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## **Entranced by the mistress of misery** **Review: Viktor, Tanztheater Wuppertal, Sadler's Wells**

Despair is too light, too facile a word for the rubble of human hopes that the German choreographer Pina Bausch lays out in her 1986 work *Viktor*. Bausch is the dance world's mistress of misery but you can't help believing her, she goes on about it so convincingly.

Unlike other great modern choreographers such as Forsythe or Cunningham, she does not invent dance movement as such. Her material is real life, which she twists savagely from visual prose into poetry. Every scene in this three-and-a-half-hour pageant of sophisticates and inadequates could almost be clipped at random from the street, the café, the home. But it is set inside a mass grave, and a grave-digger quietly shovels earth down throughout.

I must admit that by the end of the first half, 90 minutes long, I was bored stiff. The poetic scenes were few and far between, listlessness and dull parody everywhere else; the sad, nondescript men in drag and the bitch-tarts in stilettos seemed like over-familiar Bauschian archetypes.

But this is part of her wizardry - the impact of the second half comes out of the grinding tedium of the first. For me, anyway. I didn't merely spectate, I felt for myself the wretchedness of banality and waste. These people are posing, to kill time. And into the vacuum of their souls comes evil.

*Pace* Marvell, the grave here is not a fine and private place but a public swamp where everyone embraces cynically. Almost the first scene is the wedding of two corpses - paradoxically, it has an aching tenderness you'll be hard put to find later.

*Viktor* feels much more bitter than *Nelken* ("Carnations"), shown at the Edinburgh Festival recently. No one abuses women like Bausch does. Her women are either gangling innocents reciting their fairy tales or steely, cynical beauties casually manhandled, poked or pummelled by the unaroused men. In Bausch's mind there appears to be a frighteningly inevitably progression from the one to the other.

A pretty, big-breasted woman is treated like a whore on orders from her pimp (it's dreadful that they are the same couple who were so delicately married at the start). Another girl is forced docilely to spout water from her mouth, like a classical fountain, so that men can wash. Evian water bottles and cigarettes are ever-present, slightly evilly.

Bausch does get some laugh in, though (if you can take them). There's a hilariously humiliating scene in which a naked chap covers while a man in black tie chops up wood with a buzzsaw and a woman pulls fur coats disgruntledly out of a fridge. There is also breathtaking charm here and there - a miserable housewife in floral overall puts on pink pointe shoes to dream to Tchaikovsky, and giggling debutantes swing gleefully from gymnastic rings.

Dance is thin on the ground, apart from cha-chas. In fact this is more walk-theatre than dance-theatre, with some choice specimen walks on offer - the supermodel slink, the slapper's strut, the shuffle of the most slovenly waitress in the world (in a variant of the great *Monty Python* Span café sketch).

Auctions of household effects and of pet dogs remind us that we go to the grave with nothing. One thing I know, I'd hate *Viktor* to be the last thing I see before I go.

Tickets 0171 863 8000 (returns only) **IB**