



## IF I HAD A HAMMER

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# Dancing into a new dimension

In the blistering 3-D Pina, Wim Wenders brings to life the work of his friend, the late, great German choreographer. What a labour of love that was

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The dance world was rocked when Pina Bausch died suddenly in June 2009; the dancers in her company, too. Some had worked with Bausch for years, and her troupe had become a transforming force in modern dance. “We all expected Pina to live for ever,” commented one. The aftermath of her death was terrible. This quiet woman had, through sheer force of will, created a vast body of work that scraped the nerve endings off modern life. Now, the company was in danger of collapse. What saved them was collaborating on an extraordinary film by Bausch’s fellow German, the director Wim Wenders. Pina captures Bausch’s audacious, wrangling work and celebrates her unique artistry. It preserves the dance, but makes it anew. It may also be the first artistic masterpiece of 3-D cinema.

Several dancers insist Wenders’s film, far from intruding on their grief, was an essential part of the mourning process. “It was almost a rescue,” Barbara Kaufmann says. “Wim gave us the opportunity to pay homage to Pina.” The incisive Spaniard Nazareth Panadero agrees: “We were very sad, and not sure what was going to happen. But we felt so close to Wim and the team that we were not alone any more.”

Wenders had met the choreographer when her company performed two of her masterworks, *Café Müller* and *The Rite of Spring*, in Venice in 1985. They felt an affinity, he confirms, in part because they were both children of disconsolate, recovering post-war Germany. Panadero also believes Wenders shares qualities with his subject — an observant eye, a reticent sensitivity.

Sitting over a cooling cup of tea in a London hotel, Wenders ruefully admits that he and Bausch had discussed making a film throughout most of their friendship. He simply couldn’t see how to capture the comedy, anguish and visceral extremity of her signature style. Unlike twinkle-toed ballet stars, Bausch’s performers register the full weight of human physicality. They crash to the ground, drag themselves over rocks, skim over water. They are more than dancers, just as her work is more than dance. “I would have dropped everything immediately, but I always had to admit to her that I didn’t know how to do it. It was almost like a running gag, because she wouldn’t give up, and thought that I would eventually come up with the solution.” And, eventually, he did, in 2007, when he saw 3-D film for the first time.

“I called her immediately,” he says. He and Bausch began to plan the film and select the works to be included. “I was basically convinced 3-D and dance were made for each other,” he says. “I wasn’t disappointed — it took a while to get there, but the hunch was the right one.”

The film Wenders and Bausch had discussed was very different. It was, he explains, “a film on her gaze, about her look at the world”. As well as four key works (Café Müller, The Rite of Spring, Kontakthof and Vollmond), he planned to shoot her in rehearsal and follow her to South America and Asia. He would also have shown her at home in Wuppertal — “A lot of Pina’s work, from the beginning, was based on observing people, and I would have shown the city in her eyes.” Bausch died just days before they were due to shoot some test scenes with the company. “That was the end of the film as I had planned it,” Wenders has said. “We pulled the plug.” It was the dancers who persuaded him not to abandon the project, insisting that he owed it to Bausch. He shot the four key dance works in their entirety, but felt that “was just the bare bones of a movie — the centre of gravity was missing”.

So he folds extracts from the works with quirky solos devised by the dancers in and around Wuppertal. They are heartfelt sequences, often drawn from Bausch’s work: a hippo lumbers through the river; a woman’s pointe shoes are larded with slabs of meat. They remind you that Bausch built an ensemble of individuals who offered her their own imagination and flaws as raw material. How did Wenders devise these scenes? “It slowly dawned on me that Pina had given us her working method — asking countless questions of the dancers, digging deeper and deeper. So I started to ask the dancers about her, and when she recognised them the clearest. These responses became the second part of the film — so it is still a film about her gaze and how the dancers felt she had seen them.”

In other hands, 3-D has produced a bombastic display of invention and self-regarding dazzle. Wenders uses the technique with stealth: instead of hyperreal textures, he relishes the soft layerings of bodies, letting them appear and vanish, draw close or fade away. It’s beguiling, whether we watch a cowed tribe of women endure The Rite of Spring or see couples in stiff evening wear perform awkward social dances in Kontakthof. You are half observer, half participant — which is precisely the feeling Bausch’s dance often induces. Everyone is implicated in this exhilarating work.

Although the dancers suggest in voice-over something of what Bausch meant to them, there are no discussions of the work in the film. Everyone is adamant that this would have betrayed their maker, who squirmed when asked to explain her creations. The mere idea makes her long-standing dancer Dominique Mercy laugh: “With Pina, it was no help to ask her. She liked to be surprised. She liked misunderstandings when what emerged was incredibly beautiful. I never felt the need to ask things.”

