Showing off their knees and legs, the dancers develop a parody of aggressive beauty contests. (Photo by Arici & Smith)*



compulsive exhibitionism, which the company members automatically applaud. Bausch's principle of montage, inherited from the Brechtian theater, is used to interweave an extraordinary series of self-revealing mechanisms: the whole repetitive catalog of gestures and behaviors with which we sell the best aspects of our personalities.

Bausch reveals how individuals feel physically compelled to participate in the games people play—seeking recognition, affection, and social acceptance. Deeply felt, unadmitted human truths are glimpsed through the fragile veneer of mandatory conventions that negate sensual freedom in the face of simulated happiness. Popular romantic songs and Hollywood clichés are played off against tragicomic effects produced by the dancers' "fulfillment" of our expectations. They show us how beautiful they are, how affectionate and aggressively successful they can be, and how desperately they need contact. Running toward the front rows, they threaten to fall over the edge that separates audience and stage. Such explicit references to the social reality of the theater merely highlight the process through which Bausch's choreography of the social physique translates emotional needs—experienced as a generally oppressive compulsion that assumes specific male and female forms—into a wider constellation of cultural attitudes toward the genres that inform such attitudes. Without effort, a Bausch evening crosses and recrosses the boundaries between love song, film, ballet, revue, circus, and social dance. Each crossing, however, reflects a high awareness of the content and the potential inhibitions of a chosen form. The audience's automatic expectations of or responses to the forms are incorporated into the parodic action on stage.

Sometimes, the dancers (Jan Minarik and Dominique Mercy in particular) grotesquely exaggerate this doubling of theater reality; more often, they plan these shifts from one emotional atmosphere to another with

6. *Rite of Spring* (1975):
The sacrificial victim has
been chosen and prepares for
her death. (Photo by Ulli
Weiss)



perfectly deadpan seriousness. There are certain limits to the crossings, of course. I have seen the company perform in Germany, Italy, France, and the U.S., and each time they make considerable efforts to approach particular audiences. The spoken bits of dialog are usually rendered in the language of the host country. Nevertheless, “automatic” audience reactions differ from country to country, from evening to evening.

BAM audiences in 1985 sat perplexed and unmoved through an episode in *Kontakthof* in which the dancers seated themselves with their backs to the audience to watch a German documentary film on the breeding behavior of small water animals. The joke was lost on the American audience. Similar problems arise when audiences can't feel any of the connotations of the German love songs of the '50s or in the sentimental tango that the German middle class danced to during its post-World War II reconstruction.

In the works of Bausch and other post-war German choreographers such as Mechthild Grossmann's *Where My Sun Shines For Me* (1984), the parody of conventions, and the truth of parody, are always linked with a sense of personally experienced history. Repressed memory of childhood traumas can be retrieved if only one listens carefully enough to the repetitions of the socialized body. “We must look again and again,” Bausch once said in defense of her excessive repetitions, “and maybe the saddest thing about our obsessions is that they often look so cheerful.” I counted perhaps 40 or 50 different childhood games in 1980 and *Arien* (1979). When the Wuppertal dancers recall the youthful joy with which they used to drive away the fear built into all children's games, the hide-and-seek exercises always look ambiguously sad and cheerful at the same time. Bausch's dramaturgical method becomes more accessible over time; these adult remembrances of things past are made to evolve slowly and unobtrusively. They take time, and sometimes we cannot see them all at once because they run parallel, commenting on and overlapping with each other. Sometimes they return in a different context and assume a different emotional quality, like the many stories that emerge and disappear again, accentuating the subjective reality of experiences that are both pleasurable and painful.

Silvia Kesselheim, in 1980, repeatedly tells us how, as a child left alone in the dark, she would cry out, and how her nanny would come in and “turn on the light—and she would hit me, she would hit me, she would hit me.” After we have heard the story five times, it becomes poignantly clear that the pleasure of pain can become almost mechanical, automatic. We must listen again and again.

