

Speech of Boris Charmatz
Press conference on October 21, 2021
Announcement of the new direction of Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch

It's impressive to stand here on this stage and speak...
How can I accurately convey the feeling of the immense honor and responsibility to have been invited to come and live, work, and imagine by your side?
It is perhaps a misleading that I'm here alone on this dais: I came to put together an ensemble, to add myself to a unique artistic, technical, administrative team; I came to dance with them and with this city, and with this landscape, for this city and for this landscape, and we are going to dance together with this history... But we are going to dance to MAKE history, to make the history of today, to sketch the history of tomorrow, to articulate the past, the present, and the future of the legendary institution that is Tanztheater Wuppertal...

I came to join a collective momentum which we all need today. I've been a bit of a lone dancer of late, but the whole company should be on stage, not just a new director, but a new artistic leadership that would pull in all bodies, not just the dancers of the ensemble, but also the people of Wuppertal and North Rhine-Westphalia, and beyond. I would even like to bring the French inhabitants of Hauts-de-France into our circle, I desire a Franco-German cooperation...
I would even like us to dance with the absent, with the dead, with those who are gone: with and for Pina Bausch, and also with and for the entire German and European modernity, the likes of Valeska Gert and Fassbinder, the likes of Raimund Hoghe and Else Lasker Schüler...

I was contacted by the search committee. I immediately said that it was almost impossible for an artist to step into Pina's shoes, that it was almost impossible for me to totally rearrange my private and professional life, that it was almost impossible to apply for such a position, as if it were an institution like any other...

I can't remember who, in those early exchanges, said that that was PRECISELY the thing, the impossibility, working on the impossible, that PRECISELY it would be very exciting. I think someone even said that it was my specialty, working on impossible things!

So I did my best to dodge the invitation! First, I proposed we give the repertoire and Pina's touring performances a renewed sense of urgency, by closing off our horizon, for example by deciding that the company would stop touring in five or even ten years, and that, until then, we should put on a sort of fireworks display in her memory, do EVERYTHING that we could dream of doing in her absence. NO ONE wanted that.

I then proposed that the company broaden the invitations extended to other choreographers, that it become a true contemporary ballet, structured around Pina's works, but galvanized by various creations, a little like the ballet of the Lyon Opera, or even like the New York City Ballet, if you will, which continues to cite Balanchine and Jerome Robbins as its primary genetic makeup, but which also works with present-day choreographers...
NO ONE wanted that.

So, my final suggestion was to actually invite an artist, but ... that it would upset a lot of things, it would send shockwaves, it would mean a radical change. To really welcome a new vision for the company, for the city, for the art... it would be also necessary to agree to give something up. That, of course, Pina's works would continue to be part of the company's repertoire, but that the present and the future would also have to be given priority if we were to have a shot at making gestures that counted.

Then I came to Wuppertal with my collaborators Hélène Joly and Martina Hochmuth, and ... I fell in love. Love at first sight. It was terrible, after the visit we couldn't sleep at all, we were all teenagers, we were high on all the extraordinary encounters: I suspect that, in close cooperation with the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, you secretly pumped a very powerful, undetectable drug into the Wuppertal Institute, into the Wuppertal City Hall. And the effects haven't worn off since! Pina used to say that Wuppertal was a city of everyday life, that it was not a city of Sundays... she was right, of course, but... I still think that the city and dance have something to do with Sundays, don't you? Maybe it's because we're just getting out of the lockdowns and Covid-related restrictions, but my dream for Wuppertal such joyful art, dance that explodes with love and desire, all week long but also at night and on Sundays!!! We all need to rediscover an excess of bodies, a carnal relationship to touch, to contact, to connection.

Today I feel overwhelmed... so I don't know what will really happen when I get here in September 2022: we will need time to touch one another, understand one another, live-move-think together. It will take a lot of trust and attention to find all the FREEDOM without which no art can be born. But I know the kind of madness I have in mind:

Pina Bausch, and all of you, experienced and created the best thing one could ever create in the twentieth century. And today, it is extraordinary to see what you have accomplished since her death. But if we want to carry on, then the art we imagine in 2021, 22, 23, has to be as impassioned, as topical as the art you made together. The best way to be true to your genius is to take risks, to never give up, to ask the right questions, even if they may be painful at times. When Pina died, Angela Merkel was in her first term of office. The AfD did not exist. The climate emergency was not as present on everyone's minds. The migrant crisis had not yet begun. Europe still seemed solid: the United Kingdom was in Europe, the Western democracies did not seem as threatened as they are now. Social networking was in its infancy... Imagine: the series of terrorist attacks of the last few years had not yet taken place; Covid did not exist... Thirteen years ago, we thought Pina was eternal, Merce was eternal, Kazuo Ohno was eternal, Trisha was Brown eternal...

