

Choreographer Pina Bausch and Incarnation



Federico Gambarini/European Pressphoto Agency
Pina Bausch in 2007.

Pina Bausch, the choreographer and exponent of the Neo-Expressionist form of German dance known as Tanztheater, died Tuesday in Wuppertal. She was 68.

The Wuppertal Dance Theater in western Germany, where she had served as director, announced the death. It did not give the cause, but said Ms. Bausch's "unexpectedly fast" death came five days after a cancer diagnosis, the Associated Press reported.

In a review of Ms. Bausch's "Bamboo Blues" that was performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December, Alastair Macaulay wrote that her work could be "strikingly picturesque, always fluid in its comings and goings" as it "switches between episodes of sensual impulsiveness; coy, catwalklike audience-awareness; rushing scenes of harrowing need or anxiety; and diverse aspects of melancholia."

One of the world's most influential choreographers, Pina Bausch's work lives on after her death last year.

Members of her German dance company are determined to preserve her legacy by taking part in a mini Bausch season at the Barbican theatre in London.

It is an unusual show - performed exclusively by non-professionals - and the BBC's Jasbir Saund went to watch the performance.

Pina Bausch created many pieces throughout her career inspired by her travels to Turkey ("Nefés"), Portugal ("Masurca Fogo"), the United States ("Nur Du (Only You)") and several other countries. During her company's last appearance in New York, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December, she presented "Bamboo Blues." which grew out of her time in India.

In an interview before that piece opened at BAM, the elusive choreographer talked about how the many places she visited influenced her movement.



(mp3)

Her wild freedom and imagination, bound by a remarkable discipline, constantly reminded us that the frame of reference for the theatre need not be what we think it is. She had her dancers speak, but we in the classical theatre have yet to really use personal movement. I remember her first work in London: 1980. Those of us who were lucky enough to see this phenomenon marvelled at her dancers, who danced from themselves. Their narratives were the stuff of the evening. Their dreams, sorrows and anecdotes mutated in a rhythmic grace, universalised by their internationalism.

She never settled on one style, which kept the audience enthralled. Sometimes a cross-dressed dancer would break into the most classical movement or Peter Papst, her designer, would have a huge wall fall and nearly break through the floor of the theatre. We were being shown that there is a boundlessness to our vanity, our folly and our inventiveness.

One one of her last visits to the UK, Michael Morris – the producer and Pina's champion – took us on a boat ride down the Thames. I felt, as we approached the Thames barrier, that she would be just as happy in a rehearsal room, as she quietly took out an ashtray that had its own lid. The wind roared and she delicately flicked her ash into the pot. Later on, I had supper with her and asked her plans for rest. She said: "I have so much to do I cannot rest." I think this is the sign that she knew her purpose went beyond the company and its success of the evening. She has been helping us catch up with what we missed for some years, remounting and touring her many pieces.

Her dancers are the loveliest bunch; they have mystery and innocence in their great performances and selves. She washes clean the human soul on and off the stage. She shows in her scenarios our addiction to causing and receiving pain and our ecstasy at being human. When you see the work – the repetition of human love gestures, aborted wishes, rejection, inadequacy, desolation and absurdity – you still come out thrilled to be a member of the human race.

There has been no one like her. Her monumental effect has yet to be really felt. Without her, not just her dancers are bereft. Something terrible has happened. I hope she has left us enough that we can incorporate her indelible mark, and move all the performing arts forward stylishly.

Fiona Shaw 6.7.09 The Guardian

Dancing, dancing,

The body as text

Rhythmic movements and cadences

That tell a story albeit tortured

Of modern man and woman

Of desire and pain

Aging and fractured lives.

Watching the dances I felt as if they were telling me about my deepest self

What an inspired choreographer

What a prophet!

If the body can be read this way

Beyond words

Rather rhythm and music

Movement and gesture

Then the silence of incarnation

Can be manifest here too.

The divine within man and woman

Expresses itself through the body as text

And the words and sentences are acted out silently.