Even with the overtly brutal treatment of the theme in *Bluebeard*—a piece about an obsessive male sadist who kills the women he loves—I am tempted to emphasize the redemptive effect of repetition. While “Bluebeard” is caught up with his machine, “listening to a tape recording” of his murderous desire (the voices that sing about love and death in Béla Bartók's opera), the women dancers gather their strength with their backs to the walls, laughing at the monster in their midst. Since most American audiences were outraged by the violence portrayed in the performance, one might ask why they responded to the violence and not to the sharply focussed process of recognition that leads from the pathos of self-absorbed sexual obsession to the much larger patterns of mechanical evasion that a guilt-ridden society resorts to when it prefers to deny the consequences of its continuing aggression.

In her earlier pieces, Bausch seemed less interested in the grotesque

aspects of male violence. In her choreographic treatment of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, the ritual dance was constantly repeated—to the point of total exhaustion—as a central metaphor for the well-rehearsed behavior of men following the rules of society and selecting women as sacrificial victims, even as the women themselves envision and anticipate the selection. In *Arien*, the stage is not covered with brown earth, as in *Rite of Spring*, but with ankle-deep water. It is surrounded by reflecting mirrors that create an almost surreal combination of surfaces. The tone has changed, too. In a series of parodic images of narcissistic self-regard, *Arien* establishes a melancholy mood that seems provoked by the individual's constant effort to maintain a sense of self-expression and self-comprehension in the face of the mechanical violence that so often dominates the appearances, if not in the theater, then certainly in our lives.

In Bausch's recent theater pieces, such efforts are often comic because they literally carry out the beautiful metaphors of our operas and classical ballets. In *Arien*, fairytale queens and divas who are grotesquely decorated and dressed up by their partners plunge into movement phrases and word litanies. They look and sound nonsensical in comparison with the old Italian belcanto arias (recordings by Beniamino Gigli) and Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. It is the music that makes no sense or the words and movements? We cannot be sure; certainty seems lost as the dancers show us how forms, or formal atmospheres, can come together momentarily, only to disintegrate.

The naked reality of the performers' bodies in *Arien* begins to shine through the wet costumes as they slosh through the water, tumbling forward with the desperate determination to act out normal routines under abnormal circumstances. They do so with high operatic pathos, worthy of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, as when Lutz Förster solemnly carries the lifeless Beatrice Libonati across the pool, their lips glued in a kiss. But that pathos is a dead language, like the reified media gossip that the dancers shout at each other and at the audience. When a huge hippopotamus rises out of the water, nobody seems to notice the incongruity. Bausch's tanztheater lives through such incongruities; the stage is awash with consumer objects that seem out of place or useless, but the actors cling to them for dear life. How life is deformed by such clinging is shown during the grand dinner party in *Arien*, surely the most chaotic scene ever staged on the BAM Opera House stage. The solemnly disintegrating party drowns in an all-out, deliberately self-indulgent schizophrenia that is frightening—if we care to see our culture reflected in it.

Arien has many such dark undertones that undercut our laughter. Jan Minarik's antics as the party photographer or Josephine Ann Endicott's Titania-like love affair with the sad-looking hippo offer comic relief that is coupled with a sense of danger. It is as if we were taking pictures of a society doomed to drown its catastrophic desires in a continuous masquerade of optimism, an on-going party. "What do you think of arias?," one of the dancers asks as she puts thick make-up on her face. "I associate them with blood-red fingernails and torture," is one of the answers.

It is pointless to ask Pina Bausch what her pieces are about. "It is never something you can describe exactly," she told me. "Basically one wants to say something which cannot be said, so we make a poem where one can feel what is meant. You see it, and you know it without being able to formulate it." The East German playwright Heiner Müller once said that in Bausch's theater "the image is a thorn in our eye" (1982:103). Her works are too uncompromising to let themselves be easily domesticated, and there are perhaps no answers to the reality of experience depicted in



them. If anything, the Wuppertal dancers show us what it means to keep questioning beyond the point where repetitions appear merely exhausting and deadly, or perhaps just normal.

It is also possible, of course, that Bausch's continuing performances of human self-degradation and self-oppression will reach a point of no return, where the tenderness and the hope for love are no longer recognizable. Bausch's newest piece, *On the Mountain a Cry Was Heard*, provoked deep distress among BAM audiences, since even those who admire her work felt numbed by the bleak, destructive images of the group scenes. The piece refers us back to the menacing atmosphere of *Rite of Spring*, whose stage is also covered by a deep layer of earth; the dancers seem lost in this vast and empty landscape. There are quiet moments when individuals or couples cry out for help and affection and when their vulnerability becomes a positive force. But these moments of longing are overwhelmed by unconditional violence. In one scene, repeated several times to the blaring sound of the triumphal march from Mendelssohn's *Athalie*, two groups of men chase Helena Pikon and Francis Viet across the dark stage, capture them, and brutally force them to kiss each other. Undoubtedly, there is something deeply disconcerting about these images of fatal enclosure and social pressure. The unloving couple, forced to love each other, cannot escape. But they continue to struggle and to resist.

