Dancing Pina Bausch

Daniel Larlham

The only thing I did all the time was watching people. I have only seen human relations or I have tried to see them and talk about them. That's what I am interested in. I don't know anything more important.

—Pina Bausch (in Hoghe 1980:65)

I want to be a part of it, you see. If I weren't allowed to sit in on the performance I'd feel I were no longer part of it; I would feel offended. It's all part and parcel—the piece, the company and myself. I simply have to be there. The others are on stage—I'm there watching as always; somehow I feel it's my performance too.

—Pina Bausch (in Servos 1984:237)

It was just after 4:00 PM Central European Time on 30 June 2009. A number of us attending the international theatre festival “The World as Place of Truth,” hosted by the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw, Poland, had gathered for a film screening at the festival headquarters. Casting my eyes about for a seat, my gaze fell on a young woman staring downward with moistened eyes at a text message on her cell phone. Her companion, who noticed my querying look, relayed the news that Pina Bausch, the gracious and soft-spoken revolutionary who brought contemporary dance into radical reengagement with everyday human experience, had passed away earlier that afternoon.1

Figure 1. Thusnelda Mercy in Pina Bausch’s Nefés, Wroclaw Opera House, June 2009. (Photo by Francesco Galli)

1. Bausch passed away in a Wuppertal hospital just five days after being diagnosed with cancer.

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A curtain billowed suddenly as a violent wind whipped up, and through a propped side exit of the auditorium I saw what had been a gorgeous summer day transformed by a sudden downpour.

The Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch was performing Nefés, a revived work, at the festival. Bausch herself was supposed to have been present in Wroclaw (she typically traveled with her troupe), but her sudden illness had prevented this. The company was scheduled to give their last performance that evening—also the final night of the festival—and I had a ticket. Surely the show would be canceled. Or would it? A festival representative passed around the word that the company had decided to proceed with the performance.

Two hours later, a mood of hushed anticipation hung over the Wroclaw Opera House foyer and orchestra. In this day of online news updates and cell phone internet access—technological complements to the efficient word-of-mouth network typical of a festival setting—it was clear that the vast majority of the audience members were aware of Bausch's death. Many had, like myself, surely also heard something about the production from friends at the festival who had seen one of the two preceding showings of Nefés: apparently, the atmosphere of the piece was sensual, playful, and light—refreshment for festivalgoers who had endured a fortnight of productions generally exploring the darker territories of human experience. How could Bausch's dancers possibly conjure such an atmosphere on this night of all nights? The house lights fell, beat-driven music swelled from the sound system, a well-muscled male dancer wrapped in a white bath towel padded onto the stage, and the performance began.

2. Nefés means “breath” in Turkish.

3. As Bausch and her company members often emphasized in interviews, these experiences of place included those of being welcomed, embraced, and shown around an unfamiliar locale by congenial hosts—key determinants, no doubt, of the much noted tonal warmth of the residency pieces. One of the main objectives of her recent productions, according to Bausch, was to make a reciprocal gesture, “giving back some of the beauty we have received” from the people and places the company encountered during its residencies and tours (in Ben-Itzak 2004).

4. In the interim, Nefés was presented at Paris's Théâtre de la Ville in 2004 and New York’s Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2006, among other venues.

A Tanztheater Utopia

The Tanztheater Wuppertal began developing Nefés during a three-week residency in Istanbul in 2002, and the production premiered the following year at the International Istanbul Festival. As with Bausch’s other “residency pieces” (Climenhaga 2009:26), Istanbul provided not a subject or theme but an environment for generative encounter: the content of the piece emerged out of the company members’ confrontations with the newness and difference of an unfamiliar place and culture. Nefés was created during the aftermath of 9/11 and the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, but rather than absorbing the seismic violence of this dark time the production offered a kind of antidote to dejection and despair. With Bausch’s other works of recent years, Nefés forms part of “an effort to remind us it could be different” (Bausch in Ben-Itzak 2004)—to affirm the human capacity to transcend the thoughtless agonism often taken to be a composite element of our “nature.” Nefés received a mixed reception in Istanbul; some critics protested that the performance offered a skewed, negative perspective on contemporary Turkish life by focusing unfairly on dynamics of patriarchal domination (see Öztürkmen 2003), but six years later—and in a different performance context—the piece had unmoored from its site of creation and existed on its own terms. Except for a brief program note on its generative circumstances and a handful of sequences evoking a bath (Turkish bathhouse) setting, no explicit traces of the piece’s culturally particular genesis remained.

Quite at odds with the opinions of the Turkish critics, reviewers elsewhere have been most struck by the production's sensuality, joie de vivre, and playful humor. While such elements were certainly present in Bausch’s iconic pieces of the 1970s and ’80s—like Café...
shifting artist need not grow ever darker and that the artistic credo “brutality is truth, truth brutality” might not sum up all we need know about life within the world of others.

Like all of Bausch’s dance-theatre works since the late ’70s, Nefés unfolds in a seamless flow of scenes, scenarios, and dance sequences montaged together with an associative logic. Sometimes these scenes cross-fade into each other with gradual overlap; at other moments they shift with lighting abruptness as Bausch’s dancers dash in and out of the “poetic playground” created by Bausch’s longtime stage designer Peter Pabst. Nefés’ stage environment is dominated by a central pool, which appears almost imperceptibly and gradually spreads to become a site for liaisons, picnics, and exultant, water-spraying dance solos. The women in the ensemble appear in flowing, brightly colored dresses; the men are usually buttoned-up in dark suits or stripped down to slacks or black undergarments. The soundscore, arranged and mixed by Matthias Burkert and Andreas Eisenschneider in collaboration with the Istanbul Oriental Ensemble, interweaves the music of Tom Waits and Astor Piazzolla with elements from traditional Turkish songs.

