



## Dancing through the fireproof carnations

Ismene Brown

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**Next week Pina Bausch's dance company comes to Sadler's Wells. It's a visit that will place unusual and exotic demands on the technical crew – but, as they tell Ismene Brown, they're ready for anything**

Paul Richardson has an unusual list of things on his mind – an imminent consignment of 8,000 artificial carnations and 1,200 breeze-blocks, and the sourcing of four Alsatian dogs, six pianos and a boy of six with black hair. Not to mention an appointment with a chap from Islington Council bearing a box of matches. After 42 years backstage at Sadler's Wells, though, Richardson is prepared for anything when Pina Bausch is about to arrive with her dance company from Wuppertal.

"Pina? You think, what's she up to now? Your heart lifts, of course it does," Richardson beams. A tanned, elfin man of 60, he is Sadler's Wells's technical director. He started crewing there way back in 1963, and his work memories are more surreal than is easily believable.

"Pina's definitely challenging. I remember she had real grass for her show 1980. We had to keep it watered all week, with UV lighting at night to keep it green, or by the end of the run it would have been like a rugby pitch."

Then there was the vast earthwork of Viktor, staged at the Wells in 1999. More gardening. "The earth came from Germany loose in huge containers, and we had to build it up in a wall. Then it got trampled down in the show and next afternoon we'd

come in and reset the thing. Took about four hours."

Bausch loves natural elements for her scenery – partly, she once told me, because of her powerful childhood memories of the countryside, partly because she likes to see what her dancers do when forced to tread not clean boards but soil, rubble, mud or water.

Her last show seen here, Masurca Fogo two years ago, had rocks and water (as well as a chicken and a walrus). On her new visit, with two productions, the elements are the famous field of carnations for Nelken and bricks for Palermo Palermo, which make a specific and daunting requirement that I won't describe until later, so you don't have to spoil the anticipation if you don't want to.

If there are two people happier in their work than Richardson and Emma Wilson, his technical manager, I have yet to meet them. Sadler's Wells has the highest and most unusual turnover of shows anywhere in Britain – perhaps even the world – and to be at the Wells is a dream technical job.

Adam Cooper's Singin' in the Rain needed a colossal pond-liner, Mark Morris's Hard Nut demanded 15 extra dressers, and the switch from Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake to the Flamenco Festival the following day had the crew clearing up all night.

But Bausch, with her messy, elemental sets and fondness for animals, is the crew's favourite for outlandish challenges. Nelken needs the team to replant 8,000 carnations every day, and obtain four Alsatisans skilled at ferocious barking. In a Sadler's Wells drawer there's a book that tells you where to get any animal stage-trained for any specific situation.

However, the first priority is always getting the props and scenery past fire regulations. In Nelken's case this entails a chap from Islington Council's licensing department putting a match (in vain, with luck) to four sample carnations sent on ahead and then doing a spot check when the other 7,996 arrive to make sure that they are similarly fireproof.

Bausch's company are a bit upset about the stringency of UK fire regulations, says Emma Wilson. "It's the cardboard boxes," she explains. In Nelken, a mountain of boxes will be built, and performers will dive into them from eight metres up. If they're fireproofed again, they may soften up. European companies used to EU regulations often get a shock at the extra precautions in the UK. "Pina's technical director Manfred Marczewski told me that all their stuff was passed by German fire officers, but an English fire officer will say, 'So what?'" shrugs Richardson. "Britain is pretty rigid," confirms Wilson.

Farcical situations naturally arise. The chicken in Masurca Fogo had to have its passport checked before it was allowed to perform. A recent Belgian production, *Wolf*, had 14 imported dogs – that passport check must have been positively Kafkaesque.

Things got more exciting after *Wolf*'s opening night, when there was not only a randy pair of collies but a Great British moment when a spectator shrieked in protest at seeing a small pooch being spun in a crash helmet. Richardson sighs. "Well, next day the council were down here, and they said, we take a dim view of this. So that bit was stopped."

I sense that there's a sitcom relationship between the Sadler's Wells backstage team and Islington's licensing department that we would all like to know more about, but sadly Islington Council forbade their man to spill any beans.

Still, as Emma Wilson stresses, even within Islington's fierce envelope of caution, just about anything is possible, and the oriental companies are particularly adventurous. Nightly sand showers took place in Sankai Juku's *Hibiki* from Japan – the Wells crew spent two solid hours every day sieving it.

And the rice mists of the Taiwanese company Cloud Gate's *Songs of the Wanderers* were created by hoisting 33 buckets of rice 22 metres over the stage, and two crew manually pouring it into funnels for 55 minutes.

The theatre soon has to cope with its first skating show, *Sleeping Beauty on Ice* which opens on March 8. "I've just ordered five tonnes of crushed ice from Eskimo Ice in old Covent Garden," says Richardson. Two Russian "ice doctors" will spread it in freezer trays on stage, and spend all night spraying it with water, to melt and freeze. But then, during the show, Wilson explains, "we have to supply hot water in a hosepipe to a gentleman who will skate the rink in the interval with the hose attached to his broom, to make a fresh skin."

Such provisions, though, are mere bagatelles compared with what the Wells staff will have to cope with on Bausch's *Palermo Palermo*. Stop reading now if you don't want to know.

"The thing about Pina," says Richardson approvingly, "is that it's always got to be real."

What's real here is a brick wall which totally fills the stage height and which launches

the show by collapsing apocalyptically on to the Wells stage, reinforced for the job with three separate floors.

Richardson says gleefully: "It's five tonnes when it falls – and the council weren't happy about that. They said, what if it falls this way, Paul? I said, I believe what Manfred says! He said, it's never happened, never."

Well, we who have seats booked in the stalls must believe him. Around a third of the bricks (specially constructed with knuckles to fall only one way) will be smashed in the crash, and each day the stage crew will shovel them into skips and spend the afternoon rebuilding the wall.

"It's fantastic here," says Richardson. "Imagine being crew on *The Mousetrap* for 45 years."

- Tanztheater Wuppertaler at Sadler's Wells, Feb 10-20. Tickets: 0870 737 7737.



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