



Brechtian Traces in Pina Bausch's Choreographic and Cinematic Work

Born in Solingen, Germany, in 1940, and trained both in Germany and in the United States, Pina Bausch is a contemporary German choreographer and a major innovator of modern dance. She is the founder, director, and choreographer of the internationally recognized “Tanztheater Wuppertal” company in Germany, a role which she has occupied since 1973. She has thus had her own stage for 35 years now, much longer than Wagner ever held Bayreuth or Brecht directed his Berliner Ensemble during his lifetime. Recently, in August 2008, Bausch received the Goethe Prize of the city of Frankfurt; the film director Wim Wenders delivered the “laudatio.”

Pina Bausch is a leading influence in the development of “Tanztheater.” “Dance theatre” is the third form of classical theatre, besides spoken theatre and musical theatre. In the twentieth century, “dance theatre” developed parallel to the “modern dance” movement into a particular theatrical style that brought about a unique union of genuine dance and theatrical methods of stage performance. In Germany, this interdisciplinary art form of “Tanztheater” is rooted in the expressionist movement of the 1910s and 1920s and has often been used as a form of social critique in the hope of achieving radical changes in humankind and creating a better world. Two stylistic elements that characterize “Tanztheater” are the principle of montage and the integration of spoken language in a danced piece¹ – principles that describe Brecht’s theater as well.

Many of her earlier dance pieces deal with gender clashes, the inability of men and women to come close to each other, despite our great need for love. In 1975 she developed a dance on *Frühlingsopfer* (The Rite of Spring) as part of a three-part Stravinsky evening. Stravinsky's mythic sacrificial ritual is modernized and seen in light of gender conflicts in which women are sacrificed. In 1977 *Blaubart* followed, based on Béla Bartók's opera *King Bluebeard's Castle* which tells the story about King Bluebeard and his seventh wife Judith. It is a horrifying fairy tale in which Judith realizes that Bluebeard has raped, tortured, and killed his prior wives, and she realizes her inevitable end. In Bausch's dance this tale becomes a metaphor for the alienation between men and women.

When might Pina Bausch have first come in contact with Brecht? In 1949 a performance of *Mutter Courage* took place at Städtische Bühnen in Wuppertal. Brecht had just arrived in Berlin, he did not yet have the Berliner Ensemble at his disposal and worked at Deutsches Theater. For this "Modellaufführung" of *Mutter Courage* Brecht's collaborator Ruth Berlau trained the actors in the art of epic acting. While allowing for variations, Wuppertal modeled its *Mother Courage* on the Berlin performance.² It is possible that Pina Bausch might have seen this performance in 1949, although she would have been only nine years old.

In 1976 Bausch choreographed *Die sieben Todsünden*, Brecht-Weill's 1933 ballet that also included *Fürchtet euch nicht*, another Brecht-Weill collage. Pina Bausch alienates the well-known Weill melodies from *The Seven Deadly Sins* in order to avoid a nostalgic

or sentimental atmosphere, and while Brecht saw the story of the two Annas (one manager and one artist) as a metaphor for society that does not allow people to be both good and successful, Bausch concentrates primarily on the suppressed role of women, on Anna II who has to sell her body to earn a living. Critics have regarded Bausch's Brecht-Weill evening as a seminal stage in Bausch's career. Only from that moment on was she truly creating her own individual "Tanztheater" – her works before 1976 can still be regarded as forms representing the more traditional genre of "modern dance."³

Even though the Brecht-Weill evening was highly successful, Bausch's dancers did not enjoy performing the piece, and a small rebellion broke out among ensemble members. Bausch was shattered and discontinued work with most dancers for a while. Slowly they came back, and Pina Bausch now initiated a rehearsal method that could be called Brechtian or dialogic, brainy rather than emotional. Before practicing any piece, she insists on asking questions to all her dancers on their view or interpretation of the scenes, and she takes notes and asks her dancers to do the same. This collaborative work method that tries to understand a piece through a series of questions and answers has characterized Pina Bausch's process of choreographing since then. It may be partially responsible for the fact that she was able to stage this Brecht-Weill evening again in 1995 in a performance in Wuppertal that was a triumphal success not only for the audience, but also a joy for her dancers and singers.

