

Cultural Daily

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Wim Wender's 'Pina' Soars

Cultural Daily · Thursday, January 12th, 2012

At once weightless as air and heavy as earth, Wim Wenders' 3D documentary *Pina* fuses the famed choreographer's work with a filmmaker's vision, with each at the height of their powers.

Pina Bausch revolutionized how I experience dance, when I first saw her work in 1984, during Los Angeles's Olympic Arts Festival. By that time, Bausch had been the director of the Wuppertal (Germany) Dance Theatre for 11 years, and had transformed the previously-unremarkable company. Her dancers did not look the way we had been taught to imagine dancers – they were not young, not waif-like, not perfect of form... although all were lithe of limb. Her company was a mix of young and old, slender and plump, people from all over the world drawn to work with her and her singular, post-expressionist vision.

While some people were – and are – put off by Bausch's movement, her metaphor, her dancers more human than mannequin, I was broken out of my preconceptions. Their performances opened a direct connection between dancers and audience. I felt like a participant in a ritual, even as I was observing it.

This feeling is recaptured in Wenders' film, and his use of 3D is both necessarily and revelatory. The project was originally conceived as collaboration with Bausch. Then she was diagnosed with cancer; five days later, she died. Wenders and Bausch's company re-assembled themselves, and conceived a whole new work – performances of Bausch's most important pieces, intercut with on-camera perspectives from company members, some spoken, some voice-over their contemplative faces.

The film begins with a parade of the company enacting four gestures, one for each of the seasons. This carnival-like parade reappears at several moments in the film, bridging sequences and suggesting the continual, turning passage of time and location.

We get only fleeting glimpses of Bausch herself. We see her first at the seven-minute mark, in rehearsal, explaining the ideology for her life's work: "Words can't do more than just evoke things. That's where dance comes in."

This is not showy filmmaking, and the 3D format lets us experience Bausch's work in a manner that closely resembles how we saw it live on stage, because her staging was always dimensional, playing the foreground and background of her large spaces. Wenders' 3D emphasizes backgrounds, as in one sequence where a foreground line-up of people is being inspected. We become aware that far behind them, in the background, the row of people sitting in chairs is changing; at times they are young, at times they are older.

Each dance sets its own vocabulary of movement and gesture that develops and becomes the thesis and "text" of the dance. This concept is given emphasis by Toni Froschhammer's editorial work, at

times seamlessly intercutting with re-created and historic versions of the same piece. Her intercut style, which gives content and drama, is especially powerful as we watch scenes of Bausch herself performing *Café Mueller*.

Wenders makes ample use of exterior locations, both natural settings and strongly-designed, monochromatic architectural environments that emphasize verticals and horizontals. A sequence on a moving monorail is a stand-out, as is a piece set in an industrial wasteland, where a dancer performs with raw veal in her toe shoes.

The raw meat is more than a metaphor: Bausch's work accepts emotional pain, and there's the possibility of physical pain, too. There are heart-stopping moments where dancers show absolute trust, and leap into the void. Will they fall onto concrete, or will their colleague catch them just in time? We gasp every time, because the catcher doesn't reach out until after the leaper is well in flight – we're tricked into believing that the catch may not occur.

Pathos of a more immediate nature enters at the 75-minute mark, with one dancer's voice-over statement, "I still haven't dreamed of you, Pina." This is the intimation of Bausch's sudden death, which shadows the third act.

One dancer says, "You always felt more human working with Pina," The audience feels more human, too.

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