



A place where life happens

Pina Bausch has transformed contemporary dance and theatre, as her many celebrity supporters will testify. During preparations for her return to the London stage, she talks to Ismene Brown about the savage violence and redeeming love in her work

By Ismene Brown

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WHAT links Victor Meldrew, Britain's favourite television grump, and Pina Bausch, the first lady of modern dance? Not much, on the face of it. Bausch would be virtually unheard of by the millions who were enchanted by *One Foot in the Grave*, while Meldrew is not exactly your culture vulture. The link is, of course, the actor who plays Meldrew.

Richard Wilson has long been a Bauschite, ever since fellow actor Alan Rickman took him to see her company's first British appearance, in 1982 in London. The coup de foudre that hit him then has endured, and, nearly 20 years later, he, Rickman, Fiona Shaw and the artist Antony Gormley discreetly headed a fund-raising effort by her many admirers among actors and artists to support the return of the Tanztheater Wuppertal to Sadler's Wells at the end of this month.

"Victor Meldrew wouldn't know her from a hole in the head," Wilson said drily last week, "but I think she is a genius. Some of the things she shows are certainly violent, and she does point out some of the nastier aspects of the human condition, but I never

leave feeling miserable or depressed. My feeling is that she has real heart in her work, a hope and a joy. She is so witty, there is such taste there."

Wit and taste are not the first things that might come to mind in thinking about Bausch's dense, elliptical dance-theatre productions. Violent, even sado-masochistic images clot on a visual palette of refined, almost exaggerated decorativeness. When you see snarling alsatians chasing men wearing chintz dresses through a field of pink carnations, do you laugh as the men gleefully bunnyhop away among the flowers, or do you flinch at the gloating Nazi-ness of it? When people rub their faces into raw onions, when a pair of corpses are tenderly married, you may be both repelled and compelled.

Bausch is the world leader of dance-theatre, often imitated, never equalled. Some dance-lovers are strongly resistant to the genre that she has, if not invented, then formulated as the late-20th-century's major contribution to the history of dance. Although she credits much to her early teachers - Kurt Jooss in Germany and Antony Tudor, the British ballet choreographer, in New York - she has defined dance-theatre in her own experience: with a heavy emotional loading, a portrayal of the world as chaotic, and an interest in the dramatic significance of everyday movements.

She refuses to offer verbal explanations of her work but is the subject of thousands of theses, admired by liberal-minded stage directors such as Robert Wilson, Peter Stein and Peter Brook as well as choreographers such as Belgium's Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and Lloyd Newson of DV8.

This sort of theatre, with its tricky appeal to both fantasy and intellect, sets itself multiple challenges: visual images must be magical, the speech must be clever, the choreography must be arresting. Bausch says that much of the material in her productions is originated by her dancers, but her stamp is unmistakable. There is passionate curiosity there, a powerful moral urge, a relish of the theatre's chameleon versatility, and a strong skill in making or discovering movement.

Her own career as an outstanding dancer in the Sixties underpins the rigour and derring-do of her 30 dancers. Shaped by her experience as a war child in Nazi Germany, her observations about human behaviour are painfully truthful. Telling of the triumphalism of the young and beautiful, the mysteries of sexual attraction, the bewilderment of the child watching its parents, the fear of physical inadequacy, her pieces trigger emotional memories common to most of us.

In person, Bausch turns out to be nothing like the formidable Rosa Klebb character you might anticipate. Now 61, she is a wraith-like woman with a long iron-grey ponytail and a quiet voice, wearing puritan black pyjamas when we met in Wuppertal last month. Bausch has been based in this prosperous German industrial town for 28 years.

She looked shy and hates doing interviews, yet she suddenly kissed me when I offered her a carnation in greeting. You might not notice her in a room; she has a vanishing quality, rather like the role she still dances in one of her most famous pieces, *Café Müller* (1978), in which she flits like a ghost among the agonised couples at the tables.

She actually did grow up in a café, run by her parents in Solingen, not far from

Wuppertal. Politics shadowed her sense of life and fed the images of her dance. But that fearful social tension is only the rumbling bass under her main subject: the game of love. In the theatre of her parents' cafe, the child watched the mystifying, frightening, disturbingly erotic relationships between men and women that appear so constantly in her work.

"It was a neighbourhood restaurant, not an elegant place," she says, "but a place where life happens and couples have love affairs and fights. I saw that love was a strong relationship in which anything can happen, from misunderstandings to falling in love with other people, or losing work."

What about all the violence? "I am afraid of violence. And, of course, some of these things appear in the pieces because I am afraid of violence. . . If somebody is screaming loud, I find it very uncomfortable" - she banged her heart - "I can't stay."

"Men and women don't only fight, of course. But, for some people, fighting is exciting; life would be boring without it. There are so many ways of relating to each other. Also we've forgotten about what we felt when we were little children, and, when you look even at very young children, you see how difficult life is for them, how serious their experiences are. Everything is happening to them that will happen again in the future."

This super-sensitive child's eye perhaps explains Bausch's unconventional view of the stage. She loves to transform the theatre (working with the designer Peter Pabst, since 1980) by introducing natural elements: mountains of soil, grass, flowers, water, even live animals. "It was just my wish to put such things on stage. Suddenly, you take a new look at grass, or mosquitoes, or the noise you make when you walk - walking in water makes a different kind of movement from walking in leaves."

"Also, some dancers naturally like earth, and the moment they start working on earth, they love it, they go with their whole body. But others think, 'Ooo, earth is dirty', and they're scared of it. I like this sort of thing."

She has an equally disingenuous explanation for her unsettling and controversial portrayals of women. They are generally dressed with aggressive glamour, in high heeled shoes and pretty Fifties frocks or ballgowns - part killer-bitch, part-innocent, not remotely resembling Bausch's own style. What deep subtext lay here?

"They look beautiful, that's all," she said. "People don't dress up any more - me also; I don't dress up. But on stage you can dress up and I think that's a very beautiful style. I like the way they walk; I like the way their legs look. I like colour; I like materials; I enjoy all that. It's everything we don't see outside there [she gestured to the window] - in Wuppertal, at least."

During her long residence in Wuppertal the world has considerably altered: the Berlin Wall has come down, Germany has recovered its sense of democratic pride, and she has had a son, now 20, with her domestic partner, a Chilean poet. Although she still worries that "this is a very fragile time, that you don't know where the world is going, what is right", a more optimistic outlook seems to be reflected in Bausch's recent pieces.

More and more, she is interested in the body language and characteristics of other peoples and other countries. Masurca Fogo ("Mazurka of Fire"), showing at Sadler's

Wells, is a 1997 tribute to Lisbon; two years ago, she showed London her grimly witty 1986 piece inspired by Rome, Viktor. Sicily (Palermo Palermo) and California (Nur Du) have had the Bausch treatment. Japan is next.

Some protest that Bausch has sold out by doing such pieces. Bausch says firmly that it is the reverse. She becomes interested in a city, and the city offers to host her company while they learn about the place.

Masurca Fogo is said to be a relatively jolly piece, driven by the vivacious music of Cape Verde and Brazil - though it contains yet another of her death-traps for dancers, a waterslide and a stage full of broken rocks, among which they have to climb in high heels.

Isn't this more than a bit dangerous? "Oh," Bausch pursed her lips, "sometimes things look dangerous, but they are not dangerous at all." Besides, she said, her dancers liked to be challenged. "They don't come for fun to Wuppertal."

- Tanztheater Wuppertal performs 'Masurca Fogo' at Sadler's Wells (020 7863 8112) from Jan 31 to Feb 3.

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