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Women of Vision

Their Psychology, Circumstances, and Success

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CHAPTER ONE

Dancing Women's Freedom

The Story of Isadora Duncan

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"Isadora raised her arms and the stars rocked."
– Agnes de Mille, 1993, p. 13

Any faithful portrait of Isadora cannot be a simple one. She was too easily dubbed a "barefoot dancer" in the mass media of her day, but what seemed singularly important in her art was the upper part of her body, including the expressive arms to which choreographer de Mille's encomium draws our attention. She was renowned as a dancer, but she was contemptuous of some applications of that term, indicating on at least one occasion that she would prefer to be called an *expressioniste* (Kurth, 2001). She studied, admired, and was influenced by what she knew of the ancient Greeks, yet she took issue with too facile a description of her art as "Greek," pointing also to its transfusion by the American pioneer spirit, as evinced in her Irish grandmother's version of the jig. She described herself as an avowed enemy of ballet, but she eventually had an impact on two of the greatest figures in 20th-century ballet, the impresario, Diaghilev, and the choreographer, Folkine. Her San Francisco roots may well have provided the initial setting for the free expression that was to characterize her dancing; however, in an attempt to further acceptance of her work, she was continually to set her sights eastward (Chicago, New York, London, Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg). She led what is widely characterized as a "sensational life," as the subtitle of a recent and monumental biography (Kurth, 2001) attests, but what one reviewer of that book characterized as the "purity and seriousness" of her work has often escaped attention. It is the seriousness of her pursuits, rather than the attendant sensationalism, that we emphasize in this chapter. In the course of our account, some of the apparent contradictions in Isadora's life and work may become more comprehensible.

Several biographical works have been consulted as background for this chapter, but the preponderance of our material on Isadora's life comes from Kurth's (2001) exhaustive and highly reputed work and Isadora's autobiography (Duncan, 1927/1995). Unless otherwise indicated, it may be assumed that biographical detail came from one of the latter sources.

Some feminists might prefer the use of a surname in referring to a celebrated woman, as is the general practice with celebrated men. However, Isadora was that unusual person, regardless of gender, who at the height of her fame was widely known by only her first name. It is that uncommon degree of name recognition—and the associated attainment—that we honor in our references to her.

THE TRAIL SHE BLAZED

Suppose that we use Isadora's own account of her early experiences to select one self-defining memory in Singer and Salovey's (1993) sense, or

even what Schultz (2003) considers a prototypical scene—a recollection that would encapsulate the subsequent life story. We can hardly do better than to contemplate 6-year-old Dora having "collected half a dozen babies of the neighborhood, all of them too young to walk," and lining them up in a row on the floor, where she taught them to "wave their arms." She subsequently explained to her mother that this was her "school of the dance" (Duncan, 1927/1995, p. 16).

Viewed retrospectively, this episode captures more than one facet of her future career: (a) Note that she does not recall herself performing. Instead, she is teaching the very young how to experience their bodies. From her perspective, Isadora's mission was not primarily that of a dancer but closer to that of an educator or even what we now call a dance therapist. (b) It is the upper body—specifically, the arms—of these tender recruits on which the young Dora was concentrating. Critics would later comment on the distinctive use of her body in her performances. A *New York Times* review of her performance shortly after her first solo appearance on the New York stage in 1898 described her movements as more of the body and arms than of the legs. Similarly, a review by Shebuyev, a Russian theatre critic, in 1905 notes, "Actually the legs play the least important role in these dances. Here *everything dances*" (cited in Kurth, 2001, p. 153).

The young Dora may already have been acting in the service of body memories of which, even as an artistically precocious child, she could have had only a dim intuition. That such body memories may persevere was noted by Berger (1992) in her renewed exposure to Duncan exercises many years after studying in middle childhood with Julia Levien, a prominent exponent of the Duncan technique. Randomly picked in a workshop demonstration to be a partner for guest artist Levien (who did not immediately recognize her former pupil), Berger found that her "arms automatically floated into position . . . although it was a truly unconscious body memory which I had. I went through the rest of the day's work with tears streaming down my face. . . . This deeply emotional experience gave me direct, concrete validation of the power of the unconscious memories we hold in our bodies" (p. 97).

Isadora has often been described as the founder of modern dance, insofar as by example and exhortation she encouraged greater freedom in the movements of the dancer, in the interaction between dancer and dancing surface, and in the elimination of elaborate or confining costuming and set design. It is worth looking at what Isadora brought to the "new dance."

Presence

Reading about Isadora, one soon realizes that the somewhat ineffable dimension called "presence" was a significant element in her communication of her art. By her very presence, she may well have succeeded in

orienting her audiences to the "new" in her dance, whereas a less dynamic dancer would simply have left them completely puzzled and confused. One wishes in vain for a cinematic record of her programs, but all that is available is a brief clip of her appearance at a garden party—so brief as to leave the viewer completely at a loss in comprehending the fascination that Isadora could generate (Loewenthal, 1993).

There are some still photographs and paintings, drawings, and sculpture by Isadora's contemporaries that do give us a glimpse of the woman and her art. Let us first consider her face as it appears in some of her youthful photographs. Her features are very regular—striking eyes with sometimes the faintest hint of the exophthalmic, a straight and well-proportioned nose, a winsome mouth—but despite this regularity, she falls short of what would have been beautiful by the conventions of her day. Perhaps it is the suggestion of a receding chin or the compact distribution of features in the facial oval that detracts slightly from her frontal view. Certainly, she has a beautiful profile, where the soft jaw of the frontal view appears mysteriously strong. She was described as beautiful in some of the reviews of her work, which may be a tribute to the impression she created in her performances. The effect on members of her audience may have been intimated best by Genthe's series of still portraits, where the play of shadow and light on Isadora's features may have been similar to what was seen from the stage. (Genthe's rendering of Isadora is available in Duncan, Pratl, & Splatt, 1993.)

Isadora was taller and apparently not so spare in build as some of the dancers of her day. She is described as being about 5 feet, 6 inches tall and weighing just less than 130 pounds in her younger days—good proportions but not really sylph like. Photographs of Isadora taken early in her performing career show her still wearing toe shoes. What we see of her is garbed in a dress made from her mother's lace curtains, with only the slender lower portion of her legs visible. When her later costuming revealed more of her lower extremities, one could view what were really sturdy legs and equally sturdy thighs. Hers was apparently a physique much like that in the sculptures of Greek women that she was to see in the celebrated museums of Europe. For that matter, it also resembled the figures in Botticelli's "La Primavera," the painting that from childhood exercised such a hold on her imagination. Isadora's own figure thus seems to correspond with what she describes as the typical American build: "The real American type can never be a ballet dancer. The legs are too long, the body too supple, and the spirit too free for this school of affected grace and toe-walking. It is noteworthy that all great ballet dancers have been very short women with small frames" (Duncan, cited in Kurth, 2001, p. 22). What she saw as the incompatibility between the American build and what was favored in ballet was only one of her quarrels with the latter form of dance.

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