Nefés is peppered with scenic miniatures that include purely acted (rather than danced) episodes (as when two women flop down to eat bread and honey in a moment of indulgent sensoriality), moments of direct address to the audience (on this occasion, in laboriously memorized Polish), and group sequences featuring multifocal action (as when all the performers invade the stage space, tussling playfully over swaths of colorful fabric). Bausch’s unique artistic sensibility has always featured a comic dimension, exploiting the recognition of defamiliarized Müller (1978), Kontakthof (1979), and Arien (1979)—they were overshadowed by the bleaker aspects of Bausch’s vision. In these early productions, the Wuppertal dancers ricocheted around the stage in quests for contact that were agonized, desperate, and difficult to watch, prompting Heiner Müller’s famous comment on Bausch’s work: “the image is a thorn in our eye” (in Birringer 1986:92).

A brighter perspective began to emerge visibly in the late 1990s with pieces like the “buoyantly gleeful” Masurca Fogo (1998; Climenhaga 2009:31) and continued to inform the Tanztheater Wuppertal’s most recent works like Bamboo Blues (2007) and Sweet Mambo (2008). Some critics see the tonal shift in Bausch’s work as evidence of her having mellowed with age or even of having lost the edge that made her artistic perspective so compellingly distinctive. In fact, the evolution of Bausch’s vision was less a radical transformation than a gradual shift of emphasis: her great theme was always the intimate relations between men and women, but the recent works demonstrate a growing concern with the possibilities for genuine tenderness and joy in human connection. Seen from one perspective, it comes as something of a relief that the maturing vision of a ground-
social behavior, but the mode of this humor was once bleaker, the laughs it called forth harsher. Some of the comic scenelets of Nefés have become outright lazzi: a woman bends forward and we hear the sound of tearing fabric over the auditorium’s sound system; a male “guardian angel” with handheld halo enters and shadows her from behind, concealing the imagined rip in her dress; she becomes irritated by his shuffling proximity, yelling, “I need my space!” in Polish. There are also purely visual jokes: an elegantly accoutered woman enters with a toothbrush and toothpaste, carefully removes her satin gloves, and brushes her diamond rings instead of her teeth. The spirit of the vaudeville revue is strong in such scenes.

Although Nefés does contain moments of warmth, brightness, and explosive jubilation, its atmosphere is far less uniform than early reviews of the production would lead one to believe. The performance also includes moments of solemnity, lyricism, and abandon—even a number of group sequences that could be characterized as classic Bausch in their harshly uncanny examination of male-female relations:

The female company members stand in a line at stage left; the men cross the stage one by one, each choosing a woman to kiss, coldly, through a screen of her own hair hanging down over her face;

The men slouch commandingly in chairs; the women approach them on their hands and knees—again, with their hair obscuring their faces; the men languidly fondle the women’s heads with an air of met expectation;

In what might be the signature image of the production, each woman stands bowed over a prone man, beating her hair downward, rhythmically and aggressively, above his seminaked form. Like the two previously described scenarios of male privilege-taking, this last sequence develops through repetition and accumulation: as we see movement-structures reiterated over a series of highly particular bodies, we are afforded the opportunity to interpret them differently—to “watch the other way,” as Bausch once put it (in Hoghe 1980:73).

A hamam scenario also recurs throughout the performance: a smiling woman takes a cloth bag soaked in soapy water, fills it with air like a balloon, and wrings bubbly foam onto the reclining body of a man. In 2003, some Turkish critics felt that this scenario concretized a “master-slave relationship” (in Öztürkmen 2003:234), but my impression at the performance in Wrocław, prompted more by the manner in which the female dancers performed the action than the action itself, was that the women were genuinely taking pleasure in attending the men. After all, the act of doing

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6. It was once a trope of Bausch scholarship to apply the Brechtian notion of “gestus” to Bausch’s treatment of social gesture onstage (see, for example, Cody 1998:119). However, in Bausch’s pieces, interactional behavior is alienated (or “defamiliarized”) less by an underlying gest of “demonstration” (see Brecht 1964:121–29) than by the degree of physical organization inherent in every movement—from the quotidian to the abstract—made by her highly trained performers. (Despite Bausch’s break with balletic conventions, dancers of considerable technical accomplishment have always made up the Wuppertal company.)
attending women and women attending men; the roles of server and served are constantly being exchanged, even on a moment-to-moment basis within a particular scenic miniature. As audience members, we relax into the confidence that every member of the company—a truly egalitarian ensemble, with no evident “stars”—will have his or her own turn to be attended.

In Bausch’s dance theatre, the dynamics of attending-and-being-attended-to play themselves out both within miniature fictions and acts of overtly exhibitionistic theatricality. A male dancer lifts a female castmate with her feet stuck into plastic buckets off the ground, enabling her to bound across the stage as if her encumbering footwear were winged sandals. Aware that Bausch’s creative process drew heavily upon the memories and fantasies of her performers, I imagine that the male dancer is helping his female colleague realize a dream of flight. In the process, they bring to the spectator’s awareness the fundamental collaborative aspect of the balletic \textit{pas de deux}: the male dancer assists his female partner in breaking gravity’s limits (a thrill for both the partner and the audience); at the same time the female dancer allows him the opportunity to exhibit—and to feel—his physical power. In Bausch’s earlier work, male manipulations of the female body tended to be enforced or at least imposed: the female subject might resist or, like a mannequin devoid of animus, absorb the repositioning passively. \textit{Nefés} certainly features moments that hearken back to this concern with the male capacity to dominate the female using pure physical strength, as when a male dancer whirls a woman in pink around him in various ways, using her as a kind of prop in his experiments with centripetal force. But he verbally

for another, even \textit{serving} another, can often provide a sense of deep fulfillment in relationships of friendship and love. Later, a woman smokes a cigarette, stretched out by the stage’s central pool. A man approaches and pours a carafe of water over her head. We see this as an act of cold malevolence. But the woman seems unconcerned and takes another long drag of her cigarette. The man refills his carafe and pours it over her again, but this time she bends her head back, luxuriating in the second flow of water. Suddenly, we see the man as an attendant to a nonchalantly imperious Cleopatra figure. \textit{Nefés} presents us with many such scenes of men.
asks her permission, and she grants it. Yes, she rigidifies—and in some sense reifies—her body in order to enable his feat, but she does so in the spirit of play. Together, the male and the female dancer surprise and delight the audience with a collaborative demonstration of strength and bodily control.

