

Pina: A Questioning of One's Truth

Just after the death of Pina Bausch, filmmaker Wim Wenders took a journey into the heart of her work with dancers well-equipped to ask all the right questions

by Krystal Matsuyama-Tsai

For German film director Wim Wenders, creating a dance documentary was a departure from his usual creative ventures. His most widely-recognized work during the eighties consisted of dramas, art books showcasing his photography, and a music documentary. Up until *Pina*, Wenders had never had a desire to incorporate dance into his work. But when he reluctantly accompanied his girlfriend to a concert in 1985, he unexpectedly found himself moved to helpless tears by the work of dance theatre choreographer Pina Bausch.

That night, Bausch's company, *Tanztheater Wuppertal*, performed her famous *Cafe Müller*. In an NPR interview to promote the documentary, Wenders reflected on his initial introduction to the choreographer's work that evening: "Bausch showed me in forty minutes more about men and women than the entire history of cinema." Wenders sought out Bausch the following day, and the initial plans for *Pina* began.

For this new creative venture, Wenders wanted to explore a new way to capture dance on film, encompassing the visceral humanity that Bausch's choreography illuminated. He wanted to break the traditional fourth wall that was often the typical package of dance on film at the time; the only trick was finding the cutting-edge technology to do so. It was not until nearly two decades later, in 2007, when the rock band U2 released their concert film, "U2 3D," that Wenders finally discovered the perfect vehicle to showcase Bausch's work in its most authentic light. The 3-D film technology would diminish the fourth wall, allowing the viewer to feel as if they were moving with the dancers onstage, living with their every breath and movement.

After a year of trouble-shooting the cutting-edge 3-D film technology, Wenders was finally ready to begin production for the film in June 2009. However, just days before the first day of shooting, a fragile Bausch succumbed to a lung cancer, diagnosed only five days before. Wenders immediately halted production for the film. After almost twenty years thinking of how to capture Bausch on film, how was he to carry on with the documentary without its main subject and collaborator?

Ultimately, Bausch's dancers convinced Wenders to proceed with the film. Not only was it important to fulfill the desires of their late mentor, but it provided an opportunity for Bausch's works to be preserved in the way she intended. At the beginning of the documentary, the words, "For Pina. By all of us who made this film together," set the scene as the viewer embarks on a journey into the choreographer's mysterious and vibrant world.

In *Pina*, some of Bausch's more celebrated works, including *The Rite of Spring*, *Cafe Müller*, and *Kontakthof*, are highlighted at length. While her work was typically performed in a proscenium theatre, the ways in which the choreographer coupled movement with theatricality and scenic design challenged the traditional acceptable cultural and societal norms of dance performance. In works like *Cafe Müller*, audiences were challenged by unusual staging (amid many chairs) and movement "too ugly to be considered dance." In a colorless café, hesitant characters move in indirect and jerky ways, seemingly searching for human connection. The tone of the scene is somber, yet there are moments of hope and

lightness between the characters. In a 1988 interview with NPR, Bausch responded to criticism of the piece stating, “If people are very sad or something, it does not look so pretty. In ballet, usually you speak about certain kind of people. You have a different story [in ballet] — it's almost like a fairy tale, it's a fable, it's like princes. In this, we speak about us; we are the heroes on the street.”

In defense of her choreographic choices, Bausch argued that these so called “ugly” dances allowed for expression through movement that was more relatable to the common human experience. By departing from the classical tradition of the theatrical experience, Bausch dared her audiences to question how the human body could show a fuller sense of what it meant to be human. With the immersive focus on her works throughout the film, the viewer gains an intimate sense of how this humanity was expressed in her work.

As the film shifts in and out of scenes of Bausch’s choreography, the viewer drifts into what Wenders considers “silent portraits” of *Tanztheater Wuppertal* dancers. The silent portraits show the dancers in pensive states filled with introspection and questioning, while voiceovers from interviews play. You hear philosophical questions from one of her dancers, such as prompts Bausch used in her choreographic process: “What is honesty?” and “What is our responsibility even when we dance?” Another dancer recalls when Bausch would ask, “What are [you] longing for?” and “Where does all this yearning come from?” which encouraged her dancers to explore the deepest parts of themselves. The portraits take the viewer into a psychological level of Bausch’s work through the lens of her dancers.

Often followed by clips of the dancer(s) performing some choreographic aspect of Bausch’s work, the silent portraits reveal how the choreographer affected her dancers’ perspectives of themselves and her work. Perhaps this introspective questioning allowed her dancers to access parts of their humanity that resulted in the honesty that exists in her work. Bausch’s ability to display the human nature through dance not only shines in the scenes of her choreography, but also lives on through the artists who danced for her.

Through stunning cinematography capturing Bausch’s choreography, supported by intimate glimpses into the dancers’ thoughts and reflections, Wenders reveals how Bausch possessed a tenacity to question and challenge what her dancers could do. A predominant theme that emerges throughout the film is the questioning of one’s truth and one’s relationship to dance. The viewer might begin to ask, *What is dance?*, *Who am I to dance?*, and, lastly, *Why is this all important?* Ultimately, these are questions that vary from artist to artist and will be ever-changing through one’s relationship with dance.

After the viewer is taken on an adventurous journey through the world of Pina Bausch, the film closes with a simple thought that lingers, quoting the late choreographer’s last words, “Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost.”

Sources:

1. Dowell, Pat. “Wim Wender on ‘Pina’: A Dance Documentary In 3-D.” *NPR*. January 14 2012. www.npr.org/2012/01/14/145123337/wim-wenders-on-pina-a-dance-documentary-in-3-d. Accessed April 6 2019.
2. Kourlas, Gia. “Wim Wenders’s ‘Pina’: Without Her but for Her.” *The New York Times*. September 12 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/arts/wim-wenders-pina-bausch-film.html?. Accessed April 6 2019.

3. Mueller-Kroll, Monika. "In 'Pina,' Filmmaker Wim Wenders Says 3D Creates 'A New Realm of Documentary.'" *NPR*. February 24 2011. www.npr.org/2011/02/24/133997303/in-pina-german-filmmaker-wim-wenders-says-3d-is-a-new-realm-of-documentary. Accessed April 6 2019.

Krystal Matsuama-Tsai is a second-year MFA candidate in Dance at University of California, Irvine. Her thesis looks at perceptions of pedagogical communication between dancers and educators in the studio.