I am interested in the astounding ironies of this image, not only because they reveal an implicit alternative to the radical historical pessimism and the collapse of individualism depicted in Heiner Müller's plays but also because they must be seen with the German sensitivity toward historical determinations in mind. If some American critics prefer to miss the ironies and find themselves appalled at the vision of painfully distorted bodies and victimized individuals, it may be that the general optimism (the "official" image) in this body-building and aerobics culture has

7. Arien (1979): *The "hippopotamus" watches on as Lutz Förster carries the lifeless Beatrice Libonati across the waters.* (Photo by Ulli Weiss)

locked up any perception of irony in a heightened state of repression that feeds a mindless consumerism and an automatic dream of endless survival. Images of pain or fear of death disturb the American landscape; they don't accommodate the rhetoric of beauty, power, and speed in a technological Disneyland. Images of violence are acceptable in films and MTV, where they can be made to look beautiful. As for the dance: why should anyone want to see distorted and victimized bodies that don't even dance most of the time?

Although it may not have been consciously planned, the Fall 1985 program of the BAM Next Wave festival turned out to be the site of a vociferous encounter between proponents of German tanztheater and American postmodern dance. Both traditions share common roots but have gone in different directions. Halfway through the festival it was already clear that New York audiences had the unique chance to see the leading choreographers of the current German tanztheater movement (Bausch, Reinhild Hoffmann, Susanne Linke) side by side with some post-Cunningham American choreographers (Laura Dean, Nina Wiener, Margaret Jenkins).

Cunningham's influence has been so strong in the United States that today's postmodern dance can only be understood in relation to his programmatic rejection of Graham-style modern dance with its emphasis on emotion, theatrical decor and costumes, character, dramatic phrasing, and narrative. Even those familiar with contemporary dance must have been struck, however, by the amount of frustrated anger vented upon tanztheater. At a symposium co-sponsored by BAM and Goethe House New York on 8 November 1985, directly after the opening nights of Hoff-

8. *On The Mountain A Cry Was Heard (1984): The hysteria of self-oppression and compulsive aggression is shown as the dark underside of human existence. (Photo by Arici & Smith)*





9. Callas (1983): Reinhild Hoffmann's Bremen Tanztheater looks into the reflecting mirrors of fashions and artistic careers. (Photo by Klaus LeFebvre)

mann's *Callas* (1983) and Wiener's *In Closed Time* (1985), some critics objected to what they felt was the self-indulgence of Bausch's long and repetitive performances and her wallowing in pain and angst. (See pp. 46–56 for an edited transcript of the symposium.)

Hoffmann and Wiener were present at this intercultural event, and both looked exhausted after hours of heated discussion about the respective merits of the formal, movement-oriented concerns of American postmodern dance and the concrete emotional and social content expressed in the German works. The problem of cultural perceptions of the relationship between form and content remained a stumbling block, but the symposium made it clear that our common vocabulary (“movement,” “narrative,” “motion,” etc.) needs to be more carefully defined with regard to the specific aesthetic, including its political dimension, that makes the apparent violence in Bausch's works so objectionable to so many people in the United States.

At the same time, such a clash of perceptions may also help redirect attention to the easily forgotten roots of early modern dance shared by both traditions and mediated by the highly influential work of American dancers such as Isadora Duncan in Germany and later on by the teaching of Rudolf von Laban and Kurt Jooss. The pupils of Jooss's Folkwang School, including Bausch, Hoffmann, and Linke, are central to the revitalization of expressionist dance.

Seeing the BAM premieres of Wiener's *In Closed Time* or Laura Dean's *Sky Light* (1982), *Transformer* (1985), and *Impact* (1985), one still notices

the fundamental difference between some American thinking about the validity and beauty of movement qualities or rhythmic forms and these German choreographers' deliberate insistence on questioning the conditions of social performance themselves—those gender-identified roles and behaviors that determine our relationship to each other and to our culture at large.

