

## **Dancing to talk about yourself. The character is me. Case study: Pina Bausch**

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**Abstract:** From the corpus of our doctoral research, an essential place in the development and analysis of the theatrical elements of contemporary dance is the subject of Pina Bausch. The choreographic world has been and will remain strongly guided by the well-implemented corporeal principles of Pina Bausch, also called the choreographer of souls. The corporeal rigors imposed by the artistic system and classical working techniques are not the only methods by which we can access a complete final product, to the surprise of many practitioners or theorists. The proof that emotion and corporeality can be accessed and directed through multiple variants lies in the work exercises created by Pina Bausch. I will not use the term method or technique because “there is no method, no technique to follow: What remains is a process, and to build from this process becomes the highest quality of Pina Bausch, moving in your own direction and taking advantage of the available resources.” The esthetics of the movement occupied a leading place in the ranking of choreographic priorities until the emergence of the precursors of modern dance, which exposed new meanings of corporeality. Pina Bausch supported the move by stating that “I am not so interested in how they move as in what moves them.” The purpose of the study is to analyze the work processes and to classify them in distinct stages, meant to help in forming a direction that will bring us as close as possible to the nature of the theatre.

**Keywords:** Pina Bausch; theatre; dance.

The aesthetic of motion had held a leading position in the hierarchy of choreographic priorities until the emergence of the precursors of modern dance, who have exhibited new meanings of corporeality. This more profound approach to the Pina Bausch topic has the purpose of analyzing the work processes and of classifying them into different stages, meant to aid the shaping of a direction, which should bring us closer to the nature of theatricality.

An essential step in developing a career as a choreographer consists in the indispensable study of the creations and innovations brought by Pina Bausch, a drainless source of emotions. It is with affection that we notice, in

the few, but important fragments where we see Pina Bausch herself dancing, the emotion transposed at the corporal level. Her body, one of the main pillars of creation, has been little analysed compared to the intensity of its presence. The initiation into the profound analysis of Pina Bausch's way of choreographic thinking thus begins with the study of the exterior side.

Corporeal fragility and sensitivity are aesthetics coming from the sylph pattern of Pina Bausch's body. With the unusual length of her arms, she could reach an inevitable amplitude of moves, subduing the surrounding space regardless of its surface. Her thin and long neck allowed her a maximum rotation of the head which, most of the time, touched the arms, thus forming a relation of bondage. The prominent bone structure of her chest was a sort of a corporal *Axis mundi*, holding two breasts, which timidly spoke to us through the melted cloth. Through the same cloth came into sight the prominent iliac bones, which resembled not only two fallen wrists, but also a bodily weakness bordering illness. The legs, a little absent from this physiological architectural picture, had the role of sustaining, of generating a connection with reality<sup>1</sup>. We thus ask ourselves why a body of this sort, inclined to be unceasingly observed for hours and hours, draws off discretely behind the fragile and yet highly profound creations. We reach the idea of an artistic sacrifice, which begins when the flux of information, once accumulated, becomes necessary to be shared with your predecessors, leaving no room for the time to rediscover your own body; it may also become a real call to the pedagogical side, characterized by an intense empathy.

The corporeal rigors imposed by the artistic system and the classical work techniques are not the only methods by which we can access a complete final product, to the surprise of many practitioners or theorists. The proof that emotion and corporality can be accessed and guided through multiple versions resides in the work exercises created by Pina Bausch. I will not use the terms *method* or *technique* because "There is no method, no technique to follow; so what is left is a process, and to build from that ground becomes Bausch's greatest influence."<sup>2</sup> We thus introduce the main question which generates new meanings: *how?* How to feel the sorrow, how to touch a face, how does a sensation change the entire corporality? "She is looking for the way in which each individual contains his or her expression, how it lives in his or her body."<sup>3</sup> This self-analysis opens access to multiple and various

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<sup>1</sup> Images from the choreographic performance of Pina Bausch in *Café Müller*, Wuppertal online archive, retrieved from [https://www.pinabausch.org/archives/video/cafe\\_19850518\\_01\\_0002](https://www.pinabausch.org/archives/video/cafe_19850518_01_0002).