Every day of Pesach we say the Hallel prayer, which contains a description of the exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, and many other miracles connected with these events. "The sea saw and fled, the Jordan turned backward. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like young sheep." (Psalms 114:3) What quality do the mountains have that causes them to skip, and why do the waters flee?

...where all souls share a common root and are like brothers to one another...

Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi explains that these two miracles represent two kinds of service to G-d: one motivated by fear, the other by love. The sea, like a servant, flees when the king reveals himself because he is afraid that the king is displeased with him. The mountains, like a loyal minister, are joyful when the king arrives and greets him, eager to carry out his every command. This joy is expressed by the skipping of the mountains which represent the world of Atzilut, where all souls share a common root and are like brothers to one another and to G-d.

The concept of the source of the souls in Atzilut is connected with another miracle that occurred during the parting of the Red Sea. The Jewish People walking on dry land in the middle of the sea is similar to the way their souls rose in the mind of G-d. How are these two things connected? According to the Arizal, the Seventh Day of Pesach, a commemoration of the parting of the Red Sea, is also the day when the souls of the Jewish People were "born" - or brought down from Atzilut. True, they already had souls, but this event was the revelation of the higher level of the souls.

How did this "birth" take place?

As mentioned above, all souls have their source in Atzilut where there is a complete unity among them and with G-d. This level of unity is ideal, but for a soul to exist as a separate entity and to be born, it must descend to the lower level of Beriya through malchut. This process is similar to that of speech.

Before one speaks, the words are not yet formed...

Before one speaks, the words are not yet formed, but the idea of what is going to be said is unified in the mind. Even when the idea of the words begins to emerge, this idea is still one idea. Once the words descend to a lower level and leave the mouth, they are

separate from the intellect. Malchut represents the mouth in the process of speech, and it also represents the sea, the part of the physical world which is concealed from view under the water.

The concealment by the aspect of malchut is necessary for any birth or creation. Created things do not see or hear the words of G-d as the words are creating them; if they could perceive these words, their existence would be nullified to the words, just as rays of the sun can hardly be distinguished from the sun itself. Even the angels in the higher worlds understand clearly that they are created from the speech of G-d, and this knowledge fills them with awe and love for their Creator. However, the process of their creation is concealed from them also in the aspect of malchut.

One can reach higher levels by "skipping"...

The concealment period or "pregnancy" of the souls begins on Shemini Atzeret. The souls are brought from highest aspect within Atzilut to malchut of Atzilut where they remain for seven months until they descend on the seventh day of Pesach. Just as the human fetus receives nourishment from its mother while it grows in the womb, so the souls receive their nourishment from malchut of Atzilut. The souls remain there for seven months until they descend on the seventh day of Pesach. When we ask for rain on Shemini Atzeret, we are also asking for a successful "birth" of the souls seven months later.

What energy propels the actual birth and creates "contractions"? The energy must come from a higher level than Atzilut in order to "shake up" Atzilut and release the souls. This energy is the light from the first letter "hei" in G-d's name and serves as a catalyst for the "birth". The impact of this energy from beyond the levels of the worlds is like the supernaturally strong winds that G-d sent to split the sea. The energy that propelled the winds is from the encompassing light and breaks the sea, which conceals the supreme levels of G-dliness. When the encompassing light split the sea, the mountains, representing the sefirot of chesed, gevura and tiferet, began to dance, since these attributes are above the level of the sea, which represents concealment.

The skipping of the mountains shows us that, at such a time, one can reach higher levels by "skipping" from the lowest to the highest levels instead of merely "stepping", progressing one level after another in sequence. The seventh day of Pesach, then, is like a day of renewal for the souls of Israel, a day when any Jew can "skip" to his or her highest spiritual potential.¹

The dance then represents skipping because the act represents a connection to a higher level of divine light than the hierarchical step work from level to level. The notion of skipping or *dilug* applied to God's ability to over reach and ignore the facts on the ground because of His love for Israel and skip over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt with the death of the firstborn. This skipping is used by the rebbe to apply to the spiritual movement as opposed to the step by step work of the spirit as is usual. The opposition of the sea which flees representing the concealment of the divine light as opposed to its revelation and the ensuing response of dancing.

