

## **Isadora Duncan: Spirit of Athena**

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Ideas move on the wind independent of time, space and artful human intervention. So it is now with awakening interest in the ideals of Isadora Duncan which, for too long, have been trapped like a handful of ungerminated seeds in inhospitable soil. But time and place do not diminish the power of a fecund idea; the dance world may be wafting toward a first major revival of Duncan lore in more than half a century.

Unlike the proverbial phoenix, Isadora Duncan's choreographies are not reborn from mounded ashes; they are emerging whole or in part, in versatile similitude, from an eclipse of faith, a lapse of social memory, to once again claim centre stage and to reassert the power of art to affect human consciousness. While not yet a ground swell, a momentum of discovery is beginning to span the almost mythological distance between the Periclean world in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and the Duncan world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century A.D. We are beginning to hear echoes of an embattled cry of the "Turbulent Goddess" [1] fighting for the integrity of choreographic art.

Was it not in ancient Greece that Demosthenes cautioned his country's artists to be responsive and sensitive to signs of cultural change, to warn the citizenry of potential operative consequences? Was it not the great political orator Pericles who reminded his constituency that "all Athens is the school of Hellas" and the individual Athenian in his own person possesses adaptive powers to act in any situation "with the utmost versatility and grace". Could it not have been such concepts which inspired the hortatory 'modern' Terpsichore to plead with her countrymen, "Give me 1000 children for my school"?

Her aim was to develop a model for technique, choreography and educational procedures by which "all children of the world", all people might attain "the highest intelligence in the freest body". She would devote her talent and energy "to discover in its ideal form the most beautiful rhythmic movement of the human body in harmony with the highest beauty of physical form and to resuscitate an art that lay dormant for 2000 years". In language of superlatives and inspired by her own dream of the 'future dance' as "the living leap of the child springing towards a great vision of life that would express America, she proclaimed that it would be a dance of "great strides, leaps and bounds, with lifted forehead and far-spread arms worthy of the name of the greatest democracy. [2] Counting herself a spiritual daughter of the poet Walt Whitman who wrote, "I Hear America Singing", she added, "I see America dancing". Twenty centuries earlier the voice of Pericles is said to have thundered, "There are monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and of succeeding ages"; two millenia after him, Isadora, staring in awed absorption at the Legacy of Greek art, convinced that such claims were more than nationalistic hyperbole, determined to seek out-the source of power by which ancient stone forms and marble goddesses draped in rigid gauzy flutings could still radiate an illusion of animated moving forms. To such purpose she announced, "C'est en Grèce qu'il faut aller rechercher son principe". [3] In the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles, in the great choruses of Euripides she found close association of music, movement and mood which was to become so integral a part of her later kinaesthetic discovery.

In her effort to restore what she perceived to be the past art of human movement to its original importance, the visionary artist discovered her own destiny. That her genius as a choreographer led her to translate democratic ideals - ancient and modern - into dance, is a historic fact. That the technique she devised flowed from her own way of thinking and sensing is also a fact (though quod erat demonstrandum as I shall explain later in this paper). She predicated dance designs, in a great tradition, on a direct and magnificent order of human truth stated with elegant simplicity: people are, people feel, people think, plan, act and react within frames of reference suited to their personal and collective Will. How this artist developed her way of dance is no secret to exceptionally gifted artists working in other media. She worked! As indicated in her autobiography, "It has taken me years of struggle, hard work and research to make one simple gesture". [4] Here, indeed, the Periclean principle resonates: "Beauty in simplicity". [5] From such an acorn, an impressive art was made manifest. In a burst of clairvoyance, she prophesied and promised, "I bring you the idea that is going to revolutionize our entire epoch. Where have I discovered it? By the Pacific Ocean, by the waving pine forests of Sierra Nevada I have seen the ideal figure of youthful America dancing over the top of the Rockies". Her dance was to be shaped according to "all the theories on which I founded my school, by which the body becomes transparent and is a medium for the mind and spirit". [6]

Yet for all her parochial allegiance, there is abundant alluding to an original experiment in what has come to be called Democracy, a word of Greek origin. More than that, her entire repertory seems to be abstract enunciations of subjective emotional states made impersonal and universal by the power of her artistry; sensuous imagery and careful structuring center on two absolute commitments, absolutely re-enforced:

A free dance is fundamental in the education of all children. Excellence in the arts is shared responsibility by the individual artists and the society in which they live; the arts should be supported by governments as public need legitimized by consent of the people - a most enlightened percept promoted in Periclean Athens. [7] So far in my discussion of Isadora Duncan and ancient Greece, I have indicated a few historical continuities and influences in the emergence of her works. Undoubtedly there is consensus for a seat in George Elliot's "Choir invisible" among "those immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence". But where are her works? Where is the corroborating proof of her genius? Where are the dances in hand to be examined, studied, analyzed, interpreted, and performed?