A 1990 interview with Pina Bausch is entitled "Tanz ist die einzig wirkliche Sprache" (dance is the only real language). The dramatist Heiner Müller tried to render her drama

in words that might describe his own writings as well. In a perceptive essay entitled “Blut ist im Schuh, oder Das Rätsel der Freiheit” Müller analyzes: “Die Spieler sind Überlebende. (...) Sie berichten vom Terror der Kindheit. . . Der Striptease des Humanismus entblößt die blutige Wurzel der Kultur.”⁴ Especially the last powerful line – The striptease of humanism reveals the bloody roots of our culture – may be a reference to the postwar German history in which both Bausch and Müller lived. Having grown up in the rubble (the “Trümmer”) of immediate postwar Germany, Bausch consciously returned to that Germany after her studies in New York City, always driven by a mixture of “Wanderlust” and “Heimweh,” simultaneous feelings of homesickness and farsickness. Returning to Germany also meant helping to build the country up from the rubble, not so much physically as the “Trümmerfrauen,” but psychologically and artistically by working through the injustice and the suffering that the fascist legacy had left. The agony of working through that painful legacy often took a more personalized form in the shape of expressing the cruelties of the gender struggle in Bausch’s earlier work.

Besides creating a theater of cruelty that frequently deals with the war between the sexes, there is a great international side to the work of Pina Bausch. To the degree that one can speak of world music or of world literature, Bausch may have created the genre of “world dance.” In the 1980s, after becoming an international star, she started producing her “city works” and traveled world-wide with her company. Many great cities – Rome, Palermo, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Lisbon, Budapest, Madrid, Sao Paulo, Mexico City – commissioned her to make evening-length shows about them. Her company would spend

about a month in the respective city, explore the area, mix with local dancers, musicians, performers, and create a piece in collaboration with these local artists that would usually premiere toward the end of their stay in that city. If successful, then it would often tour around the world.⁵ Many of her accomplished works came about this way, for example: *Palermo Palermo*, a 1989 piece about poverty or the clashes between rich and poor in the Mezzogiorno (southern Italy); *Danzón*, a 1995 Mexican dance creation; *Masurca Fogo*, a coproduction with the EXPO 1998 in Lisbon; *O Dido*, a coproduction with Teatro Argentina in Rome (1999). She also invited international dance groups to her home theater in Wuppertal, such as the National Dance Company of Korea (in Seoul), or the Turkish artist Kudsi Ergüner (from Diyarbaki, Turkey) who is best known for composing the music for Peter Brooks's filmic masterpiece *Mahabharata*.⁶

Bausch travels a lot and has frequently stated that life is a journey: "Das Leben ist eine Reise" (Servos 234, 237-38). The question has arisen how German she is. She describes herself as an internationalist and compares herself to a migrating bird without any national identity. "Wenn ich ein Vogel wär", she asks, alluding to a popular German folksong, "würden sie mich dann als deutschen Vogel bezeichnen wollen?" (Schmidt 224). Yet the paradox between "Nesthocker" and "Zugvogel" (Schmidt 213) remains, since this world traveler has never permanently left Wuppertal since 1973. Wuppertal is not only a German town, but a small town in Germany. Bausch has declined offers to locate to bigger venues in Germany like Hamburg, Bremen, Frankfurt, or international stages.

Pina Bausch also made an international contribution to film. She appeared in Federico Fellini's 1983 film *And the Ship Sails On* and in *Talk to Her* (2002), a film by the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar, in addition to having directed her own film *Die Klage der Kaiserin* (*The Complaint of an Empress*, 1990), a German-French co-production. I would like to concentrate on *Café Müller*, one of two pieces by Bausch that enter into Almodóvar's film *Hable con ella* (*Talk to Her*) – the other being *Masurca Fogo* –, before I conclude with some words on a recent piece by Pina Bausch, *Nefés*, a choreographic ode to the city of Istanbul.

Almodóvar's film *Talk to Her* opens with a dance performance by Pina Bausch. The two main male characters, Benigno and Marco, sit next to each other at Teatro Lara in Madrid while watching the dance piece *Café Müller*. One of them, Marco, is moved to tears by the performance, not realizing that the fate of the two men who do not know each other yet is already intertwined. This opening segment of *Café Müller* symbolically foreshadows many filmic events. The title *Café Müller* is already striking: The name *Müller* couldn't be more ordinary in German (unless it refers to the poet Heiner Müller...), yet it is a highly unusual and strange café, and the events taking place in it are intimate and mysterious. Pina Bausch did not just choreograph this piece, she is also dancing in it. As Almodóvar's film, the danced movements concentrate on the interactions of four main characters, two women and two men. The stage shows an empty salon full of chairs. Like in Eugène Ionesco's absurdist drama *Les chaises* (*The Chairs*), these chairs symbolize emptiness, alienation, lack of communication, obstacles in life. While in Ionesco's play invisible people sit, speak, and move on visible chairs,

the dancers here are visible, but the chairs also seem animate and powerful, hindrances to humans. A melancholy music from two operas by Henry Purcell, *The Fairy Queen* and *Dido and Aeneas*, is playing continuously throughout the performance.

