

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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Body Language

Pina Bausch



I had my first Pina Bausch experience about six years ago when a friend bought me a ticket to *Nelken* (Carnation). I knew very little about the German choreographer and former dancer, and in truth was expecting to count the minutes until we could escape to a nearby bar. But by the time the curtain came down, the last thing I wanted was for the performance to end. I had witnessed a world that, somewhat bizarrely, made sense of my own and yet left me wanting more. Asiatians chased men in floating dresses through a field of pink carnations while a semi-naked accordionist re-appeared with the regularity of a broken clock; red-lipped women exploded with doubt and desire in clouds of chiffon (love in Bausch's world is more complicated than any bureaucracy; dance less a solution to heartache than its catharsis). Time was vague; the dresses might have been old-fashioned but intimations of the future lurked in the wings like a friend in need of advice. Scenes unfolded like fireworks, but the explosions were human. Eclectic music saturated an already lush atmosphere with an exhausted yet unresigned beauty. I had never seen anything so nakedly and wildly imaginative. Who could be bored?

Masurca Fogo (Fiery Mazurka), commissioned for the Lisbon Festival in 1998, was recently performed by Bausch's company, the Tanztheater Wuppertal, in London for the first time. The company's previous appearance in the UK was two years ago, with the melancholic and mesmerizing *Viktor* (1986). *Masurca Fogo* is Bausch's tribute to the Portuguese capital and its culture. (She has also paid homage to Budapest, Palermo, Brazil and California - apparently Japan is next.) The piece, however, is not simply a homage to a specific place, but also Bausch's love song to the sea and the city, the head and the heart. Bausch once said that what interests her is not how people move but what moves people. As a result *Masurca Fogo* is wildly moody; in the blink of an eye it swerves between being funny, impossibly surprising and unflinchingly sentimental - for the grand finale, for example, couples, awash with projections of crashing waves dance a slow waltz with production-line precision while they tenderly undress each other. As one by one they fall asleep to KD Lang's version of 'The Air that I Breathe', the light dims and the waves segue into images of vivid blooming flowers, which drift over their slumbering bodies.

The music accompanying *Masurca Fogo* includes Lang, Duke Ellington, the Alexander Balanescu Quartet's interpretations of Kraftwerk, and traditional Portuguese music. The set design, by Peter Pabst, is simple for Bausch: an arrangement of grey rocks set against a white stage. In a series of loosely linked vignettes Portugal is envisioned as a culture of street and beach, driving rhythms and surreal situations: tightly structured scenes which illuminate an unstructured world. Mermaids are given swimming lessons; a woman dressed in red balloons tells long-winded stories to a group of men who, bored and horny pop her balloons with their cigarettes to reveal her nakedness; a man tosses roses at an indifferent woman; a group of people dance joyfully in an impromptu beach hut, which subsequently becomes an element in a projection of stampeding cattle; a walrus shuffles across the stage and a woman attempts to teach a hen to fly. Yet, for all this madness, it is the relationships between people which are paramount; love, lunacy and joy jostle equally for attention with a kind of wilful camaraderie.



The performers in Bausch's company have body types and ages that range from the devilishly youthful to the vigorously middle-aged. Although all of the dancers are physically splendid, wobbly breasts, short legs and big bottoms are not uncommon; occasionally women partner men half their size. (These kinds of bodies may be the norm in life, but are still unconventional in dance.) Greying men move with elegance and energy; young men bounce off each other like acrobats; dancers often smoke; and kisses are a desperate currency. Hair is flung, flattened or soaked in water with near-mystical significance. Words are employed for emphasis and deflection, never explanation; reason is tossed from bodies with the disdain the dictates of the heart demands.

Bausch knows how to elucidate the feelings we find difficult to express with the simplest of gestures - a scream, a sigh, a sidelong glance, the flexing of a foot, a leap through space. Imagine a dance which has been blown apart and then lovingly reassembled by a Cubist with a good ear, great rhythm and a concrete poet's turn of phrase and you might be getting close to what it is like to experience her theatre. She dignifies illogic and normalizes chaos as not only inevitable but bearable if embraced and thus transcended. To witness such a celebration is not only hypnotizingly beautiful, but reassuringly humane. Bausch knows that what is deeply felt is also, in terms of the language with which we are familiar, often inarticulate. And as we all know, when you're lost for words, something else has take their place.