In Likutei Mehoran I 54, Reb Nachman speaks about joy, music and dance:

"It was through music that prophetic spirit rested upon the prophets (see II Kings 3:15) . A musical instrument is a vessel containing air (ruach=spirit). The air in the instrument is a mixture of good and bad. On the one hand there is the anxious, depressed spirit – a bad spirit, as we find in the case of King Saul: "and an evil spirit terrified him" (I Samuel 16:14) . On the other hand, there is a good spirit, as it is written: "Let Your good spirit lead me in an even land" (Psalms 143:10) . This good spirit is the spirit of prophecy: holy spirit. But when good and bad are mixed up, it is impossible to receive true prophecy.

"The musician playing the instrument must gather the good spirit – the spirit of prophecy – and separate it from the sad, depressed spirit. He must understand music in order to know how to sift out and gather up the parts of the spirit and put them together in order to construct the melody, namely the joy, in order to build the good, prophetic spirit, which is the opposite of the depressed spirit. He must move his hand up and down the instrument in order to channel the joy and bring it to perfection.

¹ From Yehoshua Metzinger's translation

And when the prophet hears a melody from an expert musician, he receives a spirit of prophecy, the very spirit that the musician gathered with his hand and separated from the depressed spirit. Thus the attendants of the depressed King Saul said to him of the young David: "And he will play with his hand and it will be good for you" (I Samuel 16:16) .

"Accordingly, by playing the musical instrument with one's hand, one sifts, purifies and elevates the good spirit and separates it from the bad. This is the way to overcome the evil spirit of folly that seeks to spoil and upset the good, prophetic spirit. The bad spirit is dissipated through the joy that comes through the hand of the player.

"For the root of the power of the spirit of folly lies in sadness and depression. Therefore the only way to receive a holy spirit of prophecy is through joy – the joy created by the hand of the player. Thus, "It was when the musician played that the hand of God was upon him" (II Kings 3:15) ; "and he will play with his hand and it will be good for you". The player who has the power of the hand can sift out the good spirit from the bad and thereby subdue the evil spirit.

And in I:41...

"Dancing for joy over a mitzvah is a wonderful thing. There are times when it is a mitzvah to drink wine, as on Shabbat and festivals, or at weddings and other religious celebrations. If you drink on such occasions, do not drink to excess but in moderation. Your intention should be for the sake of Heaven, to experience the true joy of Israel , which is to rejoice in God, who chose us from all the nations.

"As the joy begins to radiate within you, it will spread to your legs until you literally start to dance for joy. This will banish the forces of impurity, which take hold of the legs, mitigating harsh judgments and enabling you to receive blessings.

"The fervor with which you dance is "a fire offering, a sweet savor to the Lord" (Numbers 28:8) . However, when a person dances with the heat of the evil inclination, this is a

“strange fire” (Leviticus 10:1) , while the wine he drinks is the “wine of drunkenness”, which allows the forces of impurity to take hold .

“Holy dance has the same power to sweeten harsh judgments as a redemption performed by a Tzaddik.”

I believe that the power of music and dance that these zaddikim insist upon is found in the bringing of the spirit into the body itself which reflects upon the *the body-as-temple* notion. The body is the very housing for the soul which, once incarnated in the flesh, transforms it in a mysterious way. However this needs to be made conscious. The ritual acts of Torah and mitzvot in performance make conscious the need to include the body itself in holy acts of ritual meaning. Music and dance also have the power to bring down into the flesh itself the sacred consciousness of the soul.

In our spiritual recovery we too need to become more aware of this dimension of incarnation of soul. Unfortunately our upbringing culture and western education has done much to split our heads from the body and we walk around as disembodied intellects. In our healing work the use of music and dance as therapy is vital to bringing back the body into consciousness, the body in sickness and illness, the body in addiction and the body that is being “inscribed” pathologically by self-mutilation.

Watching those elderly dancers across the stage in Bausch's dance troupe I was moved by her instinct and diagnostic skills. She seemed to have read modern man and his disconnectedness from self and others and in her graceful way brought to consciousness in the mode of dance how we must heal this splitting within.