The two female dancers, Pina Bausch and her colleague Malou Airaudo, walk with closed eyes through the scenes, like two somnambules, missing and losing each other. As he sees them walking, floating, dancing into the stage, one of the men jumps into the scene and frantically tries to remove the chairs blocking the way for the women, in a gesture of sadness and panic. In the premiere of *Café Müller* this role was played by Rolf Borzik, stage designer and Pina Bausch's partner in life at the time. Ironically, the choreographic role of the stage designer here consists in removing the furniture; he is not creating decoration, but rather paving the path for the dancers.

As the piece unfolds, triangular relationships develop in the front of the stage, and in the back Pina Bausch dances her somnambulistic movements, lost in the inner world of her feelings, without contact to her environment. She stays toward the back, in the half dark space, dancing alongside the walls where she is looking for protection and against which she stumbles and aesthetically slides to the floor, much like the other female dancer is looking for protection in the arms of a man through which she slides on the floor as well. Bausch's dance towards the back of the stage acts almost as a Brechtian choreographic commentary on the interactions in the front of the stage. An intense atmosphere of loneliness and alienation haunts the dream-like, magical world of *Café Müller*.

Let me now turn to one of Pina Bausch's recent pieces about the city of Istanbul, *Nefés*. It can be seen in the context of Bausch's so-called "city works." The Irish scholar and theater director Deirdre Mulrooney has analyzed the process of these municipal commissions in her book *Orientalism, Orientation, and the Nomadic Work of Pina Bausch*. She sees Bausch's work in the context of Edward Said's theories on orientalism, especially his thesis that "nations are narrations".⁷ Over centuries of colonization Western powers have imposed their values on the countries they colonized and forced their "narrations" onto other "nations." In contrast to this "orientalist" point of view, Mulrooney perceives Pina Bausch's creative process rather as "nomadic." In the 1970s and 1980s she questioned in Germany the roots of the welfare society by exposing the country's Nazi past and thus lent her support to the protest movement of the 1960s. In the international context, her "city works" critically pointed to the legacy of colonialism and tried to help "decolonize" the world. She did this, for example, through non-Aristotelian forms of narration, since her pieces usually did not follow a tightly scripted story or plot, but rather were composed of sketches, scenic montages, associations, and images. Mulrooney considers this looser form of narration as "nomadic" or "anti-orientalist," in contrast to the western Aristotelian approach that in its strictest interpretation requires the unity of time, place, and action (or plot). The mere fact that these "city pieces" are created in another city, that Bausch removes her troupe from her home base of Wuppertal, is a form of nomadism, because her creative base is no longer Wuppertal but the new city. Similarly, the nomadic structure in Bausch's dance theater is already visible in her company itself, since her dancers originate from many different countries and cultures in the world. Up to 17 nationalities were often represented in her

ensemble, integrating diverse dance styles, from India and Latin America to Southern and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Pina Bausch has left the “narration of her specific nation” and rather facilitates a decentered, tolerant, questioning and open form of narration and dance. This “nomadic” theatre can be considered “epic” in many senses of Brecht’s words.

These thoughts also apply to Bausch’s recent piece *Nefés*. *Nefés* means “breath” in Turkish (although spelt without the French looking accent on “é” which makes it inauthentic and almost orientalizes it again...) and was created in 2003 in collaboration between Pina Bausch and her dancers and the International Istanbul Theatre Festival as well as the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts. This piece recently received its US premiere in New York City at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December 2006, and there is even a film about it by the young Turkish film director Hüseyin Karabey entitled *A Breath with Pina Bausch*, which played at the Boston Turkish Film Festival in 2006.