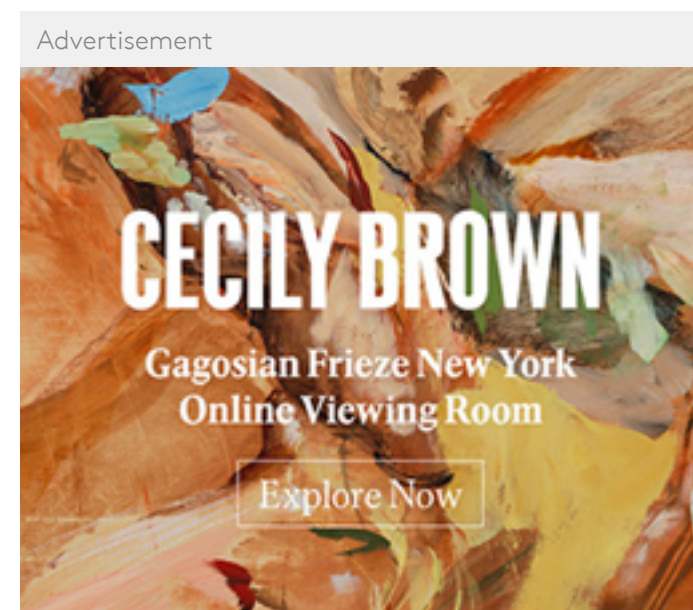
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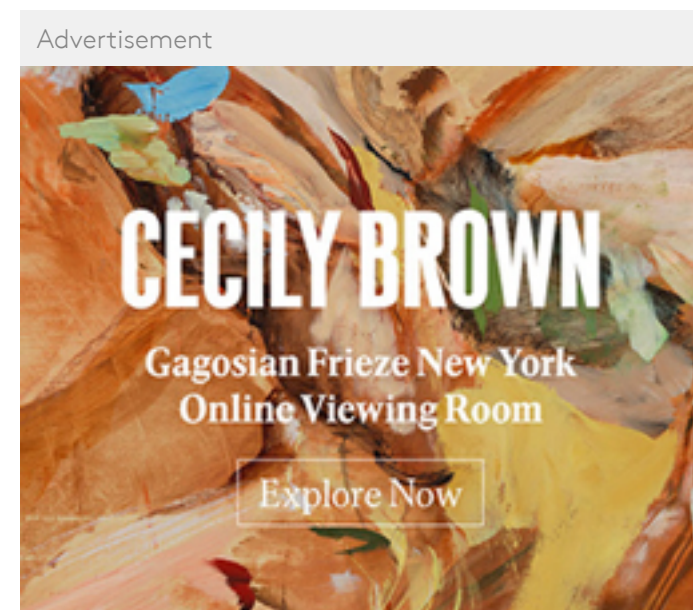
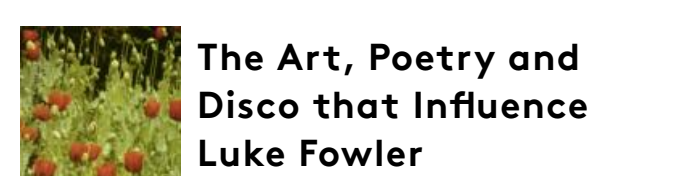
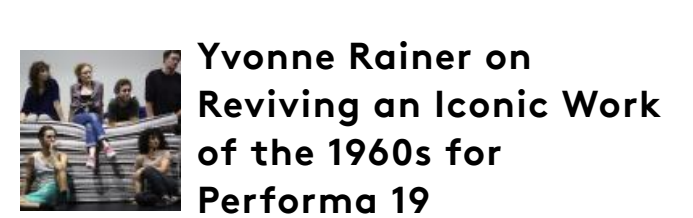
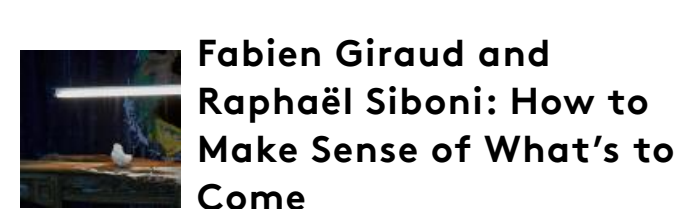
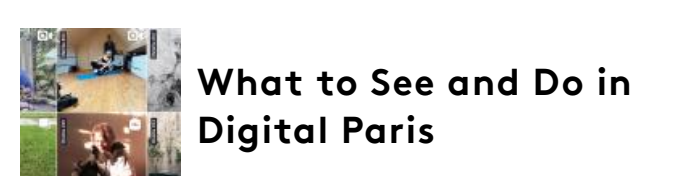
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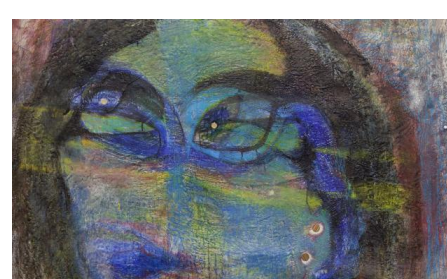


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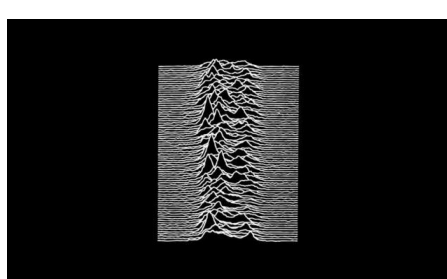
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