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TANZTHEATER, PINA BAUSCH AND THE ONGOING INFLUENCE OF HER LEGACY

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London Contemporary Dance School. Postgraduate Choreography in *The Place*

Introducción

Pina Bausch and the Tanztheater Wuppertal have been fundamental in the international establishment of Tanztheater as a new and independent dance genre, and their impact is evident and vibrant in the current contemporary dance scene. To support this statement I will first unfold the history of modern dance in Germany, from Rudolf Laban and the German expressive dance movement of the 1920's, to the creations of Kurt Jooss and finally the formation of Tanztheater Wuppertal in 1973. I will then study Bausch's life and work, and reveal the essential and unique characteristics of her style, to ultimately prove the ongoing influence of her legacy, looking at one of the final pieces of the 2013 London based choreographic competition The Place Prize.

Keywords: TANZTHEATER; BAUSCH, PINA; CHOREOGRAPHY; THEATER

TANZTHEATER, PINA BAUSCH Y LA INFLUENCIA ININTERRUMPIDA DE SU LEGADO

Resumen

Pina Bausch y ThanztheaterWuppertal han sido fundamentales en la difusión internacional del Tanztheater/Danza-Teatro, como un nuevo e independiente genero de danza, con evidente y substancial impacto en el actual escenario de la danza contemporánea. Para remarcar dicha importancia, señalo en primer lugar, el recorrido de la danza contemporánea en Alemania, desde Rudolf Laban y el movimiento de danza expresiva alemana de los años 1920; hasta las creaciones de KurtJoos, y finalizo con la creación de TanztheaterWuppertal en 1973. A continuación, presento la vida y obra de Bausch, para revelar lo esencial y las características primordiales de su estilo. Concluyo con la notoria influencia ininterrumpida de su legado, señalando una de las piezas finalistas del concurso de coreógrafos The Place Prize, que tuvo lugar en Londres en el año2013.

Palabras clave: TANZTHEATER/DANZA-TEATRO; BAUSCH, PINA; COREOGRAFÍA; TEATRO

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Tanztheater refers to a genre of performing arts that combines dance and theatre with other medias such as visual arts and stage design (Langer, 1984). It is a complex style of multi-layered metaphors and poetic imagery (Servos, 2008, p.12) that unlike previous dance genres embraces the subjective experience of the performer (Climenhaga, 2009, p.14). The term was first used in the 1920's by Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) to denominate the dance culture he was to create (Servos, n.d.a). A dancer, choreographer and movement theoretician, he is considered one of the pioneers of Ausdruckstanz - German Expressionist Dance (Trinity Laban Conservatoire, 2011). According to Laban, Tanztheater was an interdisciplinary total art form that could restore the original harmony of the individual with the cosmos and therefore reinstate the natural bonds of community. Through dance, he hoped to unite all art media and achieve an all-embracing, radical change in humankind (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.219). Mary Wigman, one of Laban's dancers, also became a central figure of the German Expressionist modern dance. Her dances embodied the spirit of expressionism, and she required a form that transcended the individual (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.221). The belief of Wigman that only a few chosen could communicate the spirit of the time through dance, contrasted with the egalitarianism and the accessibility of dance promoted by Laban, defined the end points of Ausdruckstanz (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.221).

Kurt Jooss, a student of Laban, also became a central figure in the development of German Tanztheater. Through naturalistic movement, large-scale unisons and sharply observed social caricature, Jooss addressed political concerns of the time (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.219). In 1932, the year before Adolf Hitler became the chancellor of Germany, he made his main choreographic work called *The Green Table* (1932), a strong anti-war statement that depicted the ineffective peace negotiations of the 1930's and the effects of war (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.).

With the rise of the Nazi regime in 1933, the modern art developed during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) was repressed and artists that did not follow the strict demands of the regime were forced to leave Germany. Kurt Jooss was among them after he refused to fire the Jews from his company (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.219). In 1949 he returned to the country, where he established the Folkwang School in Essen. At that point, in a post-war divided Germany where modern dance was associated with the National Socialist Party, the Ausdruckstanz movement had

almost disappeared. Due to the promotion of ballet as light entertainment by the Nazi regime, classical ballet was prospering and, therefore, the Folkwang School became the only place for formal modern dance training (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.225).