<sup>2</sup> Royd Climenhaga, *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook. The Making of Tanztheater*, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2012, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p. 59.

possibilities of creation and interpretation, a sort of an interior abyss from which Pina Bausch extracts creative force.

Tenderness. What is it? Where does it start? How far does tenderness go before it turns into something else? When is it no longer tenderness, or, does tenderness persist? A man takes a woman's hand and bends her finger backward. A woman approaches a man and bites his ear. Men and women pinch each other's armpits, push their eyes closed, pluck out a hair or pull a chair out from under them and then calmly walk away, arm in arm. Later on these little antagonisms continue. Tender gestures turn into punches. The transition is smooth. At the end of the performance, all the men surround and touch a woman. They cover her body with touches.<sup>4</sup>

These images, taken from the *Kontakthof* performance, talk, besides tenderness, about the model of the other. The stage partner is the one in front of whom we reveal ourselves emotionally, in the arms of whom we entrust our weaknesses and power. We are a whole, the same. Is the stage partner my reflection?

When asked what her weaknesses and strengths were, Pina Bausch confessed, after long moments of silence, that her strength was her greatest weakness<sup>5</sup>. Does the capacity of empathizing with the performers, of intensely living every breath, of being overwhelmed by so many sensations, represent power? Or it is rather a weakness which consumes you and brings you close to exhaustion? To find a relieving solution, you must feel the same pain; to laugh naturally, you need to rejoice sincerely. Can detachment bring the same result?

Pina Bausch said that

It's not so simple to turn a feeling, an idea into dance. Sometimes a small event happens and makes me open my eyes. Suddenly I see a tiny key but don't know what it is. Something that I know is present, that I must respond to. Then, I start asking myself questions, and one thing leads to another. It is like an adventure but with no map. At first, I have to listen to my feelings, then I do it again and again to maintain this approach in my daily work. This is a difficult and sometimes terrifying process.<sup>6</sup>

In an attempt to shape an idea about Pina Bausch's work manner and structural steps, I have brought together, in different ways, the information gathered so far, and each final version leads me to the same answer: question.

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<sup>4</sup> Royd Climenhaga, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, *Golden Lion Awarded*, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM6wp9zLux0&t=185s>.

<sup>6</sup> Interview *Kyoro Prize*, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSvqC3oKiq8&t=6s>.

Does the question refer to the inexistent work “technique” of Pina Bausch? Does the question generate creation? Does it germinate an already existing kernel?

The connections resulted from the association of the multiple pieces of information may generate a systematized working method. The young creators of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, characterized by a more and more prominent agitation, or by an equally prominent negligence, need a guide. Along with a well outlined technique and intense physical training, choreographers/dancers need the naturalness coming from emotion, the naturalness of a simple gesture. They need to experience the profoundness, for it offers life to the true meanings. This “guide” is Pina Bausch’s working method, which we discover, if we pay attention, in many interviews, video materials, confessions of the performers and of her collaborators. It is a sort of a guide of spirituality which leads, through study and patience, to enlightenment, and, in our case, to a potentially limitless inspiration.

I had the intention and even insisted to learn more of the yet to be researched information about the Pina Bausch choreography, and also about the person Philippine Bausch, through an email exchange with Ismael Dia, the manager of the Wuppertal archive. I could understand his at least momentary inability to offer more information, but I have appreciated his involvement and effort to find a few solutions, such as Pina Bausch’s online archive<sup>7</sup>. Although I have repeatedly accessed it, I admit that, in the rush after information, I missed a few of Pina Bausch’s confessions, which actually represent the essence of creation. Thus, we shall rediscover her childhood, her passions, her desire to dance, and will answer many of the questions that we have asked ourselves.

The capacity of observing, of analyzing emotions and interactions has developed since her childhood.

Even the restaurant in our hotel was highly interesting for me. My parents had to work a great deal and weren’t able to look after me. In the evenings, when I was actually supposed to go to bed, I would hide under the tables and simply stay there. I found what I saw and heard very exciting: friendship, love, and quarrels – simply everything that you can experience in a local restaurant like this. I think this stimulated my imagination a great deal. I have always been a spectator. Talkative, I certainly wasn’t. I was more silent...