A man asks a woman to dance for him. At first she demurs, but ultimately she does so, happily and without reservation. He watches, seated on the stage floor, his back to the orchestra—and we watch too, as spectators. In this instance, the two performers do not play out an asymmetrically weighted dynamic of objectification. Rather, watching and dancing become shared activities contributing to mutual enjoyment: the watcher enjoys the dancing, the dancer enjoys being watched, and the watcher enjoys the dancer’s watching his watching. During this simple scene of dancing and watching, we as spectators are invited to join the reciprocal play of gazes—and to enjoy the attraction the dancing body’s sheer physicality exerts upon us without a sense of guilt or shame. Reduced to their barest elements, the last two scenarios described above might inescapably seem to contain an aspect of male domination. However, the audience sees these interactions being negotiated—that is, we see one dancer proposing the playing out of a fantasy or game to a partner and we see that partner’s response emerge in a flow of nuances. Yes, this response may include trepidation, hesitation, or even a measure of awkwardness, but so do many of the compromises we make in life when we defer or adapt ourselves to the wants or needs of a loved one. The way of asking and the way of responding mark the difference between coercion, compliance, and play.

If Nefēs presents us with what often approaches a utopia of male and female bodies in mutually pleasurable collaboration, this is not simply the result of a changed perspective on human relations on Bausch’s part, but also of a concrete evolution of the working dynamics of the Tanztheater Wuppertal over the past three decades. Beginning with the seminal Blaubart (1977), Bausch abdicated the dictation and demonstration of choreography in favor of a provocateur’s role: at the beginning of each process she would pose a series of thematically related questions and her dancers would respond to these provocations in words or in action. The dancers’ responses were written down, videoed, revised, edited, and sometimes passed from one member of the company to another before being spliced into the final performance-collage. Within an atmosphere of trust and sharing, Bausch gently coaxed her company members toward the threshold of intimate revelation, keeping the process open for as long as possible. Although she did hold some degree of ultimate creative control as the metteuse-en-scène responsible for the production’s associative cohesiveness and moment-to-moment flow, Bausch emphasized the collaborative nature of the company’s process and the collective ownership of the fragments generated, going so far as to describe her work with her dancers as “a kind of love-relationship” (Arts. 21, 2009).

A common feminist critique of Bausch’s earlier work, summed up succinctly by theatre scholar Gabrielle Cody, held that she exposed “the production and reproduction of gendered behavior” without supplying “alternatives to her sadistic displays of women” (Cody 1998:123). However, Bausch’s working process itself—the “practicable way of living together” that developed organically within the walls of the opera house at Wuppertal (Servos 2008:222)—opens up opportunities for powerfully alternative modes of relation less encumbered by the suspicions, tensions, and fears of everyday social interaction. When the performers of the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch take the stage, they are dancing an ethos of openness, sensitivity, and honesty that emerges from the very concrete, lived dynamics of the company itself. The widespread—one is tempted to say universal—feeling that Bausch herself also embodied this utopian ethos in her personal way of being—in her grace, honesty, and optimism—has been evidenced by the outpouring of emotion from all corners of the dance world following her death.

An Emptied Embrace

All physical scores, no matter how finely honed or oft repeated, are experienced anew.
by performers on each occasion of performance, and the newness of each manifestation often has as much to do with the events of the performers’ personal lives as with their process of preparation in a professional capacity. Bausch once commented upon the remarkable changeability of her performances from night to night even under normal circumstances—“The evenings are like pieces of music: they’re not created to be watched once and once only”8—and the conditions under which the performance of Nefés took place on 30 June 2009 were anything but normal. Throughout the evening, currents of sorrow and celebration—the dialectical energies of a wake—emerged out of and blended into each other, producing a highly unstable emotional atmosphere. It also seemed to me that on this night, with the shock of Bausch’s death still reverberating in the consciousnesses and surging through the bodies of the Wuppertal performers, Nefés’ established set of physical scores—many of which embodied human dynamics of comfort, care, and reassurance—took on a life specific to the occasion, becoming channels for the venting of grief and the consolation of loved ones. These loved ones were, of course, the other members of the Wuppertal ensemble, obliged by circumstance to spend three-and-a-half hours dealing with the still raw impact of their director’s passing under the eyes of unknown others.

A man’s right hand seems to take on a frenzied life of its own, striking him again and again in the face. This loss of physical control spreads to the rest of his body; he clutches his head, convulses. A crowd of women arrive and take hold of him gently but firmly, restraining his frenzy. His body relaxes; he shyly allows them to console him, then to draw him offstage. What emotional animus lay at the center of this onstage interaction, I wondered: one connected to the memory or fantasy out of which it was born during the rehearsal process, or one specific to the distressing circumstances of the evening of 30 June?

As a physical motif, an emptied embrace, out of which one performer steps, leaving the other’s frozen arms encircling an empty volume of space, has appeared in Bausch’s work for decades. On this night, it carried trenchant emotional force that had much more to do with loss than rejection. This impact hit home both in the auditorium and onstage, judging from the pained look that flashed across the face of one of the dancers executing the movement.

In perhaps the most visually striking moment of the production, all the women in the ensemble clasp hands and stand shoulder-to-shoulder in a line extending across the stage. The line of bodies swings back and forth on a central axis with precise synchronicity, the women’s multicolored dresses shimmering under a rippling light cue. This particular configuration struck me as an emblem of the solidarity among Bausch’s performers on this night; in addition, I assume, it would have served as a psychophysical amplifier for feelings of mutual support among them. Moved, I found myself imagining what it might be like to be one of these dancers, clasping the hands of two trusted colleagues with whom I had worked for years under Bausch’s guidance, moving with them in lockstep across the darkened stage space on this disorienting night. Indeed, at a handful of key moments during the performance, kinesthetic empathy9, heightened by emotional sympathy, led me into an unusual form of identification with Bausch’s dancers as I felt myself inside the choreographic sequences being enacted before me.

