

Isadora Duncan (1877-1927)

by Ann Cooper Albright

Isadora Duncan was born on May 26, 1877 into a free-spirited, artistic family who lived in San Francisco. Her mother was a musician who played the piano almost constantly and organized dancing lessons for her children early in their lives. Despite real hardships resulting from the father's financial losses, the family prided itself on its cultured aesthetic sensibilities. Eventually Isadora persuaded her mother and siblings that she needed to follow her artistic destiny first to Chicago and then to New York City, where she worked briefly in the renowned producer Augustin Daly's theater company. One of the most famous photographs of her youth shows Duncan posing as a fairy from Daly's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Her tilted head, smiling face, arched back, and the classical position of her raised arms all suggest that by the time she was twenty, Duncan had incorporated an eclectic movement training that included bits of ballet as well as codified gestures called The Delsarte System of Expression.¹

Like many of her contemporaries, Duncan felt the draw of Europe and she soon left for London and then Paris, where she crystallized her aesthetic identity as a modern or "expressive" dancer. Duncan's star burned brightly in Europe for a decade, but the tragic death of her children when their car fell into the Seine river and the ravages of World War I shifted the focus of her work. She lived through varying degrees of fame and fortune (including a failed adventure in Greece and a brief infatuation with the Soviet experiment in Russia) before dying in a tragic car accident in 1927.

Popular sentiment has long regarded Isadora Duncan as the "mother" of Modern Dance, placing her at the top of a lineage that can be traced through multiple generations. Even contemporary modern

dance pedagogy, although it doesn't look like Duncan dancing and doesn't talk about 'soul' anymore, can trace its sources to a Duncanesque belief in "authentic" movement that comes from somewhere inside the dancer's body. Duncan was famous for being able to galvanize space in her solo performances. Often a small figure on enormous Opera House stages, Duncan evoked a fullness of presence that radiated out of her open arms and chest into the cavernous theater. She would begin in stillness, waiting for the music to inspire her motion. Poised in midst of a dramatic tension, she would wait until an unseen element called her forth, and she then would respond, rushing in one direction with quick, light steps.

"I spent long days and nights in the studio seeking that dance which might be the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body's movement. For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus. . . I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born, the mirror of vision for the creation of the dance" (Duncan, 1955, 75).

This oft-quoted phrase from Duncan's autobiography, *My Life*, encapsulates the mythopoetic tone of much of Duncan's own writing. Although she speaks of dancing, Duncan rarely calls herself a choreographer. Most of her descriptions, in fact, talk of "finding" movements, almost as if she were simply channeling the motion of the universe through her body. Her inspiration is often metaphysical, found in philosophical ideas about the goodness of nature or art, in addition to romanticized visions of the purity of ancient Greek culture that were so prevalent in early

twentieth-century Hellenism. Yet there is also a physical dimension here, for inspiration can literally mean to breathe in. When she reaches up towards the heavens, with her feet firmly weighted into the ground, Duncan embodies this tension between establishing her material body and evoking the metaphoric world around her.

At the beginning of her book on Duncan's American presence, *Done Into Dance*, Ann Daly describes Duncan's amazing ability to make visible what she calls a "narrative of force." "The general components of force are also those of Duncan's dancing: interaction, motion, directionality, and intensity. Duncan's solos – a single body struggling against, shrinking from, floating on, and thrusting into space – were enactments of agency, the self in the process of engagement with the external world, whether that meant love or fate, oppression or death" (Daly, 6-7). Whether it is the simple wave-like stepping forward and back of her early dancing, or the more dramatic, weighted, and defiant gestures of her mature work, this interplay of forces moves from the body out into the space around it, and then cycles back to affect the body anew. For Duncan, its source was the solar plexus, that "central spring of movement."

As an expressive dancer, Duncan used her breath to initiate movements, both her dynamic attack and her lyrical suspension. The cyclical nature of the breath regenerates itself, insuring a continuity of movement that Duncan then shaped dynamically and dramatically. In her essay on "The Dancer and Nature," Duncan expounds on what the dancer can learn from the action, suspension, and resolution of the waves. She then extrapolates from these examples to produce a universal law: "all energy expresses itself through this wave movement. For does not sound travel in waves, and light also?" (Duncan, 1969, 69)

Playing in between these visible and invisible waves, Duncan allowed her breath rhythm to ride over the metrical regularity of musical phrases. This improvisational dialogue with music produced a sense that Duncan was creating a unique style of moving, one that galvanized a new approach to dance on the theatrical stage.

When I teach about Isadora Duncan in my twentieth-century dance history class, I take the students outside to a memorial archway on campus. Standing between the columns, we draw on what we have learned of the cultural milieu of early modern dance and, inspired by the monumental architecture and open sky, we try to embody something of Duncan's expressive movement. Over the years, I have become increasingly aware that young dancers often have very little sense of space. They do not "see" it; they do not "feel" it; and they certainly cannot "sculpt" the space in any meaningful way. Kinesthetically, they remain inside their own physical reach space, dancing only with their reflection in the mirror. Any three-dimensional expansiveness that affects the space beyond their bodies seems outside the scope of their experience. I believe that by learning about Duncan, they might begin to envision a dialogue between movement and space. Indeed, encouraging a dynamic physical imagination is one of the greatest gifts that Duncan can give a younger generation of dancers.

Notes:

1. For more information on the Delsarte System of Expression see Elizabeth Kendall's "Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art Dance" and Nancy Lee Ruyter's "Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance."

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

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