



## Pina Bausch

Pina Bausch, the German dancer and choreographer who died aged 68 on Tuesday, five days after being diagnosed with cancer, was the most influential figure in European contemporary dance for the past 30 years, creating a much-imitated fusion of radical theatre, surreal art, sexual drama and danced body language, known as Tanztheater.

01 July 2009 • 7:07pm



Drawing deeply on the violence in male-female relationships, often with mordantly witty texts and fantastical sets, Pina Bausch crossed the borders between dance and theatre, inspiring radical theatre and film directors such as Robert Wilson, David Alden

and Pedro Almodóvar as well as younger choreographers including William Forsythe, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and Lloyd Newson of the company DV8.

She shocked audiences by the apparently punishing lengths to which she drove her dancers. Leading American critic Arlene Croce excoriated Pina Bausch's US debut in 1984, describing her as a "theatre terrorist" and her material as "the raw pulp of abuse". But Pina Bausch's company regarded her with absolute devotion. "Pina?" the great French ballerina Sylvie Guillem once responded, on being queried about Bausch: "You work for here\_SLps I think it's like joining a cult."

For her legions of admirers, including those at Sadler's Wells, where she was a favourite if colossally expensive attraction, Pina Bausch was uniquely eloquent in the surreal pageants she produced, portraying the endless ways that men and women choose to love each other and fight each other.

Obsessive behaviour was meat and drink to Pina Bausch's caricaturist sense of humour – a gargoyle of a woman possessively counting out her spaghetti strands, men shovelling chopped onions into girls' mouths, crowds throwing themselves off walls. Absurdity and cruelty punctured episodes of dull banality or dreamlike confusion, and thanks to Pina Bausch dance-theatre became the most chic form of theatre in Britain, much (and, often, horribly) imitated.

Philippine Bausch was born on July 27 1940, in the swordsmithing centre of Solingen, western Germany, the late third child of poor parents who owned a working-class hotel-restaurant. She told *The Daily Telegraph* in a 2001 interview the café customers were a formative influence on her view of sexual attraction, as she observed everything from tenderness to violent abuse. "It was a place where life happens, and couples have love affairs and fights," she said, "I saw that love was a strong relationship in which anything can happen. For some people, fighting is exciting; life would be boring without it."

This fascination with primitive human emotions dictated most of her memorable productions, including the semi-autobiographical *Café Müller* – in which she appeared as a childlike ghost sleepwalking through a rowdily populated café – and *Viktor*, in which men and women fought and flirted their way into a gigantic earth grave.

The war also made her a nervous child, she said. *Nelken*, her 1982 production set on a field of plastic carnations, recalled Nazi tyranny with its prowling militia and guard dogs. "I am afraid of violence," she told the *Telegraph*. "And, of course, some of these

things appear in the pieces." Her epic version of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, in which the sacrificial victim is effectively lynched by the crowd, is thought by many to be the finest of the 180-plus versions that exist.

After childhood ballet classes, Pina Bausch started dance studies in earnest at 15, joining the Folkwang School in Essen run by the leading progressive choreographer Kurt Jooss, whose eclectic theatrical approach drew on Germany's pre-war tradition in dance expressionism, or *Ausdruckstanz*, which the Nazis had suppressed.

Winning a three-year dance scholarship to New York's Juilliard School of Music, the 18-year-old Pina felt liberated from an insular, defensive post-war Germany into a cosmos of colour and possibilities, despite speaking no English. She became a student of the leading ballet-drama choreographers José Limon and the Englishman Antony Tudor, who enjoyed making her do very tricky ballet – one dance he made for her included 587 arabesques, 224 *jetés* and 184 turns.

Pina Bausch also studied with the classical specialist Margaret Craske and avidly watched George Balanchine's ballets, but she was even more interested in the variety of peoples and cultures she saw on the streets. New York, she said later, opened her eyes.

On her return to Essen, she became a founder dancer of Jooss's Folkwang Ballett, and was a principal dancer for several years before attempting her first choreography in 1968, *Fragment*, set to the music of Bartók.

Appointed director of the Folkwang Ballett in 1969, she made striking choreography for Wuppertal opera house productions of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* and Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, leading to the crucial appointment as artistic director of Wuppertal's Opera Ballet in 1973. The company was soon renamed Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch and sharply steered away from ballet, to the rage of some traditionalists.

For the 36 years of her directorship Bausch insisted on only signing year-long contracts, so that "I was always ready to go. It was never meant that I stay here in Wuppertal – it just happened."

The 1970s saw the creation of many of her most acclaimed works. Drawing on classical music, she made radically modern choreographies to Gluck's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* and *Orpheus und Eurydice*, Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and her 1975 *Rite of Spring*, one of the few Pina Bausch works lent to other companies, notably in 1997 to Paris Opera Ballet. Meanwhile she was developing the narrative potential of Germany's pre-war memories and popular song in the acclaimed *Café Müller* and *Kontakthof*, her acidly funny work about sexual urges, which she updated with a cast entirely of pensioners for its 2002 London visit.

From 1973 the designer Rolf Borzík defined the use of extravagant, symbolic scenery in her productions, and he and Pina Bausch were lovers for seven years, before his death from leukaemia in 1980. Bausch considered closing down the company, but instead created one of her most acclaimed works, *1980, a piece by Pina Bausch*, and within months met the Chilean poet Ronald Kay. They fell in love and in 1981 she bore her only child, Rolf Salomon (named after Borzík).

Pina Bausch increasingly became a global presence, and in 1986 created the first of several large productions commissioned by world cities. *Viktor*, produced for Rome, was described by *The Daily Telegraph* critic as "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".

It fielded a sheep among its cast, joining a new pattern of animal participation that enlivened the dramatis personae of *Nelken* (alsatian dogs), *Arias* (a hippopotamus) and *Masurca Fogo* (a manatee). Waterslides, growing grass and piles of rubble were among other obstacles that littered Pina Bausch's dance stages and caused headaches for stage technicians, quite apart from hazards for dancers often wearing very high heels. It was not as dangerous as it looked, Pina Bausch told *The Daily Telegraph* – what fascinated her was how differently people moved when familiar things were put in the wrong context and they were disturbed.

When her company first appeared in London in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was to discouragingly empty halls, but she took off with the British public with visits to the Edinburgh Festival in the 1990s. When Sadler's Wells reopened after a major refurbishment in 1999, the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch was its prime attraction. Her most recent London visit was in February last year, with *Café Müller* and

---

*Rite of Spring.*

As her fame grew, Pina Bausch's creations increasingly drew criticism for their Grand Tour aspect, with residences in cities abroad followed by a major production, usually complimentary, about the location – *Nur Du* (Los Angeles), *Der Fensterputzer* (Hong Kong), *Masurca Fogo* (Portugal), *Wiesenland* (Budapest), *Agua* (Brazil), *Nefes* (Istanbul), *Ten Chi* (Japan) and last year's *Bamboo Blues* (India) were, regrettably, never capped by a London work.

Pina Bausch's company made two notable appearances in feature films, in Federico Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On* (1982) and Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* (2001).

Among her many awards were a 2006 Laurence Olivier Award, and Japan's 2007 Kyoto Prize. She took curtain calls on stage 10 days ago at her company's performance in Wuppertal, and was diagnosed with her illness only last week.

She is survived by her son Rolf and by her partner Ronald Kay.

*Published July 1 2009*



**More stories**