Like the majority of Bausch’s productions from the mid-’90s onward, Nefés features a set of “pure dance solos” (Cody 1998:128)—in this case, one for each company member (further evidence of the Tanztheater Wuppertal’s egalitarian ethics). The appearance of these solos has been noted but left generally unexamined in accounts of Bausch’s oeuvre, perhaps

8. “The evenings are like pieces of music: they’re not created to be watched once and once only. I see them very often and know how different they can be, what can happen to people, how each tiny nuance can change something” (Bausch in Servos 2008:231).

9. For an exploration of the importance of a kinesthetically based understanding of empathy to contemporary dance and performance scholarship, see Foster (2007 and 2008).
because they were less present in the work of the '70s and '80s, when the various critical positions on Bausch's work took shape. Bausch's work always placed itself at odds with the routines of socialized physicality, and the increasing prevalence of the solos in her recent productions perhaps marks a redoubled effort to carve out a space of freedom for the whirling, leaping, dancing body.

It is often stated that Bausch rejected the movement vocabularies of classical ballet and German ausruckstanz, the two formative traditions in her training as a young dancer. Bausch herself said of her earliest choreographic endeavors: “I didn't want to imitate anybody [...] Any movement I knew, I didn’t want to use” (in Jennings 2009). However, a clearly recognizable movement vocabulary does cut across Bausch’s oeuvre, appearing intermittently within the early works and surfacing more extensively in the recent solos. This unsystematized system of movements emanated from Bausch’s very being, making manifest in a set of gestures and postures her highly personal way of experiencing the world.

How might one attempt to understand this uniquely Bauschian mode of physicalized subjectivity? First, by taking stock of the characteristic movements: The arms snake around and away from the torso, clasping and encircling it. The hands again and again find their way to the face, caressing, cradling, and sometimes throwing it into motion. The arms windmill at the shoulder joints; sometimes one casts the other into a horizontal arc across the body, clearing space for the next gesture. The head is tossed, rolled, flung about; the hair falls over the face, is batted, whisked, thrown aside. The palms and backs of the hands seek each other out; the elbows and wrists twine and cradle each other. The arms reach tentatively, or forcefully thrust themselves skyward. The whole body whirls and twists through space with fluid angularity.

One can think of this movement species as a corporeal “memeplex,” a set of behavioral-expressive traits now transferred among the bodies of the Wuppertal dancers, or an idiosyncratic and expressively dilated form of what Pierre Bourdieu termed “body hexis”: “a certain subjective experience” of the world (1977:87) embodied as a “permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (93–94). Whatever theoretical framework is applied, the main point is that the corporeal lexicon I characterize above as “Bauschian,” far more than a collection of purely formal movements, simultaneously encapsulates and summons a highly particular mode of subjectivity—a way of feeling, thinking, and moving through the world.

And how to define this Bauschian sensibility? What is its psychophysical center of gravity, its inner dynamic? To my mind, the characteristic gestures involve an attending to the self, a sensitive effort of delving inward toward some


11. Although Bourdieu describes body hexis as being “both individual and systematic” (1977:87), as one might expect he emphasizes the socially programmed over the personally idiosyncratic.
beyond the immediate pod of space encircling the body. There is something intensely private about this effort to connect with the inner life of the spirit under the pressure of observing eyes, giving the bodily energies unearthed and sown into space a rare and precious quality—whether the mode of their sharing is anguished, tender, or joyous.

Before taking over the Wuppertal company, Bausch spent six years as the lead soloist of Kurt Jooss’s New Folkwang Ballet in Essen (1962–1968), but at the Tanztheater she stepped almost completely into the role of choreographer-provocateur. Even during this later career phase, however, Bausch’s prime motivating force remained the simple impetus “to dance”: to unleash subjectivity into expressive movement. For the last four decades this physical impetus was channeled through the bodies of her dancers, first at the Folkwang Studios and then at the Tanztheater Wuppertal. Bausch danced through her dancers, and they continue to dance through her distinctive mode of physicalized subjectivity, her way of being in the world. Without straying into metaphor or sentimentally elegiac phraseology, I can say with utter conviction that Pina Bausch was materially present in the Wrocław Opera House on 30 June 2009, danced into corporeal being by her performers.

As the evening drew to a close, an anguished energy began to flow through the later solos: again, preexisting physical scores served as channels for occasion-specific

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12. Bausch had studied with Jooss, a former student of Laban and himself a Tanztheater innovator, from the age of 14 onward at the Folkwangschule in Essen. From 1960 to 1961 she trained at the Juilliard School of Music in New York and danced with the New American Ballet and the Metropolitan Opera House Ballet before returning to Essen in 1962 to join Jooss’s company.

13. Productions like Café Müller and Danzón (1995), in which Bausch did appear as a performer, were rare exceptions. In interviews, Bausch often expressed her bemusement that her decision to take the leadership of the Tanztheater Wuppertal, at first prompted largely by a desire to create more opportunities for herself as a dancer, resulted in almost the opposite situation: her observing presence became so crucial to the development of her pieces that it proved extremely difficult for her to perform in them.