We need to take a plunge into the twenty-first century. I came here for the twenty-first century. I came to take Pina's work with us on a twenty-first-century adventure. And it will be an *adventure*. I came so that, together, we can find a new terrain for the company. Lichtburg is the perfect studio theater, it is monumental. I've come to throw open the doors, to carve out windows, to let in draughts. The company lacks working space and the three studios are not enough? So we will set up a workspace with no walls or roof in one of the city parks; we will become a company porous to passers-by, to rain, to cold and heat; a company which has black-box theaters encoded in its DNA, but which can make do with the landscapes of the Ruhr, which can think about social and energy transition, which is not afraid of getting our feet wet and our hands dirty. The best rock festivals take place in the mud! After all, the greatest dance film masterpiece ever is *Singing in the Rain*. We would become a company "singing-dancing-laughing-partying in the rain." Take the Bismarckturm: today, it is a parking lot; I dream that it becomes our studio, it would be a new green space reclaimed from the asphalt, one of our "playgrounds"...

As it happens, for the past several years I have been imagining a project of green, urban, choreographic institution with the North of France, a [terrain] of art, without roof or walls. The Tanztheater Wuppertal must find its own new "terrain," both symbolic and concrete, anchored in the territory, porous to the elements. And I would like to formulate a wish here: why not make the first dance company firmly tied to the Franco-German project? We could embody the official partnership between the North Rhine-Westphalia and the Hauts-de-France, the region where I work today... This is vital: Europe is not enough of a cultural Europe, even while the European community first started in our very territories with a coal and steel community after the war. There is a geological vein of coal that runs through Lens, Valenciennes... and crosses the Ruhr. We share a common geological, social, aesthetic, and economic landscape. And, in Picardy, there are First World War trenches... I want to strengthen this Franco-German connection, to develop partnerships and decentralized European cooperation. Pina Bausch lived and worked here, but the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris was like her second home... In a new spirit, why not imagine that her work and our future work together are also part of France?

I was speaking last week at the Shoah Memorial... I used to spend my summers in Berlin as a child... I sometimes have the impression that I was "meant" to bring the work of this first lady of choreography into the future, and to re-assert a desire for Europe that sometimes struggles to be embodied.

I will be taking over from Bettina Wagner in September 2022, but the schedule for the 2022-23 season is nearly complete, both for [terrain], my company, and for Tanztheater Wuppertal. This gives us time to get to know each other, and to bring my excitement in harmony with the company's forty-five-year-long history.

Our first creation could be, symbolically, a collective performance for the whole company plus 200 Wuppertal residents, in a street blocked off from traffic, but with an artistic rigor such as one encounters at the Opera, as if one could create a human architecture in motion!

We will of course create for brick-and-mortar theaters, too; but my dream is that we do a piece for the Cologne Cathedral, a *liberté-cathédrale* choreography, with bell-ringing that goes on for thirty minutes and the great pipe organ that makes the air vibrate around the bodies in contact. I have been also imagining that one day we might do a stadium piece: a thousand dancers in a stadium, in order to make art, the type of art we need today, an art of living-moving-thinking together. Our society is wounded: dance cannot mend everything, but it can act on the imagination, it has the capacity to be a political medium in the public space. I would go so far as to say: we need to project ourselves, as a society, as a dancing people, a diverse ensemble of bodies that dance so that, for a moment, we abolish social gaps. Company dancers are an immense resource: of course, they are the extraordinary performers we know, but they are also transmitters of art, the transmitters of a necessary movement, and I believe that together we can invent a company that is more "porous" to other bodies and to contemporary social issues.

Pina Bausch's oeuvre. I believe that if Solomon Bausch and Peter Pabst had not been so open and

curious, I would not be here today.

Her work has been a Wuppertal treasure, and today it should be included on the World Heritage List. The foundation, the company, the city, and the state could even apply to the UNESCO: we have taken care of these artistic and human gestures, we have made them available to the eyes and bodies of future generations...

The movement of transmitting Pina's works is already underway, with pieces being performed at the Paris National Opera Ballet, at the Flanders Ballet, at the Lyon Ballet... in Senegal... I also have the impression that the residents and the spectators dream of touching these "dancing dreams": Pina has shown us the way by working with teenagers and senior citizens.

I will need time to immerse myself in this repertoire and feel my way through it. I want to do mild "restorations," as they say in painting, taking a slightly different look at the repertoire which should remain fairly stable, but just let it vibrate with today's audience. And I also have the desire to experiment more radically with certain projects, to dare to look at one's work the way one looks at musical scores or theatrical texts, as works "to be interpreted," that is to say, to inhabit them differently. With the Musée de la Danse, we have done a lot of work to understand what collection, what museology could be in the field of dance, how we could make living exhibitions with dancers who are both living archives and improvisers of their memories... I hope that the unique knowledge of the company and my work as a "curator" in the field of the living arts will also allow me to place Pina's journey in a constellation of artists who have participated in her work or who feel an "elective affinity" toward her.

It will take a lot of tact for all of us to exercise our freedom at its most intense. I know that all the partners here wish the same thing and have this confidence, and I thank you all, overcome as I am with emotion.