In many ways *Nefés* is a joyful departure from Bausch’s earlier, darker works that were frequently filled with anguish and despair, and her love for the city of Istanbul is evident in every theatrical scene in *Nefés*. This dance-theater portrait of Istanbul consists of a beautifully assembled collection of scenes or skits, a series of tableaux or stylized snapshots of the city. Like pictures of an exhibition, it lacks a clear narrative. It opens in a “hammam,” a Turkish bath, with men wrapped only in white towels demonstrating how difficult and harsh the art of a massage actually is and what skills it requires. Many of the scenes celebrate joy and sensuality. It is as if in the year of the beginning of the Iraq

War and worldwide tensions, Bausch deliberately wanted to celebrate beauty, joy, and life. Her main metaphors for this celebration are water and hair.⁸ All the women dancers have luscious long hair, which they occasionally use as a veil, covering their face. But these are also seductive veils, displaying all the more the radiant beauty of the women when they toss their hair back. Water is present throughout much of *Nefés*, in the form of rain falling on the stage and creating a large pool of water in the center of the stage, symbolizing the Bosphorus Strait. It reminds us that Istanbul is a city on two continents separated by water. One of the dancers, Rainer Behr, has an astounding virtuoso dance solo completely drenched in that water connecting the continents. There is also an episode in which women at either side of the pool have a sort of tea party by floating a tray back and forth across it. This scene has some elements of a modern-day, danced version of Manet's painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.⁹

The sensuality of *Nefés* at times seems almost orientalizing. Gender questions are asked only with subtlety and irony that display none of the hard core feminism of Bausch's earlier years. Occasionally absurdist skits enter into the piece: There is a humorous reference to the ten children born by the grandmother of one of the dancers. Another scene in which one of the dancers states how difficult it is to "smile without a reason" and encourages the audience to try it, is also an alienating device that prevents the piece from being a romanticized choreographic travelogue or a sentimental ode to the city of Istanbul.

Nefés also signifies Bausch's return to the traditional medium of dance, allowing her female performers to be beautiful in long gorgeous gowns, and each dancer may perform a pure-dance solo. At the end all performers unite in an impressive closing finale. The music consists of an eclectic mix of primarily Turkish folklore, as well as tangos by Astor Piazzolla or the song "All the world is green" by Tom Waits. In *Der Messingkauf* Brecht discusses the development of Helene Weigel's acting and coins the phrase "Abstieg der Weigel in den Ruhm".¹⁰ Pina Bausch's return to a celebration of aesthetic beauty in her later years may be connected to the world-wide recognition of her art, to her "decline into fame," to use Brecht's words. Bausch no longer shocks, or engages in "épater le bourgeois," but she can afford to celebrate beauty and keep her critique subtle.

In her book *Ein Fest in Wuppertal* Pina Bausch quotes a poem by the great Sufi poet and mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (*1207 +73). It reads as follows (in English translation):

A man came to the door of his beloved and knocked.

A voice asked: "Who is there?"

"It is I", he answered.

The voice said: "There is not enough space here for me and for you."

And the door remained locked.

After a year of solitude and (de)privation the man returned and knocked.

From inside a voice asked: "Who is there?"

"It is you", the man said.

And the door was opened.

This vignette uses the poetic strategy of alienation in the best sense of Brecht's meaning and exemplifies an attitude of respect and understanding of the Other that continues to guide Pina Bausch's aesthetics.

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¹ Norbert Servos, *Pina Bausch: Tanztheater* (München: K. Kieser Verlag, 2003), 39.

² Sabine Kebir, *Mein Herz liegt neben der Schreibmaschine: Ruth Berlaus Leben vor, mit und nach Bertolt Brecht* (Algiers: Editions Lalla Moulati, 2006), 252-54.

³ Jochen Schmidt, "*Tanzen gegen die Angst*": *Pina Bausch* (Düsseldorf: Econ & List Verlag, 1998), 43.

⁴ Heiner Müller, "Blut ist im Schuh, oder Das Rätsel der Freiheit." *Rotwelsch* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1982): 100-101.

⁵ Joan Acocella, "City Lights: Pina Bausch Returns to BAM." *The New Yorker*, 12-18-2006.

⁶ *Ein Fest in Wuppertal: Tanztheater Pina Bausch. 12. bis 28. Oktober 2001* (Reimscheid: Druckhaus Arns), 179-80.

⁷ Mulrooney, Deirde. *Orientalism, Orientation, and the Nomadic Work of Pina Bausch*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2002), 7.

⁸ Jack Anderson, "Bausch's Ode to Istanbul." *New York Theatre Wire*, 12-9-2006.

⁹ Joy Goodwyn, "Snapshots of Istanbul: Dance." *New York Sun*, 12-11-2006.

¹⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Werke* 22.2 (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1994): 796-99.