To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, [8] one of Duncan's most important contemporaries, what we discover about the dance designs must be assessed in relation to the dances she designed. But the published chronicles are incomplete. The real truths about the dreams of the incomparable dancer are contained only in the heretofore not signified part of the Duncan legend - truths that live only in an artist's enduring works. And where are the elusive dances? Perhaps in the kinesthetic memories of family members or of former members in the performing companies of the "Isadorables"?

As one such former Duncan Dancer who is also a Fellow of the International Council for Kinetography Laban, I took on a project, several decades ago, of retrieving the retrievable Duncan choreographies and to transcribe them in the Laban system of movement and dance notation. With the cooperation of other Duncan artists in the United States and in Europe, there are now completed a first volume of more than 100 exercises and dances. Awaiting publication, the book is entitled Dances of Isadora Duncan.

At least some of the Duncan choreographies are before us, on paper, like music scores, as art independent of time and chronicle, belonging to all, to see them, to view them from a contemporary perspective not with intent to 'modernize' them but to study, value and preserve them. It is in the recorded dances that we can trace their essential human-ness by which the expatriated woman prodded her contemporaries to 'remember the kinds of people humans are supposed to be'; [9] we can recognize with what artistic authority the artist spoke for her time and ours; we are able to compare her individual dances with works of other artists in various media for a harvest of self understanding. We may discover kinship between the illusion of ethereal motion in Brancusi's "Bird in space" (1925) and Duncan's Brahms's Waltz #8 with its gentle curving movements creating a sense of sweeping space. Perhaps the delicate hand gestures in the Schubert Water Study suggest the decorative Corinthian art; perhaps the responsorial patterns of Dubinushka (ДУБИНУШКА) echo ancient prosodic forms.

Assuming that the choreographies as transmitted to me between 1920 and 1930 principally by Riva Hoffman Freed of the Elizabeth Duncan School and by Anna Duncan and Irma Duncan, director of our first American Duncan Company have endured minimal tampering and minor distortions, what will future versions become without access to this first volume of notated dances? A chasm of elastic verities separates interpretation from alteration. New truths tend to feed like new trunks of a Banyan tree on older ones. Original shapes of Duncan dances already lean towards approximations advanced by any 'specialist' with the authority of vigor. Where might future dance students go to find the real Duncan works of an original artist who, like Irving Babitt, was unable to discover her true dance in the *au courante* philosophy of her day and was "led to prefer to the wisdom of the age the wisdom of the ages"? [10]

Where, indeed, other than in her written collected works can one study the kinaesthetic imagery or the systemic interweaving of techniques in manipulations of monothematic materials as, for example, in the impassioned Scriabin Etude (Op. 8#12)? Where, too, can one study at leisure how she fashioned choreographic patterns from Hellenic concepts of individual freedom within community planning - as though the very walls of the Parthenon were mute Dorian informants. I shall illustrate this last point with two examples.

First "Around the linden tree" is a short dance about the exuberance of youth. It is a circle dance, as shown on the illustration. It is common knowledge that Isadora had learned a bitter lesson about circular forms which tend to define limits of inclusion and exclusion. In the path design of this dance, note the clear implication of an open society in which individuals leave the group freely and return voluntarily to add invigorating effort to the communal circle (see illustration taken from "Dances of Isadora Duncan", section on dances to music of Schubert). In contrast to this she danced an untitled composition to a Chopin Mazurka (Op.17 #4). The dance confirms Duncan's insights not only into past events but into the present state of human alienation from its own kind:

- a) A woman enters onto a drab stage, moves aimlessly to a place, kneels, reclines, an uneventful presence in unengaged space.
- b) A second woman enters in like monotonous identity, with only passing acknowledgement of the first woman, she kneels, reclines on a place physically near but emotionally remote from the first entrant.
- c) A third woman enters in similar fog-bound mood. In an interlude, a subtle change occurs in the space-volume proportions as the three attempt conversation and mild hint of human

recognition, warmth and quickened tempo. The attempt passes, all return to their individual reclining postures, detached, remote from observers and from each other.

d) A fourth woman enters, aloof, weaves a path around the others, unobserving and unresponsive, settles into an available space, reclining. Again there is a subtle change in space-volume proportion.