14. “At one point I started doing something because I wanted to dance […] The only reason was: to dance […] I liked to move in this kind of way and when I set out to do something on my own it was in that particular form” (in Climenhaga 2009:48).
Critical Acts

intention: to embrace the dancers who had shared of themselves so deeply on this night. What we did not know was that the dancers were clapping too. Janet Panetta, the Tanztheater Wuppertal's ballet master, present at the performance, describes the scene backstage:

The first performance after the news [of Bausch's death] a few hours earlier, we assumed that the audience did not know. The dancers took one curtain call with a space in the line where Pina would have been. Then they left the stage. The applause was thunderous and continued for 20, maybe 30 minutes with the bare stage. It was clear that the audience knew, and also wanted their chance to express their love for her and her work. We all stood backstage, some silent, some tearful, all of us clapping. (in Kourlas 2009)

Though Panetta's estimate of the curtain call's duration (20 to 30 minutes) is factually inaccurate, it has experiential truth: the impulses. By this point, however, the impulses were no longer those of comfort and consolation. Instead, they seemed directed toward tapping into roiling energies of lament, toward hurling the physical sensation of loss into space and exulting in a kind of wild, grief-driven euphoria.

The performance ended and the dancers came downstage for their curtain call, their faces purged of the exuberance that had animated them just moments earlier. Some looked ashen, others anguished, a few dazed. After a quick bow to deafening applause, the dancers fled the stage. The applause, however, did not end, but continued for a good seven or eight minutes. The dancers did not return; nor were we, the audience, asking this of them. It was my impression that we persisted in order that they, in the backstage area or in their dressing rooms, might hear us and know the depth of our gratitude. Clapping was the physical score given to us as audience members by the situation, and so we clapped. And into this clapping we channeled a collective psychophysical intention: to embrace the dancers who had shared of themselves so deeply on this night.

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clapping did feel like it would go on all night. Bausch once expressed her feeling that the applause during and after her performances was “not about making judgements on the choreography” but rather “about a kind of humanity” (in Servos 2008:230). In this light, I would like to think of the clapping of dancers and audience on 30 June 2009 as a kind of mutual embrace. I would also like to imagine that the efforts made by both groups to reach out toward one another encircled rather than cut across the stage-space separating us—a space, now emptied, where for the last three-and-a-half hours Pina Bausch had been danced so fully into presence.

References
Artifaceting an Intercultural Nation
Theatre Replacement’s BIOBOXES

Kim Solga

Cindy Mochizuki is sitting so close to me that I can smell her breath. Her eyes, full of tension and surprise, meet mine; I feel my own eyes open wider, my spine stiffen. I snap to attention in part out of respect for this performer’s address, in part out of a childish fear that she might see me slouching. Because Cindy and I are in this together, and I see how clearly she sees me. How could she not? I am her only audience member, and we are alone together in the “Japanese Box,” a tiny puppet-style theatre that accommodates only my body, her head, and the stage of delicate miniatures she has built for her performance.

Cindy performs grief and mourning, hope and longing: a girl, new to Canada (new enough, anyway), has lost a loved one. She struggles to fit into her new space, her new words. She takes a picture of me with a tiny, handheld camera. She takes pictures of all the people she meets, it seems; she asks me to look at the collection of snapshots with a tiny flashlight. I hold the pictures, awkwardly, until she quietly asks for them back. She follows the birds, and so do I. She asks me to light some incense for her loved one. Then she gives me a tiny pebble as a souvenir.

As I record these disconnected memories I know I’m not painting a very good picture. The truth is I don’t remember much of Cindy’s performance, in part because I chose to listen to half of it in Japanese, a language I don’t speak at all. The option was there: affix the language card and hear her words in English or Japanese, switching at will. I’m not entirely sure why I kept switching into Japanese. I think I felt bad that the character in the narrative, still so unsure in her English, should have to keep using it just for me. Or perhaps I sensed it would be somehow more respectful to hear the performance in its “native” language. In hindsight, I know I was wrong: my choice might have seemed somehow generous at the time but it proved unhelpful, provoked by my useless guilt as an English-speaking, native-born Canadian. Ultimately, the language barrier stopped me from experiencing Cindy’s performance fully. Now I barely know enough of it to pass on.

This is BIOBOXES: Artifaceting Human Experience, a theatrical installation created in 2006/07 by Vancouver’s Theatre Replacement. BIOBOXES is “a collection of one-person shows for one-person audiences that take place in an intimate theatre: a box worn on the actors’ shoulders.” It is based on the life experiences of individual first-generation Canadians living in Vancouver, each channeled through the creative

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disappear around back of the box, pop heads into puppet spaces, and begin.

**BIOBOXES** unsettled me like no other performance I have ever attended. ¹ I felt unhinged somehow, turned over. As I left each box my body felt different: I was at turns depressed and exhilarated, disquieted and quietly contemplative. And I make these claims not naively: like most performance scholars, I travel regularly to see theatre and have attended plenty of unconventional performances in the oddest places imaginable. So why this show, why now? I suspect it has something to do with Cindy, and with my sense that, while trying to be polite and respectful to her “heritage,” I somehow missed the story she was telling; that even as I took active part in that story, my own image archived among its remains, I was not, could not be, easily absorbed into its fabric. As I work through this hunch, I want to position **BIOBOXES** in relation to two contemporary debates in Canadian and international performance studies. In Canada: the debate about what constitutes “multicultural” performance, and what performing “intercultural” experience in the contemporary, multicultural nation could look like. And in the wider discipline: the debate over what constitutes an ethically, socially, and politically productive act of theatrical “witness”—what it means to look at the stage, what intersubjective experiences might, for the greater good, emerge there, and (perhaps most urgently) what it means for us, as theatre and performance scholars, to look at the audience looking at the stage and to dream the politics of that contact zone.