In the sixties, possibly awakened by the student revolts that were taking place in Germany, young dancers felt very constricted by the formalism of ballet and the hierarchies of German ballet companies. By fusing the past expressionist tendencies of Ausdruckstanz and taking influences of American modern dance, combining them with elements of other art forms, they launched into a new field that is what we recognise today as Tanztheater (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.225). Johann Kresnik was one of the first to embrace the change by creating dances with a strong political implication (Varney, 2008, p.268). His Tanztheater is characterised by the provocative imagery and controversial subjects; in *O Sela Pei* (1967), he adapted pieces of text concerning people suffering from schizophrenia into choreography (Enzelberg, 2008). *The Ring in Bonn* (2008), a collaboration with the painter and scenic designer Gottfried Helnwein, spoke about the topics of power, money, force and war (Enzelberg, 2008). His productions often attacked capitalism as well as the corrupted form of socialism practiced in the German Democratic Republic (1949- 1990) (Fraser and Hoffmann, 2006, p.225). Kresnik, also known as a choreographic revolutionary (Fraser and Hoffmann, 2006, p.225) was dismissed at times for producing mere 'rioting' on stage (Varney, 2008, p.268), his contribution is fundamental in the field of Tanztheater. Nevertheless, if there is a name to remark in the development and universal impact of this genre, this is Pina Bausch and the Tanztheater Wuppertal.

Pina Bausch was born in 1940 in Solingen, Germany, and started dancing at her hometown ballet school before joining the Folkwang School in Essen at the age of fourteen (Climenhaga, 2009, p.4). Directed by Kurt Jooss, her training combined techniques towards free creative expression with the fundamental rules of ballet and the value of form (Servos, n.d.a). She was also in proximity with other art forms taught at the Folkwang School, such as opera, drama, music, painting, sculpture, photography and design, which clearly influenced her approach to interlacing different medias (Servos, n.d.a). Growing up in a country at war was also a big impact for the young dancer, which was reflected in some of her works. For example in *Nelken* (1982) Bausch referenced the oppression

of the Nazi regime with the presence of the prowling militia and guard dogs (Tashiro, 1999).

In 1958 Pina Bausch was awarded a grant to spend a year in the Juilliard School of Music in New York, where she had the chance to work with Antony Tudor, José Limón and dancers from the Martha Graham Dance Company (Climenhaga, 2009, p.6). However, during that time a strong reaction against these formal techniques of modern dance arose from the New York City's Judson Dance Theatre (Goldberg, 1984, p.264), evolving into an avant-garde movement that searched for alternative dance experiences (Partsch-Bergsohn, 1987, p.16). Artists from the visual arts, music and dance collaborated crossing the boundaries between the medias, and choreographers explored new ideas and established new options such as the use of pedestrian movements, repetition and collage techniques (Partsch-Bergsohn, p.17). Bausch was definitely influenced by these tendencies, which she then blended with elements from the German expressionist dance. She returned to Germany in 1962, working as a soloist dancer in Kurt Joos's Folkwang Ballet, alongside starting her career as a choreographer. Bausch made her first work in Wuppertal as a guest choreographer in 1971, and two years later became head of the Wuppertal Ballet, which she soon renamed the Tanztheater Wuppertal (Climenhaga, 2009, p.10). She worked with this ensemble until her death in June 2009, establishing a universal style that since the 1970's became a leading influence in the world of modern dance.

In the first years with the company Bausch was still looking for her voice as a choreographer. The creations already showed some of the essential stylistic elements of her later work, but the pieces were still conventional movement based pieces (Climenhaga, 2009, p.11). *The Rite of Spring* (1975), one of her most emblematic works, is a clear example. The action focuses on the sacrifice of a young girl (Servos, 2008, p.37). The piece is choreographed in the traditional sense from beginning to end, with movement vocabulary strongly linked to the Ausdruckstanz era (Servos, 2008, p.38). However, Bausch incorporates some elements that will be fundamental in her style of Tanztheater, such as the extensive use of props and the depiction of gender. In *The Rite of Spring* the stage is covered in a layer of peat, which influences directly the movement of the dancers (Servos, 2008, p.37). The ankle-deep earth covering the space becomes a real resistance and is visible in the weighty steps and exhaustion of the performers (Operascenes, 2011). The focus on gender

and the characterization of men and women is also a key element of her work. In this piece, the accent clearly lies on women, shown as objects and victims. Bausch confronts the audience with female suffering and stirs their emotions (Servos, 2008, p.39). *The Rite of Spring* became one of Tanztheater Wuppertal's most frequently performed works, as well as the last piece Bausch choreographed in the traditional sense.

