

## **Pina: a dance film everyone should see**

*Need some fresh ideas about choreography, dancing, or filmmaking? Why not look to the best?*

by Blair Brown

I learned about Pina Bausch from my undergraduate dance major course in dance history, but I only knew her name, that she danced in Germany in the mid- and late-20<sup>th</sup> century, and that she created postmodern dances. The information I knew was vague, distant, and not very connected to me. But after watching this Academy Award-nominated film, I felt like I knew Pina and her dancers and could get inside their community. I started to understand her voice, and now I find that her work has become a great inspiration for my choreography.

What did this film do differently that hadn't been done before? I would say that this was the first feature length dance documentary I've seen that was primarily a screendance, not just a way of documenting a stage performance. Respected German "new cinema" director Wim Wenders uses strategies that make the film itself a creative act. Close-ups bring you very near to the performers, similar to how a screendance would. In most dance documentaries the choreographer's work is shown on a stage, recording the work being performed in front of a live audience. For *Pina*, Wenders re-shot the majority of the choreography specifically for this movie, so dance occurred in site-specific locations as well as on stage. There were interviews, but the majority of the film was choreography, and through the dance we were able to understand the subjects. When dance did appear onstage, they went up close and personal to the dancers instead of using a wide angle from the back of the house or a profile view from backstage.

The film was shot primarily in Wuppertal, a western German city where Pina ran her company. Putting her movement in site-specific locations in the city where she worked and lived helped to connect me to Pina even more. Understanding where she came from when creating her work helped me appreciate her context as an artist. This film gives a very accurate portrayal of Pina Bausch's "dance theatre" choreography and as a result, the kind of work that was being produced at that time period in Europe.

Bausch was considered one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's foremost choreographers and the film was created in the year of her death, which allowed it to not only be a lens into her work but also a tribute to her legacy. Through all the interviews with her dancers, you get a deeper awareness of how the company operated and the community that existed there. Bausch put her dancers in uncomfortable situations in a very theatrical way that as an audience member you cannot help but feel. She spoke about real and raw emotions, situations, and relationships. Being able to see those up close in the film was impactful.

Seeing this film also helped me to define "dance theater" as a genre and truly understand what that term means. Bausch took dance and made it theatrical by using not only the body but also the face, as well as spoken text. She took theater and added more choreographed bodily expression through movement. While watching, I realized how little theater exists in our dance world. There are so many blank faces in dance, which does not help to portray any choreographic intention. Bausch's work feels raw and real because of her use of theatricality and the face in her dance pieces. Without the face and emotion we are just bodies moving through space in interesting spatial patterns and shapes. To speak deeply with dance you need to get to the root of

the emotion and explore that with your whole physicality, which, from the evidence, I think Bausch and her dancers committed to.

Watching *Pina* changed me in many ways and gave me great excitement for making dance films because of its beauty. It would help teach all the many possibilities of screendance in a university course. I have the class watch it the first week of the term, as a clear example of using close-ups, mid- and wide shots, as well as panning, tracking, and dolly. I would go back to dance heavy sequences in the film and discuss them shot by shot, noticing what angles and camera motions were being used. It is this aspect that was most creative about the film and brought it to such a high level of professionalism. Aspiring filmmakers can learn so much by going over these technical details and talking about how the camera choices enhanced the choreographic intent of the movement.

*Pina* was groundbreaking in the dance film world, and for that reason, I would end the class discussion talking about its relevance. Why was it nominated for an Academy Award and now has been seen so widely around the world? Do you believe it has significance in our field of dance? What was one of your favorite moments? Was it because of the dance movement, the location, the costume, the character, or the editing? I would ask students to create a short dance film study based on the scene that inspired them. If they were inspired by a moment because of the site-specific location, then they would need to find a location that inspires *them* and create a short dance film study there. If a student enjoyed extreme close-ups that highlighted faces or body parts, they could create a study with close-up camera angles.

I believe it is important to connect to what we see or hear in class and put it into practice with our bodies. If we are motivated by a certain film or choreographer, how do we learn from their work and apply concepts to our own creations? Artists have the opportunity to leave a legacy, a voice behind. Bausch left behind a powerful message in her dances and Wenders was able to conjure up the astonishing impact of her work so that students, teachers, and choreographers can continue to draw inspiration from her timeless creations.

*Blair Brown received her MFA from UC, Irvine in 2015, focusing her thesis work on the impact of international dance service on the practice of civic responsibility in undergraduate dance majors. She created a dance documentary about an exchange to Panama where UC Irvine undergraduate students had the opportunity to teach dance in orphanages as well as at the National University of Panama. She has moved to New York City and is currently the dance specialist for Bronx Charter School for the Arts.*

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