

PINA, QUEEN OF THE DEEP

FEATURES

VALERIE LAWSON

A woman of few words breaks her silence for VALERIE LAWSON.

PINA Bausch is a beautiful woman. She is also obsessive, exhausting, elusive, occasionally infuriating and magnetic. This German queen of dance theatre fixes her subjects with deep-socketed blue eyes and, well, they melt. Dancers fall in love. So do audiences, who greet her work with ritualistic slow clapping. On their feet. Twenty-minute curtain calls. Pina grips her dancers' hands. She gazes into the auditorium, her pale face a mixture of gratitude and exhaustion.

Her setting is Wuppertal, a rainy city in the Ruhr Valley, where she has run her company for a quarter of a century. It's not far from Cologne, but unlike that city, has no awe-inspiring cathedral. In fact there's no reason at all to visit except for business (chemicals, pesticides), to boggle over the mechanics of the unique overhead railway, or to see Bausch.

I went there in May, primed for the best and worst. A former dancer with Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, Australian-born Jo Ann Endicott, had promised on the phone: "You meet Pina, you fall in love." A few days later, I asked ballet superstar Sylvie Guillem if she had ever worked with Bausch. She shook her head. "Pina? You work for her ... I think it's like joining a cult."

There was no knowing how a meeting would go. Some had warned that Bausch never answered direct questions. Perhaps a few crumbs might be forthcoming over supper with lots of coffee and cigarettes. The one certainty, clear from watching rehearsal videos of her company, was that Bausch would be chain-smoking Camels or Lucky Strikes.

After the build-up came the reality. We talked in a meeting room at the theatre, two days after the premiere of her latest work, *Wiesenland* (Meadowland). The opening night had not gone well Bausch was still making structural changes to the piece which was then without a title. She wore black and sat, impassively, waiting for the questions. Her face has been accurately described as "an early Picasso" long, white, chiselled. Her slender fingers were never without a cigarette. Questions on her work were met with a disconcerting silence. A very long silence.

At last came the right question and the sun came out. The change was as unexpected as it was a relief. The transformation from an anguished 59-year-old into a blithe young woman arrived when I asked how she felt when she went to dance class for the first time, as a child.

"I loved to dance because I was scared to speak. When I was moving, I could feel."
Other questions brought out a third Bausch, not anxious, not nostalgic, but tough. "I am," she says, "somebody who never gives up."

That is probably her greatest strength and greatest weakness. Australian dancer Michael Whaites, who worked with her for four years, knows she is "obsessive like any genius".

Genius is taking it a bit far, but Bausch does matter. She's much more than a choreographer creating in a rarefied field. Her work has influenced many other directors and companies as far apart philosophically and geographically as Lloyd Newson's DV8 from England and Lin Hwai-Min's Cloud Gate from Taiwan. Coincidentally, all three companies are appearing in the Olympic Arts Festival, with the Bausch company staging Masurca Fogo.

Bausch's productions blend speech, song, circus tricks, gymnastics, brilliant visual images, and monumental sets. Often, dance plays only a supporting role. Her works refer to Bertolt Brecht's theatre of alienation, the political cabarets of the Weimar Republic, American musicals, and the expressionist dance history of Germany, in particular, the choreography and philosophy of Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman.

Audiences react with a shock of recognition because her dance dramas seem to reach into the subconscious. Each is a patchwork quilt of episodes all to do with love, bodies, and alienation, the search for fulfilment, desire and thwarted desire. The German critic Manuel Brug sums up her philosophy as "the interpretation of the soul and the battle of the sexes".

Surely all the praise she has won along the way is enough to reassure her? But no, says Bausch, "it has been beautiful, and I am very, very happy. But when I do a new piece it doesn't help me. Nothing helps me. Not what I have already done. It is done. Each time, you are a beginner." Bausch tapped out a cigarette and lit the next. "I want to give up, actually, but I don't ... It's complicated. It all takes so much strength. I'm so fragile. It's emotional. I get little sleep, you try to sleep but you can't." She laughed but looked wretched. "I am thinking too much. It's like my head is in the way. It seems simple, but I make it so complicated.

"It gets worse when I am coming out of a work. There comes a point when I think 'This is the last time. I am never going to do this again'. And afterwards, you think 'I should not stop now. I should right away do a new piece'. I go to all the extremes, deep down ..." Her voice fades away. "It's so terrible, horrible, you go down, down, down, but you can't give up, because the dancers are always there and expect you to do something."

Who does she talk to at this point?

"At that moment, nobody."

It's no wonder she's exhausted. Whaites says that the company works from 10am to 10pm every day in the three-month lead-up to each premiere. Outside, in the rehearsal room above Wuppertal's McDonald's, there are few distractions. Bausch says it's the perfect place to create. The climate encourages a certain work ethic, and Wuppertal (population 400,000) is relatively rich. Nearby are the headquarters of the chemical firm Bayer, which was founded in Wuppertal and maintains a pesticide factory in the town. Wuppertal is also the hometown of the German Federal President and Head of State, Johannes Rau. Bausch's troupe attracts generous subsidies from the city itself, and from the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, totalling 3.7 million deutschemarks (\$3 million) a year.

Yet behind this small and serious city, there is an element of the surreal, summed up by a fascinating piece of engineering, the century-old Schwebbahn, a monorail suspension system once described as a "flying millipede". Years ago, a circus elephant called Tuffi, on a promotional tour of the town, thrilled the locals when he survived a jump from one of the carriages into the slow moving Wupper below.

Pina (short for Philippine) was born nearby in Solingen in 1940, three years before the Battle of the Ruhr. Her parents ran a modest restaurant with a small hotel attached, and sent their little girl to ballet class.

