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Viktor, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, Sadler's Wells

Major Bausch retrospective opens with a stylish commedia della morte about today's Romans

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Thursday, 7 June 2012



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Postcards of Rome sent by a German choreographer: Bausch's Viktor is both vague and precise

Image © Laszlo Szilto/Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch

It stymies any tourist to sum up for others what they saw abroad. Still more challenging, to create (or recreate) for theatre as a choreographer something more than superficial, more than clichéd about Italy, Japan, Los Angeles, Istanbul, these most clichéd of cultures. The opening of the monumental, enticing series of 10 of the late Pina Bausch's "World Cities" season in London - a posthumous celebration of her talent - launched last night with the first of her views, *Viktor*, a production about Rome, postcards of Rome sent in Eighties Italy by a German choreographer.

Choreographers' output sheathes itself in a sort of gel of confidence - in the audience you take in what you see for purely artistic-theatrical reasons, you taste, you sniff the presentation for authentic savours, but you don't seek documentary proof. Did the choreographer herself, though, worry later (after the adulation) whether what she made was *degno*? Was *Viktor* Italian-esque enough? Was that important?

“ The images are throwbacks to time-haloed, movie-aspicked sexual archetypes ”

The pinnacles of Bausch's landmark dance-theatre, things like *Café Müller*, *Rite of Spring*, *Kontakthof*, *Nelken*, not often seen in the UK but hugely acclaimed worldwide, were so anchored in specifics, her own memories, the personal DNA of her rivetingly individual dancers, that the wider scope of her series of travelogues to different cities around the world (once she'd become a celebrity) offers risks of blanding out. But they did become the spine of her later work; so that this "World Cities" retrospective over the next five weeks is a significant opportunity to see the great Pina Bausch in her maturity, while her company still exists (and there has to be doubt how long, honestly, it can survive her death in 2009).

Viktor was the first travelogue piece, in 1986, a blotting pad of impressions, vague and precise. Presumably Bausch felt it was true enough to her to risk the next travelogue work two years later, *Palermo Palermo*, anchored in Sicily, which we'll see on 1 and 2 July at the Barbican. That one brought antiquity into the equation of modern Italy with more prominence.

But *Viktor*, as a debutant in a potential new theme for her, wears its flavoursome gel with pride - this is a long, stylish trek through recognisably Italian territory. It's quite clichéd, and I'll look forward to see how later ones in other cities worked. Here, as you expect in Italy (as a tourist), the past quietly eats the present; today's Italians, stylishly



costumed *all'italiano* where Armani meets Fellini, perform inside a gigantic, menacing earthwork from the top of which a gravedigger remorselessly shovels dirt down. It's a *commedia della morte*, a sex comedy in which men set the rules and women swallow them, before the grave swallows them all.

In 1985, when Bausch was preparing her piece, what did she see in Rome? She was politically observant, a child of a post-Nazi Germany consumed with national guilt. Italy too had its own guilt, though with more recent layers added to it. The Eighties were Bettino Craxi's time, the Socialist proclaiming an intention to put Mafia corruption right, the then unblemished hero of the 1985 [Achille Lauro](#) incident - but the images in *Viktor* are throwbacks to time-haloed, movie-aspicked sexual archetypes. The men are young, dapper, suited in black and white - like fashion models, minor Coppola *mafiosi*, or undertakers. They sell anything: postcards, revolvers, women. The women are elegant, frocked in high heels and lipstick. They're sex symbols or slatternly waitresses or ageless Fellini goddesses (all archetypes that appealed to Bausch's rococo eye for feminine styling). Everything is [chaotic](#).

“ There are corpses everywhere: corpses who are married by a priest, bodies rolled up in carpets. The graveyard humour is constant ”

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Above, an extract from Bausch's *1980*, a precursor to *Viktor*, as performed at Sadler's Wells

Corpses pop up everywhere: corpses who are married by a priest, bodies rolled up in carpets, a frantic woman who's smothered by her husband. The graveyard humour is constant, a sort of circus atmosphere, now-you're-dead, which mitigates the ease of accusation. Bausch's working methods were collaborative, so who knows who to credit for the cacophonous, frantic auction in which suave young men run about holding dubious objects for sale (including dogs, sometimes)?

“ There's a sublime incidental divorce scene where the man swaps his two live sheep with his wife for the marital duvet and radio set ”

I'm sure it was Bausch, though, who wanted the men to manhandle women downstage like dead mannequins, and who suddenly decided an upstage dumbshow descant was necessary for the intellectual stuff frontstage, a sublime incidental divorce scene where the husband swaps two live sheep with his wife for the marital duvet, blanket and radio set. She

victoriously trots off with the sheep. Eh??

Viktor is from Bausch's peak style period, the Eighties of *Nelken* (enjoyed at Sadler's Wells seven years ago, and at the Edinburgh Festival in 1995). The music seems snatched from café radios: Fred Astaire puttin' on the Ritz, a village kazoo band, a mournful balladeer with guitar. Its longeurs stretch soporifically, as I remember from a long-ago viewing. Yet here are the lightly nuanced, lucid vignettes that are reminders, I'll hazard, of **Bausch's own background** as a child of café owners, where she was formatively influenced by watching the customers: couples who make baroque loveplay with their cigarettes while a child sneaks a long, avid puff, or drab mothers who sit in the shadows watching the girls who get their breasts out.

Males generally have the worst of it, in the sense that the ruthlessly feminist Bausch shows them up in her sketches, though remaining erotically susceptible to them. The cruelty of the men who jiggle women's bosoms or slap their bottoms gradually accrues into a monstrous eternal crime, in which the men's self-conscious stylishness makes them even more culpable.

But with Bausch one never knows whether one's reading her conclusions and prejudices or one's own. In *Viktor* there are long, aching long passages where time gets sucked dry by pure tedium (you exit at nearly 11 o'clock); then another rough Italian song, or fine verbal joke, or inane bit of playfulness, pulls your strings, and you react.

No one is restful on the edge of the grave - the reasons they're there range from the accidental (they forgot the time) to the purposeful (they went too far) or the inevitable (they're old) or, at the bitter end, the hateful (they're Jewish). Meanwhile, the gravedigger, not bothered, keeps shovelling the dirt down on them all.

- [Viktor is at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, tonight](#)
- [Nur Du is at the Barbican Centre, London, Saturday and Sunday](#)
- [The Pina Bausch World Cities season continues until 9 July](#)

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