“The question” surely represents the working method and is the personal print of Pina Bausch, who has gone through a whole process of transition.

Then, at the beginning – I did in fact have a large group and in the rehearsals, I was afraid to say, “I don’t know,” or “let me see.” I wanted to say, “OK, we’ll do this and this.” I planned everything very

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.pinabausch.org/archives>

meticulously but soon realized that, apart from this planned work; I was also interested by completely different things that had nothing to do with my plans. Little by little I knew... that I had to decide: do I follow a plan or do I get involved with something which I don't know where it will take me. New was also the way of working with 'questions.' Even in *Bluebeard* I had started to pose questions for some roles. Later in the *Macbeth* piece *He Takes Her by the Hand and Leads Her into the Castle, the Others Follow*, in Bochum; I then developed this way of working further. There were four dancers, four actors, one singer...and a confectioner. Here of course I couldn't come up with a movement phrase but had to start somewhere else. So I asked them the questions, which I had asked myself. That way, a way of working originated from a necessity. The "questions" are there for approaching a topic quite carefully. It's a very open way of working but again a very precise one. It leads me to many things, which alone, I wouldn't have thought about.

The same as every creator whose approaches are different, unacted, Pina Bausch was rejected by the public at the beginning of her choreographic career.

The first years were very difficult. Again and again spectators would leave the auditorium slamming doors, while others whistled or booed. Sometimes we had telephone calls in the rehearsal room with bad wishes. During one piece I went into the auditorium with four people to protect me. I was scared. One newspaper wrote in its review: "The music is very beautiful. You can simply shut your eyes." The orchestra and chorus also made things very difficult for me. I wanted so much to develop something with the chorus. They turned down every idea. In the end I managed to have the chorus singing from the boxes – from amongst the audience – that was then very nice.

Pina Bausch's relation with her performers was special. She did not treat them as subordinates, but as partners, as undrained sources of information.

I love my dancers, each in another way. It is close to my heart that you can really get to know these people on stage. I find it beautiful, when at the end of a performance you feel a little bit closer to them, because they have showed something of themselves. That is something very real. When I am engaging somebody, surely I hope that I have found a good dancer, but besides that it is something unknown. There is only the feeling of something, which I madly want to know more about. I try to support each of them in finding out things for themselves. For a few, it goes very quickly; for others it takes years, until they suddenly flourish. For some, who have already danced for a long time, it is almost like a second spring, so that I am really amazed, what all appears. Instead of becoming less, it becomes more and more.

The artistic sacrifice that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper is found in the choreographer's sayings and feelings.

Actually, the whole time I only wanted to dance. I had to dance, simply had to dance. That was the language with which I was able to express myself. Even in my first choreographed pieces in Wuppertal, I was thinking of course that I would be dancing the role of the victim in *Sacre* and in *Iphigenie* the part of Iphigenie, for example. These roles were all written with my body. But the responsibility as choreographer had always held back the urge to dance. And this is how it came that I actually have passed on to others this love, which I have inside me, this great desire to dance.<sup>8</sup>

The influence of this choreographic personality is profoundly marked in the history of dance, as it represents the basis of dance theatricality. The work exercises characterized by the access of senses with the aid of questions, sincere and natural interactions, can be "assembled", thus giving birth to a new work method. The study of this topic has the purpose of constructing and testing this method, and of analyzing the results obtained, with the hope that they will provide at least a scrap of what Pina Bausch represented.

(Translated by Andi Sâsâiac)

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<sup>8</sup> All the fragments have been cited from the article *What moves me* from the archive: <https://www.pinabausch.org/post/what-moves-me>.

Annexes



Dominique Mercy in the performance *The Window Washer* – Pina Bausch



Ruth Amarante and Julie Shanahan in the performance *Palermo Palermo* – Pina Bausch





Silvia Farias Heredia in the performance *Rough Cut* – Pina Bausch



Julie Anne Stanzak in the performance *Carnations* – Pina Bausch



Pina Bausch in the performance *After Zero* – Pina Bausch