A shift happened in 1977, in the creation of Bausch's piece *Bluebeard-with recording of Bela Bartok's "Duke Bluebeard's Castle"* (1977). The dancers were asked to push beyond their role of impersonal movers to bring more of their own individual and subjective experiences (Climenhaga, 2009, p.20). This change was emphasised in 1978, when Bausch made *He takes her by the hand and leads her into the castle, the others follow* (1978), a piece with just four dancers, five actors and a singer. In these circumstances, Bausch began to ask questions to the performers around the central topic of the piece, generating a final work that derived from the individual human experience expressed in bodily terms (Servos, n.d.a). 'The impulse for the movement always comes from the person in a specific situation' (Bausch, as cited in Climenhaga, 2009, p.13). This new questioning approach of construction and the subjective relevance of the performers input in the work became a crucial basis for the way Pina Bausch and Tanztheater Wuppertal established Tanztheater as an independent and fresh genre and provided new ground for exploration in the performing arts.

Pina Bausch's Tanztheater arises from the combination of the many elements of her work: the movement vocabulary, the emotional context, the use of text, set, costumes, music, and the particular composition. Every piece has its own unique nature, but all are clearly directed by the same voice. Therefore in the following lines I will look at the piece *Vollmond* (2006) to recognize the main characteristics of Bausch's work.

In *Vollmond* the stage is covered with black material. A channel of ankle-deep water crosses the floor towards the back, and above this sits a big rock lit from behind as if it was full moon (Bausch, 2006). Bringing slices of nature on stage is common in Bausch's work; water was already used in *Arien* (1979) and *He takes her by the hand and leads her into the castle, the others follow* (1978) (Servos, 2008, p.203). Other elements used in her extensive repertoire include snow, earth, meadow, fallen leaves, rose petals and trees (Servos, n.d.a). Bausch was particularly interested

in how these elements affected the body and the dances; in *Vollmond* the water creates sound, reflects the light in a unique way, makes the clothes long and heavy. The dancers can swim, slide across the stage, leap about with wooden poles, and also move against the resistant created by the water (Bausch, 2006).

The composition of the piece is arranged using collage technique. The scenes are placed without following a linear narrative, jumping from act to act, but the message is still strong and transmitted to the audience. Regarding the subjects of her works, Bausch often focused on conventions of communication, game structures and pedestrian actions, in a highly charged emotional context (Goldberg, 1984, p.264). *Vollmond* shows people in the search for love, both in pain and pleasure; the performers fight, kiss, attempt intimacy, and dance in desperation and for joy (Servos, 2008, p.203). The sorrow of some scenes is contrasted with the light humour of others, often achieved by the repetition of simple playful actions or with short speeches coming normally from the same characters (Bausch, 2006). The use of repetition and the sense of humour are elements that often come back in her work.

Not so interested in how people move, but in what moves them (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.225) Bausch showed strong individuals on stage. In *Vollmond* every performer has a strong personal presence; however, as in most of her works, gender stereotypes are emphasized (Goldberg, 1984, p.264). Bausch deconstructed gender identities, and dissected the social constructs that separate men and women into opposites (Goldberg, 1984, p.264). Her work was socially critical, but instead of focusing on public issues, she commented on the more private aspects of the human condition, oppression, and male and female relations (Manning and Benson, 1985, p.226).

In *Vollmond* the music varies from the Balanescu Quartet, to the dark voice of Tom Waits or the sounds of René Aubry (Servos, 2008, p.203). In the same way the scenes jump from one another, the transitions of each music track are not necessarily smooth (Bausch, 2006). The costumes in *Vollmond* are also representative of Bausch's style. The men are in smart shirts and trousers, whereas women are wearing dresses; mostly long, in one colour, and exposing their arms (Bausch, 2006). Bausch always had the dancers in normal clothes, wanting to show the individuals on stage as people, not as dancers. 'It's something that's very

intimate. I will like them to be seen as people who are dancing' (Bausch, as cited in Servos, 2008, p.238). But then again, this aesthetic choice of strongly gendered costumes reiterated the fixed social patterns and the polarities of gender revealed in Bausch's work (Goldberg, 1984, p.275).

The Tanztheater Wuppertal is an international ensemble, and due to the global success and development of Tanztheater, the Wuppertal company was able to conceive international co-productions in Europe, Asia, and North and South America (Servos, n.d.a). Consequently, the Tanztheater Wuppertal has become a world theatre, a mediator between cultures and a path towards mutual understanding. For Bausch, her Tanztheater was not about provoking but having 'a space where we can encounter each other' (Bausch, as cited in Servos, n.d.a).

