
Childhood from Carroll to Kinsey

Ismene Brown

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Ismene Brown reviews Pina Bausch at Sadler's Wells

Oh, the beauty of it, the disarming wonder of a field of carnations, every inch of Sadler's Wells stage dotted with flowers, lusciously pink, frolicsome flowers seeming to swarm out into the stalls. Plastic they may be, but the impact of the only piece of scenery in Pina Bausch's *Nelken* makes you want to shout with pleasure.

A carpet of pink flowers, to swish bare feet through, to roll on and kick down, knowing that they'll be recovered tomorrow - this is how a perfect place should look, the perfect childhood place. And the adults who populate this perfect childhood place have happily shed their adult rules and reclaimed the sweet memories of being very young.

Ageing men can put on their sisters' dresses and leave the demands of manhood behind, holding hands in girlish circles, or bunnyhopping gleefully through the flowers pretending to be rabbits. Mature women can slink like supermodels in slithery silk gowns, and then abandon dignity in a chaotic game of grandmother's footsteps. Schubert and Billie Holiday wring our hearts next to jolly bandstand tunes.

The blithe humour and beauty of *Nelken*, created in 1982 soon after her son was born, make it one of Bausch's most accessible pieces, but that is only half the story. These captivating childhood fancies were dreamed up in a Cold War world by a woman cradling a new baby, and they call up as much pain as pleasure.

An officious man persistently interrupts the games, demanding to see passports, and Alsatians bark from the edges of the field. Four men in black suits make what looks like a suicidal mass jump from high up into a wall of cardboard boxes below - the boxes smash, the men survive, and then you remember that this dates from seven years before the Berlin Wall was pulled apart by citizens.

Pina the child is everywhere, being watched quizzically by Pina the adult. A fatherly chap uses kindly tricks to make a reluctant girl eat oranges, while she splutters "no". Is he simply feeding a faddy child, or is this a more sinister violation?

Bausch's world swings between Dennis Potter, Lewis Carroll and Alfred Kinsey, a rollercoaster cartoon full of enigmas and adventures. Her engagingly motley performers are charismatic actor-dancers, particularly the older ones who don't appear

like performers at all.

This is their reality.

What does it all add up to? I have no more idea than you because we all bring our own memories and responses to Bausch's table. Nelken is sometimes despairing, but it never strikes me as cynical, and though its structure is rambling, one can always find coherence in it. It may be as near to dreaming, I think, as reality can be.

- Pina Bausch's 'Palermo Palermo' is at Sadler's Wells, Thur-next Sun. Tickets: 0870 737 7737

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