**BIOBOXES** is basically a collection of Canadian immigration stories, exactly the kind of stuff that an officially multicultural nation (as Canada has been to varying degrees since

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1. I saw **BIOBOXES** for the first time at the Dorothy Somerset Theatre on the University of British Columbia campus in Vancouver, BC, on 1 June 2008. I saw it again at the Theatre Centre in Toronto on 2 May 2009. **BIOBOXES** was created by Anita Rochon, Marco Soriano, Paul Ternes, Cindy Mochizuki, Donna Soares, and Una Memisevic; and performed by Marco Soriano, Paul Ternes, Cindy Mochizuki, Donna Soares, Una Memisevic, Anita Rochon, and Samantha Madely.
In a recent article about “the performance ecology” of Toronto’s intercultural theatre scene, Ric Knowles differentiates between what he calls Canadian “multicultural texts” and “intercultural” performance work. Multicultural texts are “the policies, documents, and official discourses of Canadian multiculturalism,” as well as the theatrical events and social performances, often funded by government diversity programs and framed by civic heritage spectacles, that are sanctioned by those texts. “Intercultural” performance work is made by a host of primarily young artists of color, and seeks to disrupt, reinterpret, question, and challenge the myths of “mosaic” harmony on which Canada’s multicultural nationhood, and conventional forms of building, rehearsing, and now, performance. (2009b)

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The stories in BIOBOXES are all derived from interviews with first-generation Canadians currently living in Vancouver. Each creator-performer conducted a series of bilingual interviews with a first-generation Canadian of their respective heritage. The interviewees were also asked to bring along three objects of importance to them, which are incorporated into the boxes and accompanying video. [...]

Over three weeks, the creative team developed these shows working through a process of transcribing, selecting and editing text, storyboarding, building, rehearsing, and now, performance. (2009b)

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“heritage” theatre, are built (2009:73). I find this binary framework a useful one for critiquing both contemporary Canadian performance and the government networks that fund it, but I also find that, ironically, I cannot fit BIOBOXES easily into it. This show, provocatively, plays both sides of the multicultural/intercultural divide. On the surface (and in the program), BIOBOXES reads as “officially” multicultural: it’s a performance about heritage. It’s memory driven, a bit nostalgic, and resolutely hyphenated: first-generation Canadians, Japanese-Canadians and German-Canadians and French-Canadians, tell their stories to...?—Canadians of all shapes and sizes. But it’s also much more than this. It’s a performance event in which form both challenges and buttresses content, celebrates “heritage” and its nostalgic impulses while also subtly meddling with the conventional multicultural performance structure into which BIOBOXES so easily seems to slide.

BIOBOXES stages its very own multicultural archive via its intimate interviews with “new” Canadians and the items they have been asked to leave behind. And it serves some painfully sentimental stories of arrival, rejection, and, finally, acceptance. In the Italian box, for example, a young wife leaves her sun-dappled childhood to start a new life in rainy Vancouver. The winter weather wears her down; her job wears her down; her husband wears her down. She makes a journey back “home” but finds herself eager to return to her new home. As her plane lands, the British Columbia coastal mountains glitter like jewels through her window. But BIOBOXES also tells totally unexpected stories, immigrant stories that have nothing to do with immigration, that are jarring and uncanny for how otherwise familiar they seem: about a family breaking up; about a woman suffering from acute hypochondria; about illness and loss; about dinner. And, of course, never far from the edge of perception: about conducting an interview, building a stage, turning all these stories into theatre, entertainment, someone else’s (my) gratification.

From box to box this show stages both the multicultural archive and the intercultural repertoire; the labor required to sustain the former bleeds relentlessly into the latter as Cindy and her colleagues set about their virtuosic work. Some of our well-trafficked narratives about what it is to be an “immigrant” nation, to be a “haven” for refugees from around the globe, appear alongside the unexpected twists and turns of ordinary lives lived (by the characters, of course, but also by the actors I see, always see, in front of me) within the impossibly idealistic expectations of official multiculturalism. Expectations that you will become Canadian while also retaining the memory of elsewhere, in part because we need your “elsewhere” to become part of our national “show”; expectations that you’ll always be just a little bit different, but that your difference will be a good thing, a neutral thing, because we will all share difference as a fulcrum of our national identity. All this stuff collides with my own experience of nationhood in the tiny space between performer and spectator. And in this space—claustrophobic and warm...
and weirdly too close to difference for comfort—I have to decide what “multiculturalism” means to me, to us, right here, right now. And I have to reckon with the work this decision requires of me.

If you’re a spectator like me—at once proud and critical of my country; at once susceptible to myth and eager to deconstruct it—BIOBOXES will pull you several ways at once. In its physical setup it produces a level of intimacy that makes anything less than full-body immersion almost impossible. Not only are the performers close enough to touch, but most boxes require my active participation. This requirement causes me occasional anxiety. In the Japanese box I have trouble juggling all of Cindy’s photographs, worry I will drop them. In the French box I am asked to write a letter from mother to son (in French! Is my spelling okay?). In the German box a drill comes through a styrofoam wall at my eye level and, just as I fear it’s going to graze me, the debris falls into my lap. In each case I am hyperaware of how important my participation is: the show cannot continue without me. I am squeezed into a story not of my own making, but I’m also oddly unfazed by this. As when I opted to listen to Cindy’s Japanese, I feel, simply, compelled to act: to keep things moving, to honor the story, and to get to the end. And I wonder: is this what it means not just to “watch” another immigrant story but to bear witness to the struggle of its telling, the awkwardness of its hearing, in the oddly crowded space between performer/creator and me?

The Canadian Drama course I teach at the University of Western Ontario is subtitled “Performing an Intercultural Nation.” We talk about Canadian political myths, about the role theatre and performance can play in generating a new national discourse around ethnic and racial diversity, and we talk about witness. What does it mean to encounter the other at the theatre, especially our national “others”? To be touched, perhaps changed (forever?) by something that happens both up there, onstage, and inside me, in my brain and body? Roger Simon, writing about the processes of historical witness, distinguishes between “memory as a component of the founding ethos of national or communal identity”—for example, a collective memory deployed by official public discourses in order to generate belief in an unbreachable, carefully bounded collective selfhood—and memory “as a condition for the learning necessary to sustain the prospect of democracy” (2005:5). This latter form of memory, Simon argues, can only be enabled by one’s “attentiveness to an otherness” and to “the question of to what and to whom I must be accountable” (4–5). Is that what happened in Cindy’s box? I ask myself later, after. Did I realize a necessary accountability to her, but then somehow, paradoxically, refuse my attentiveness by choosing to hear the story in what I imagined to be “her” language? Did Cindy ask for my witness, and in my eagerness to give it, did I fail her?