The four figures in close physical proximity seem framed in individual anonymity by a compression of space into a cold stone of eternal time and umbrageous place. We watch hopefully for a sign of vital force, for recognition of neighbor, but there is none. The music ends exactly as it began, repeating the same four sotto voce measures. Even the short phrased musical "sighs" do not awaken the paralysis of will.

We do not know the precise motivation from which the choreographer drew inspiration for the muted entrances frozen into eventual unmoving entities like those enclosed in a Grecian pediment but we are affected by the beauty and vitality trapped within their individual forms. The dance is as contemporary as any current psychology study of restless loneliness, empty formalism, bedimmed evasion, doubt, uncertainty, inaccessibility, frustration and complete futility.

We can multiply the examples from our notations of happy dances in wish-fulfilling enclaves of flitting butterflies, children playing, capricious musical moments and Strauss waltzes. We can find parallels in Duncan's understanding of inner-outer energy which the child psychologist Piaget found curiously analogous to Aristotle's concept of the duality of motive forces and "responsive action of displaced air" (discussed in the book "Dances of Isadora Duncan", under Space-Consequent Motion). The content of many of her compositions may be compared with the works of her contemporaries who saw their world from a different perspective, artists who portrayed unspeakable crimes which we, the people, tend to commit against ourselves in the name of Democracy, overshadowed by political movement into one hundred years of wars and revolutions, horrendous human dislocations and monstrous machines raining death and destruction. Similar events were differently interpreted by Duncan. She portrayed people who in the grip of survival conflict reasserted the power and the will to live (note the last sections of dances such as Work Trilogy, Marche Militaire, Warshavianka).

Finally, and in conformity with the theme of this conference, I have discussed, all too briefly, some of the ideas and applications, contained in my book, which thread Theseus and Isadora. The dance scores indicate no new theory of movement such as promulgated by another contemporaneous movement scholar, Rudolf Laban, no golden wefts, no Pythagorean calculation for a theory of dance structure. What then is the pivotal point in her work which has earned her a permanent position in the world hall of fame?

Here, in Athens, she may have found kinaesthetic constructs into which she enfolded an ancient Athenian concept of relatedness between Nature and Human Nature. Inspiration found here has assuredly figured in her invention of a uniquely human style of dance. It is safe to say that this much-revered artist recognized democracy as humanity's unfinished business and that, throughout her work there are reminders of the emotional and intellectual persuasive powers in the arts. She may have pondered, as did Demosthenes, the behaviors in humans which engineered their own decline but she absorbed the notion that ancient Athenians had found a self-regulating basis for the rhythm of life. An artist of her own time, she committed her Will and her genius to extending the most productive and positive aspects

of past arts to building a better future. Striving for a new Art of the Dance, she refocused a lantern tales on tales and residual art works of a city in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. before Christianity where ideals of artistic and social rationality coincided with experiments in principles of political democracy, where popular religion was imaginative and non-dogmatic, where an invitatory climate fostered by the government attracted large numbers of gifted sculptors, architects, and a host of other artists and artisans who enshrined mythological gods in human form as eternal models of perfection in balance, symmetry and proportion. It was the city of Athena, Isadora learned, which had realized an environment conducive to learning, tranquility of the spirit and free expression of ideas.

As the modern world we know begins its third millennium, we may recall Walt Whitman's announcement that "Greece immortal lives" and his cogent declaration in 1871 "I say that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own form of art". [12] Having done this, it is unpardonable not to have a home for it. Perhaps on Kopanos Hill in clear view of the Acropolis, Isadora Duncan may at last realize her dream of an International School of a Free Dance.

## Notes

- [1] S. Hurok, *Impressario*, Random House, New York, 1946.
- [2] Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance*, Theatre Arts, N.Y. 1928.
- [3] All references to speeches by ancient Athenians are from Benjamin Jowett's translations in "Athens in the Age of Pericles", by C.A. Robinson, Jr. University of Oklahoma Press, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 1985 and "Pericles and the Golden Age of Athens" by Evelyn Abbott, G.P. Putnam's Sons, N.Y. 1891.
- [4] Duncan, Isadora, *The art of the dance*.
- [5] Duncan, Isadora, *My life*, Boni and Liveright, N.Y. 1928.
- [6] Duncan, Isadora, *An essay: Ce que doit être la danse*, ca. 1913.
- [7] Duncan, Isadora, *My life*.
- [8] Phrase quoted in "Arts & Ideas" by Wm. Fleming, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, inc., N.Y. 1965.
- [9] Duncan, Isadora, *My life*.
- [10] Elizabeth Drew, T. S. Elliot – *The Design of this Poetry*, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1949.
- [11] From the essay *Democratic Vistas*, 1871.

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