At 14, she studied at the Essen Folkwang School, directed by Germany's most influential choreographer,

Jooss, known, Bausch says, as "Papa Jooss".

"He was like a papa, in a way, very, very kind, very, very warm, with a lot of humour, very much joy for things, people. A very beautiful man," she says. "He knew so much about history, music. His school was special, with an opera department, acting, pantomime, graphic arts, photography, sculpture, all together." Bausch became interested in "forms, materials" which later influenced her distinctive sets, such as the sea of flowers in her work *Nelken* (Carnations), the heaped leaves of *Bluebird*, the water-flooded stage of *Arien*, or the mounds of peat in her *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring). "I also saw Jose Limon's company [from the United States] in Dusseldorf and I was really very impressed."

When she graduated, Bausch won a grant to study at the Juilliard School in New York, where her teachers were the choreographers Limon, Paul Taylor and Antony Tudor.

Tudor, a tortured man, cold with most dancers, was "not tough with me, but very kind. He was very beautiful, a great man. There was a reason if he was rude. He believed if people were too comfortable they couldn't dance".

Without prompting, she added: "I don't do this kind of thing."

In 1962, Bausch returned to Germany, joining Jooss as a soloist at the Folkwang Ballet where she succeeded him as director. Eleven years later, she was asked to become director of municipal Wuppertal Dance Theatre. In the beginning, things were tough. Audiences didn't understand her choreographic language and dancers rebelled at the lack of dancing. Bausch was not deterred. She found an ally in Rolf Borzik, a designer, whom she married. He died in 1980. Their son, also called Rolf, is studying music.

Bausch now lives with Ronald Kay, a poet. He looks after her, says Whaites, does the cooking. But the two are thought to lead rather separate lives.

I wanted to know more, but suspected that a Mona Lisa-like smile would be the result of more direct questioning. As Whaites says, "she plays her cards close to her chest". For him, that proved to be a sticking point.

"One day," he recalled, "I told Pina 'I feel you know all about me' but I was sad because I knew nothing of her. I was scared of her reaction. She says she felt the same way." But Bausch told him she had "no time to give".

It's easy, though, for her to see into the souls of her dancers. Since 1978, she has been working on her question-and-answer technique. Bausch asks her dancers to enact a mood or desire, and, from their responses, she builds a collage.

The questions are "very difficult to answer", says Whaites. Among them:

- * Copy someone else's tic.
- * Do something you are ashamed of.
- * Write your name with movement.
- * What would you do with a corpse?
- * Move your favourite body part.

* How do you behave when you've lost something?

Sometimes, of course, the technique does not succeed, and the resulting piece is derivative of her own earlier works. Critics were tough on Bausch's latest for this reason. In the newspaper Die Welt, Brug wrote: "Seldom has a piece from Pina Bausch been so nice, cheerful and so meaningless, because it fails to disturb." Wiesenland had "leafed through the formidable pattern book of the Bausch collection, choosing, trying out, and returning to previous pieces".

Like many of her works, Wiesenland featured water everywhere. It's danced in front of a giant green mossy bank, dripping with rivulets of trickling water. Water is also poured from buckets, into miniature baths, from hoses, from bottles into mouths. Men holding vessels washed women who blew smoke from cigarettes through the stream of water. A lot of mopping up was required. The sexual allusions are obvious, but not overdone. Bausch treats sex lightly, but takes romance very seriously.

The dancers approached the front rows and expressed their hopes or fears. They asked audience members if they were in love, how many children they had, if they loved the person next to them, or, if not, if they would like to go backstage with the dancer? This kind of work is confrontational for both audience and dancers, but then if they work for Bausch, they are already stripped of their defences and prepared to take risks.

Reflecting the spirituality of Bausch, many are Christian or Buddhist, says Whaites, who is one of four Australian dancers to have done well in her company. The others are choreographer Meryl Tankard, Sydney-born Endicott, a member of the Australian Ballet before leaving for Europe in the early 1970s, and current company member Julie Shanahan, from Adelaide, who seems to be a kind of alter ego for Bausch, often dressing in glamorous evening clothes yet speaking quite directly of her feelings to the audience in a strong Australian accent.

Woven throughout Bausch's 34 works is the use of dress to send sexual messages. She often portrays women in vampy, girly clothes, with pointy-toed and stiletto-heeled shoes, and in long, sweeping, silky dresses. Other signatures are her love of romantic pop songs, the ritual of cigarette smoking, and social dance, especially the use of snaking dance lines. Much of this seems to recall her girlhood of the 1940s and 1950s.

But Bausch's inspiration does not come only from within. Since 1986, she's been staging co-productions collaborative efforts made with the input and influence of other cities, mainly European. Her company bases itself for about a month in a city, with the dancers absorbing the atmosphere for ideas to feed Bausch. Wiesenland was a co-production with Budapest, while Masurca Fogo arose from the company's 1998 visit to Lisbon. Says Whaites, "it reflects Lisbon's seafaring past, its adventurers and explorers". The title Masurca Fogo refers to a simple dance from Cape Verde, the islands off west Africa, a former Portuguese colony.

Before Bausch choreographed this work, she asked the dancers to express themselves through various phrases, among them: "something forbidden", "water and stone", "something about love", "a long deep tone", "first impressions", and "write the word sunshine with your body".

Bausch still has her own yearnings, among them, to work with dancers in classical companies, to "learn a lot in other countries. I would love to learn. But my wishes are much bigger than my strength. I just hope I am strong enough to do a bit more of what I wish".

But it is hard to see her leaving the security of Wuppertal permanently, ever. "I never changed anything in my house. Every year I would think 'I am leaving tomorrow'. It was like I was just passing by. But I never had time to think of anything else. We just went rolling on."

The Bausch company's Masurca Fogo is at the Capitol Theatre from August 30.