Right now in theatre and performance studies the discourses of empathy and witness are ever-present; we’re working through a moment in which many of us seek, for better or worse, to claim that politically progressive performance demands audiences to feel against the grain of the self and toward the other in a profoundly ethical way. I want to make a similar claim for BIOBOXES—I truly do. I want to say that it forces audiences into intimate, visceral collision with actors and “their” stories and thus provokes a deeply personal unsettlement that, in turn, unsettles our performative

encounter with Canada’s multicultural script. And on some level, I suspect the show does just this. At least, for some audience members. But for many others, I suspect it does something else.

The trouble is, I’m not sure—whatever my scholarly self would like to claim—that BIOBOXES necessarily provokes an act of witness simply by sitting me down two feet from a performer’s face, handing me a stack of photos (or a pen) and commanding me to look (or to write). Rather, in working through my own watching experience via this brief article, I have come to suspect that BIOBOXES enacts the politics of defining a genuinely democratic act of theatrical witness—enacts the politics inherent in the relationship among actor, subject, and witness within Canadian multicultural performance right now—by requiring every spectator to make specific choices about how to watch, how deeply to get involved. Maybe I have to take the photos, but I don’t have to look at them. Maybe I have to hold the pen, but I don’t have to write. Maybe I’ll listen in French, and really, truly try to hear. Or maybe I’ll listen in French because I don’t know French all that well (many Canadians do not, despite the mythology of official bilingualism), and I’m a bit uncomfortable, and I really just need to shut off for a minute.

BIOBOXES is in every way about the choices we make when we go to the theatre—about the usually invisible ways in which we decide when and how to look at our “others.” Because I can hardly claim to know what goes on in every box, every time (the spectator is, to my prying scholarly eyes, brilliantly opaque here), I find myself prompted to think carefully about what’s at stake in calling these small boxes—theatre reduced to their barest essentials—potentially utopic spaces, spaces of inherently democratic witness. Because the truth is, amidst all the other feelings it provoked, BIOBOXES really did make me uncomfortable. I was constantly watching myself watching (see Levin et al. 2009), analyzing my own experiences of engagement even as my body gave over, sometimes reluctantly and sometimes willingly, to each performer. The truth is, I enjoyed listening to Cindy speak Japanese; in a lot of ways it was easier, and to be honest her story didn’t matter all that much to me in the end. Ultimately, BIOBOXES unnerved me because it made me look, really look, at myself—at the work I do in the theatre, at the work I do as a theatre scholar, and at the labor I expend, as a Canadian citizen, in support of and in challenge to the cultural spectacles through which this country is evolving its contemporary cosmopolitan identity.

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Stretching the Truth Way into the Future

Cynthia Hopkins's The Success of Failure (Or, The Failure of Success)

Gwendolyn Alker

Describing the recent stage shows of Cynthia Hopkins's Accidental Trilogy is a bit like dissecting poetry with mathematical formulas: it helps, but it also fails miserably. Hopkins's work is customarily enigmatic, and her most recent piece continues to defy narrative logic or simple explanation. And that is a relevant place to begin any discourse on The Success of Failure (Or, The Failure of Success), which premiered at the Walker Center in Minneapolis and continued on to St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn (22 May–7 June 2009). The final installment of the dramatic triptych Hopkins began with Accidental Nostalgia in 2004 and continued with Must Don't Whip 'Um in 2007, Success of Failure bore the burden of what had gone before: Accidental Nostalgia, a feisty autobiographical treatise on the pros and cons of amnesia that introduced the character Cameron Seymour; and Must Don't Whip 'Um, a prequel that turned Seymour into a fading rock star who disappears into a Sufi brotherhood. The Success of Failure became not only a rough conclusion to the vast wealth of material that had gone before, but also included Hopkins's most personal and otherworldly work of the three. These three performances were put together by Hopkins with Jim Findlay, Jeff Sugg, and others as part of the Accinosco collective (founded in connection with the creation of Accidental Nostalgia in 2004). Accinosco is “dedicated to creating ground-breaking original works” that mix multimedia expertise with “unbelievable fact and outrageous fiction” (St. Ann’s Warehouse 2009).

Introducing The Success of Failure as its own work is thus a fraught endeavor. This piece was billed as a sci-fi journey, but there were really two shows: the first half reversed Cameron Seymour (literally) into Ruom Yes Noremac and sent her millions of years into the future as a lone human among the Druocs, a species with a strong resemblance to the Muppets cast of Pigs in Space. The piece is wonderfully farcical, including a gorgeous sequence in which Hopkins levitates off her spaceship by way of karabiner hooks to float and twirl against the backdrop of a projected Earth. The second half detours from the rich offerings of metaphor and analogy to a straightforward confession of Hopkins’s family dramas.

If any of this is unclear, that’s partially the point. In the theatre world, this trilogy has had audiences in a frenzy of admiration, even as reviewers have let go of any attempt at coherently describing what occurs; as the New York Times’ Charles Isherwood noted in his shot at a...
plot summary, “I didn’t understand the plot of the new ‘Star Trek’ movie, either, frankly” (2009).1

Here’s the thing: Cynthia Hopkins is the latest and best thing to come out of the New York downtown theatre scene (now transmigrated to Brooklyn). Everyone, including those with widely divergent tastes, agree that she’s worth seeing. She has been sponsored and showcased by St. Ann’s congruently with their rise as a preeminent center for Off-Off Broadway theatre. She’s garnered numerous Bessies, and won the Alpert Award in 2007. She’s worked with Bang on a Can, Big Dance Theatre, Pig Iron Theatre Company, Richard Foreman, and has a new work commissioned by SoHo Rep scheduled for 2010. She’s charming and yet inscrutable. She has been working on the Trilogy for the better half of a decade with continued buzz. She is aesthetically rigorous and childishly playful. She’s the theatre-world It-girl of the moment. “It,” as in Joe Roach, is right. She seems to balance opposition with the precision of a “tightrope dancer on one foot” (Roach 2007:8), such that “we can’t take our eyes off of It” (10).