Those roles and behaviors, so natural in the United States, are not always beautiful. Hoffmann's *Callas*, not unlike Bausch's *Kontakthof* and *Arien*, dramatizes various images of prostitution, self-oppression, anxiety, and self-humiliation that stand as realistic counterparts to the popular myths of beauty, happiness, and success. The reality of the fantasies, represented by daily routines and ever-repeated efforts to impress others, is exposed as a constricting network of internalized social conventions. In one scene, the dancers parade in front of huge mirrors, and before long, the mirrors are tied to their backs, and we see them carrying the burden of their self-images.

Likewise, Bausch's repetitive masochistic rituals and the struggle for love and recognition that her male and female dancers perform on each other with aggressive affection can only be considered offensive to the eye if one completely misunderstands the implied social critique. In order to see art as a form of cultural intervention, one must remember the specific German theater, opera, and ballet tradition whose classics have always dominated the repertoires of the state-subsidized theaters. It is this cultural repertory, with its social/political implications, that the women choreographers—the true heirs of Brecht's epic theater—rebelled against with the full rage of a generation of daughters that witnessed the successful reconstruction of the old patriarchal regime, shortly after the horrors of fascism had arisen from Western civilization.

In view of this experience one can perhaps better understand the admittedly painful image in *On the Mountain a Cry Was Heard* of a woman dancer kneeling down, repeatedly and patiently, to receive the punishing blows of her male oppressor. Jan Minarik's menacing figure stands in for the many fathers and lovers who are like children playing with weapons in order to learn the competitive rules of the game.

In this sense one can read the episodic dance sequences in *Callas* that represent the various stages of a career—here embodied in the figure of the famous opera singer. Through it one may learn the belcanto of stardom and success, but only at the great personal cost of losing all dignity. The limited range of "movement" in tanztheater is perhaps an apt expression of its anti-aesthetic stance. When Bausch explains that she is "not so much interested in how people move but in what moves them," she is also addressing classical ballet, which disguises its repressiveness with beautiful acrobatics and stunning spectacles.

American postmodern dance is not perceived to be struggling against an overbearing system of well-subsidized ballet and repertory theater, as is the case in Germany, where the majority of the state theaters house ballet companies. There are only about 10 tanztheater troupes; half of them are unaffiliated, so-called "free groups." The traditions of modern ballet and modern dance in the United States evolved independently from each other, and the emancipation of "pure dance" was achieved when Cunningham's generation freed itself, not from the constraints of any government-subsidized structure, but from the heavy emotional drama of an older choreography.

Tanztheater critics, of course, would consider the term "emancipation" paradoxical in an American context (cf. Schmidt 1984:22). For them, the

acrobatic, multi-media postmodernism of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane's *Freedom of Information* (1984) or *Secret Pastures* (1984), for example, can only indicate a regression into seductive spectacles and "superficial attractions" (Servos 1984:24). Such Brechtian criticisms miss the point, however, because they do not grasp the different ways in which American reality is represented and representable.

At the same time, I do not doubt that the freedom of information in postmodern dance is yet another illusory freedom. After all, there is something very puzzling about the self-referentiality of American abstract dance, namely the apparently unperturbed self-confidence with which it pursues "solutions to its formal problems" (Wiener 1985) without ever acknowledging the contradictions that lie in the assumption that dance is not a social practice but an art too beautiful and self-contained to engage, for example, the issues of violence and repression.

The pure energy of the relentless spinning in Laura Dean's *Sky Light*, or the spatial juxtapositions of Wiener's dancers against the huge plastic "buildings" in *In Closed Time* (designed for the BAM stage by Miami's leading commercial architecture firm, Arquitectonica) could be interpreted as reflections on the dehumanizing speed and urban density of American life here and now, were it not that the spinning, or the muscle flexing in front of geometrically shaped design elements, appear hopelessly arbitrary, equivocal, and unconscious of its articulated social content. The refusal to deal with this content deprives these works of any emotionally and intellectually significant meaning, and this is a limitation that audiences may begin to realize once they have stopped worrying about the un-American angst in Pina Bausch's tanztheater works.

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