The impact of the Tanztheater Wuppertal is undeniable in the current dance scene. Several recognized artists of the last decades used the tools and freedom inherited from Bausch's work to develop their own choreographic voice. Sasha Waltz, Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus, Alain Platel, Meg Stuart and Akram Khan are a few examples (Climenhaga, 2009, p.36). However, to prove the ongoing influence of Bausch's legacy in upcoming choreographers, I will study Eva Recacha's *The Wishing Well* (2012), a piece created for the 2013 London based choreographic competition The Place Prize.

Eva Recacha is a London based choreographer, dancer and lecturer at London Contemporary Dance School, Birkbeck and CSD Maria de Avila (Spain) (The Place, n.d.b). In 2001 she founded *Proyecto Babel*, a dance project focused on interdisciplinary and site-specific work. Since 2009, Recacha has been making her own work in the UK. Her choreographic practice is focused on exploring ways of relating movement and text, creating a blend of humorous, poetic and nonsensical juxtapositions through the interaction of both mediums (The Place, n.d.b). She attempts to merge the abstract crafting of the actual movement with the emotive side of the performance (Theplacefordance, 2013). *The Wishing Well* was created for the 2013 The Place Prize. It was a solo performance, which portrayed a character involved in her personal journey of games and rituals. With the starting point of having wishes as a motor for life, Recacha was able to evoke childhood and growing up, hopes and desires, identity and mystery (Theplacefordance, 2013). The piece was fresh and unique in itself; however, the influence of Pina Bausch's work was evident. The

following paragraphs will reveal the many elements of *The Wishing Well* that connect to Bausch's Tanztheater.

First of all, *The Wishing Well* does not follow a linear narrative. The piece is composed by the different stages that the character is going through. There is a clear sense of repetition and a subtle sense of humour (Recacha, 2012). Unlike most of Bausch's pieces, the set and design are very simple; the performer is dancing in a clear square delineated by the light. She dances in this space until the end of the piece, when, portrayed as an elderly person, the square opens and she is able to leave the stage. However, Recacha still interlaces different medias, mainly by the interplay of movement and voice. The character sings, speaks and protests, as well as relating and responding to the comments and commands of the voice of the narrator (Recacha, 2012).

The emphasis in the subjective experience of the performer is also very patent in this piece. The character, Martha, is addressed by her own name, which makes the story on stage even more realistic. The solo becomes very intimate and personal, but at the same time Recacha is able to comment on the human condition, with references to different social behaviours such as religion, football, games, protests and popular songs (Recacha, 2012). Created in England by a Spanish choreographer and with a Greek dancer, the piece has also a strong sense of multiculturalism. In the same way to the international Wuppertal ensemble, *The Wishing Well* represents diversity and cultural blend.

Although Pina Bausch's work involves a group of performers rather than soloists, there is a connection between Recacha's solo piece and Bausch's group work. A "solo" is a confrontation with oneself (Renz, 2015, p. 31), and in *The Wishing Well* piece, Eva Recacha "explores the dignity and importance of our dreams and ideals and the role they have in constructing our identities" (2012). In Pina Bausch's *Vollmond* (Full Moon), despite its ensemble nature, critic Sarah Compton notes that "what gives the piece its exceptional quality is the long sequence of solos that punctuate it" (2013).

All these characteristics from Recacha's piece directly relate to Bausch's work. The Spanish choreographer is developing her own and unique voice as a dance artist, but as well as many other choreographers in the current dance scene, Pina Bausch's impact in her practice is undeniable and proved. And by analysing *The Wishing Well*, a brand new piece by

a choreographer supported by The Place, England's premier centre for contemporary dance (The Place, n.d.a), I can attest that Bausch's influence is ongoing and prevailing.

'Pina Bausch's work continues to bring creative energy to the world.'

(Climenhaga, 2013, p.3)

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Notes

- ¹ Oihana Vesga Bujan trained in the Conservatoire National Maurice Ravel (Biarritz, France) before joining London Contemporary Dance School and graduating in 2012. A recipient of the Charlotte Kirkpatrick Award for Exceptional Potential as a Dance Artist, and first prize at the International Contemporary Dance Contest in Biarritz. In her final year at LCDS she was invited to join Richard Alston Dance Company for the creation and national touring of *A Ceremony of Carols*. Oihana joined Richard Alston Dance Company as an Apprentice in 2012 becoming a full Company member in 2013. She was selected as *Dancing Times* dancer of the month for February 2015.

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