My first introduction to Hopkins was entirely extracurricular, and therefore underanalyzed until some years later. I saw her perform with her band Gloria Deluxe—comprised of Hopkins on accordion, guitar, and saw; Kristin Mueller on drums; Josh Stark on upright bass; Philippa Thompson on violin, washboard, and spoons; Karen Waltuch on viola; and “everyone on vocals” (see www.gloriadeluxe.com)—in small, out-of-the-way spaces such as Pete’s Candy Store in Williamsburg in 2001. In ensuing conversations with Hopkins, I learned that while her lead-singer role in Gloria Deluxe has been Hopkins’s path to artistic acclaim, she was actually trained as a theatre artist and prefers the theatrical stage show: “I feel like the stories that I am trying to tell are stories that need to be told on a lot of different levels at the same time, so it requires a multifaceted structure” (Hopkins 2007). Nonetheless, even in her theatrical pieces, her voice remains most recognizable—Joe’s Pub promos branded her as mixing “dark country noir” with “toned folk.” And this vocal quality always seems to blend into various types of musical endeavors, no matter if she’s lost in an abstract Middle Eastern desert or on a spaceship high above a future Earth.

The Success of Failure (Or, The Failure of Success) is a parable that suggests that the destruction of oneself is sometimes necessary in order to save the larger community. In the first half, our protagonist facilitates the explosion of the earth to save the universe. In the second half, a 15-year-old Hopkins comes to terms with the death of her mother as a failure that may have elements of redemption. The grandiose parable of inescapable evolution in the first half is downsized in the second. Hopkins revisits her unique history so that she can arrive in the present moment and forgive herself despite and through her past. Or, as she tells it, a path of self-destruction leads to a vivid manic episode, wherein she hears “the voice of God’s forgiveness emanate from my cat and pierce my very soul.” The scene is set through projected slides that detail the various experiences. Hopkins runs the projector and narrates—and yes, a slide of the cat pops up as she presents this rather odd bit of information.

In the final installment of the trilogy, Hopkins shifts to stark, autobiographical realism reminiscent of such performance artists as Deb

1. While the plot lines of her pieces defy simple narratives, two excellent plot summaries of Accidental Nostalgia can be found in Patricia Coleman’s article “La Belle Indifference” (2005) and Judy Bauerlein’s “Cynthia Hopkins: Accidental Nostalgia” (2005).

2. Accidental Nostalgia won the 2005 Bessie Award for Creation, Must Don’t Whip ‘Um won a Bessie for Design in 2007.
prone to multiple heart attacks with a “do not resuscitate” order that the EMT’s overlook. In her final monologue, all the elements of the previous shows and the first act come together into a coherent narrative: the Sufi mysticism, the amnesia, the evolution of humans and of her own humanity. The penultimate monologue confesses: “After all those years of walking around in a black hole of depression and self-pity, worrying about money and success and failure and all this BULLSHIT [...] I’m living the solution, people, I’m walking the Sufi way. I’m in tune with the universe [...] my mind is the only place heaven really lies.”

For some, this sparkling clear revelation may have been too much. Hopkins has always been more slippery than this, and the whole thing did have a deus ex machina vibe. Yet the starkness continued to be tempered by the music, which remained clean and simple, too confrontational to be preachy: “if you ain’t got love, keep your hands to yourself,” she intoned while pondering the loss of faith and the possibilities of self-forgiveness. The set for the second act was suggestive of a high school
basement with an old school band setup: turn table, guitar, boxy keyboard, small pieces of kitsch, a wig on a mic stand, and two slide projectors with carousels. Not much else was present except for numerous monochromatic, eight-foot-high white boards, which were lifted up out of the floor during intermission to serve as a backdrop upon which she projected various charts that depicted the themes of the *Trilogy* and her life. This fictional location gave her a bit more leeway to invoke the pathos of the teenage years, when rock and roll was more than background music; it was the soundtrack of one’s emotional life. In retrospect, I am not sure if the truthfulness of this final installment was entirely truthful. The Cynthia Hopkins of this ending may have been merely one more of her many selves we have met since the beginning of the *Trilogy*. And I am more intrigued by the possibility that she still may have been playing us—not on all details, but on some.

Frankly, as a whole, I had a hard time taking *The Success of Failure (Or, The Failure of Success)* seriously. I don’t mean that in a bad way. Let us flash back to the first act with its video transmission by the “Earth Defense Committee” to Ruom Yes Noremac. The signal is fragmented, cutting through static that appears to include old clips of Miss Piggy. As the signal clears, we see that each of the four members is enacted by one of Cynthia Hopkins’s selves, complete with a pig snout: Nelg Yrrah (Spiritual Advisor), Nerf Trub (President), Ibmab Yram (Secretary), and Rebaf Einnor (Strategic Analyst). Together they form a band of sorts: one holds and plays the harmonium, another a mandolin, a third a set of spoons. Each is a precise and finely drawn caricature, riddled by religious morals, social expectations, and a healthy dose of the ridiculous. Skip to the end of this act, where Ruom is still fighting with the Committee, trying to control a massive explosion that will result in the end of Earth. She runs around the stage with frantic yet precisely controlled movements as the Committee looms above her, projected upon a backdrop the width of the entire stage. (In some of the more humorous moments of this scene, Hopkins disappears off the live stage, onto the screen, and then back into live action.) The concluding moment of Earth’s demise is too big; it should buckle under its...
Hopkins, the only certain reality is that these two elements travel hand in hand.

References