Wenders confirms that Bausch rejected any biographical context. “That was the rule of the game from the beginning. She kept her private life secret, and rightfully so. She was not good at words — she was a very funny person in private, but actually never really managed to say much about her art. That’s why it became a film that doesn’t rely on language.”



In a spin: Bausch did not always receive positive reactions to her approach (Donata Wenders)

Nonetheless, Bausch's presence is threaded through the film, caught in luminous stills and heart-catching scraps of celluloid. So what was she really like? "Pina was one of the quietest people you could ever imagine," says the Australian dancer Julie Shanahan. "If you didn't come close to her, you didn't hear her. That intimacy — which we all learn together as humans — is exactly what her work was about." Where did this scalding body of work come from? To Julie Anne Stanzak, an American who danced with Bausch for 23 years, her self-effacement masked a ferocious will: "This modest, frail, tender person had a strength that could move a mountain. She could turn water to fire." Even more simply, Kaufmann believes, "she had questions inside her, and they needed to be answered". That need burns brightly in her early masterpiece *Café Müller* (1978), the first Bausch work Wenders saw. Its impact was decisive: "I couldn't believe that somebody in 40 minutes was able to tell you more about men and women than the entire history of cinema. It still blows my mind." Bausch herself appeared as a somnambulist, drifting through a series of grotesque, wrenching encounters. The fractious discord between the sexes, soothed by pure tenderness, is, Wenders believes, "the centre of her work. She created a true anthology of behaviour about the rejection and attraction between men and women. There's almost nothing left to say".

Filming these pieces only increased Wenders's respect for their artistry. Bausch made *Café Müller*, for example, in a fortnight, and its teasing sequences can feel semiimprovised. Wenders found it to be "incredibly complex and perfect. You see purpose and structure in every second". Tensions between the original performers (including Mercy and his off-stage partner, Malou Airaudo) informed the work. As Wenders argues: "Because it is utterly personal, it is also universal."

Bausch's approach was not always appreciated. Mercy remembers an early triple bill in which he played an eerie invalid in a piece about a little boy's nightmare: "People would leave during the performance, slamming the door. Pina got naughty letters, funny phone calls. It was a difficult time." Even today, reactions can be extreme. The American dancer Eddie Martinez reports

spectators stalking out of the disturbing piece *Nelken* in Salzburg, while a friend watching the company in Edinburgh last summer was harangued by a woman who denounced them as “decadent”. The term seems out of kilter with Bausch’s quietly dedicated working method. “She didn’t let many people into the rehearsal room,” Stanzak explains. “She treasured that atmosphere of privacy and intimacy.” Within that cocoon, dancers could explore their most vulnerable traits. “She burrowed into the disquiet between human beings,” Stanzak says. “It’s one woman’s great yearning to understand human need.”

Most dance companies are a nest of lithe and unlined youth. Bausch, however, collected dancers who aged with her. The performers range in age from 20 to 60. “You can grow up and grow old, and still consider yourself a dancer,” Shanahan says. “You bring your life story on stage — which is, for me, what most dance lacks.” One of the youngest current dancers, Thusnelda Mercy, the daughter of Mercy and Airaudo, truly grew up with Bausch.

Bausch had made no plans to relinquish control, so there was understandable uncertainty after her death. Many dancers considered leaving, and the company might have dissolved, but instead, as Kaufmann says: “Nothing fell apart, everybody came a little closer.” Why? Martinez, who seriously considered returning to America, insists: “I am here because of Pina. She lives in the work, even though she’s not physically here. And I still hear her say, ‘Eddie — feet together.’” Panadero, too, sees performing as a way “to make it not seem finished”.

Wenders believes that, for Bausch, the task of maintaining her repertory of 40-plus works was a Sisyphean burden; it’s one reason she was keen to find a solution to filming them. Now the dancers shoulder the responsibility. Shanahan says: “I sometimes think I was in a convent or temple for 23 years — now we go out and give the message.” Their remorseless touring schedule will reach an exhausting peak next summer, when they perform 10 works in six weeks in London as a pre-Olympics festival. “Our first wish is to keep alive this repertoire, which is a jewel,” Mercy insists. “At some point, we have to go back to a creative process, but it’s so difficult. You don’t replace Pina.” But you can at least watch her dancers glide and stomp thrillingly past you, almost tangibly, in glorious 3-D.

*Pina opens on April 22; Ciné Lumière, SW7, screens films about Bausch’s work on Wednesday and May 19; for details, visit [institut-francais.org.uk](http://institut-francais.org.uk)*