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ISADORA

By Janet Flanner

Like a ghost from the grave Isadora Duncan is dancing again at Nice. A decade ago her art, animated by her extraordinary public personality, came as close to founding an esthetic renaissance as American morality would allow, and the provinces especially had a narrow escape. Today her body, whose Attic splendor once brought Greece to Kansas and Kalamazoo, is approaching its half-century mark. Her spirit is still green as a bay tree, but her flesh is worn, perhaps by the weight of laurels. She is the last of the trilogy of great female personalities our century produced. Two of them, Duse and Bernhardt, have gone to their elaborate national tombs. Only Isadora Duncan, the youngest, the American, remains wandering the European earth.

Isadora Duncan

Illustration by Hugo Gellert



No one has taken Isadora's place in her own country and she is not missed. Of that fervor for the classic dance which she was the first to bring to a land bred on "Turkey in the Straw," beneficial signs remain from which she alone has not benefited. Eurythmic movements now appear in the curricula of girls' schools. Vestal virgins frieze about the altar fire of St. Marks-in-the-Bouwerie on Sabbath afternoons. As a cross between gymnasia and God, Greek dance camps flourish in the Catskills, where under the summer spruce, metaphysics and muscles are welded in an Ilissan hocus-pocus for the female young. Lisa, one of her first pupils, teaches in the studio of the Champs-Elysées. Isadora's sister Elizabeth, to whom Greek might still be Greek if it had not been for Isadora, has a toga school in Berlin. Her brother Raymond, who operates a modern craft-school in Paris, wears sandals and Socratic robes as if they were a family

coat-of-arms. Isadora alone has neither sandals nor school. Most grandiose of all her influences, Diaghileff's Russian Ballet—which ironically owed its national rebirth to the inspiration of Isadora, then dancing with new terpsichorean ideals in Moscow—still seasons as an exotic spectacle in London and Monte Carlo. Only Isadora, animator of all these forces, has become obscure. Only she with her heroic sculptural movements has dropped by the wayside where she lies inert like one of those beautiful battered pagan tombs that still line the Sacred Road between Eleusis and the city of the Parthenon.

Isadora arrived in our plain and tasteless Republic before the era of the half-nude revue, before the discovery of what is now called our Native Literary School, even before the era of the celluloid sophistication of the cinema, which by its ubiquity does so much to unite the cosmopolisms of Terre Haute and New York. What America now has, and gorges on in the way of sophistication, it then hungered for. Repressed by generations of Puritanism, it longed for bright, visible and blatant beauty presented in a public form the simple citizenry could understand. Isadora appeared as a half-clothed Greek. . . . A Paris couturier recently said woman's modern freedom in dress is largely due to Isadora. She was the first artist to appear uncinctured, barefooted and free. She arrived like a glorious bounding Minerva in the midst of a cautious corseted decade. The clergy, hearing of (though supposedly without ever seeing) her bare calf, denounced it as violently as if it had been golden. Despite its longings, for a moment America hesitated, Puritanism rather than poetry coupling lewd with nude in rhyme. But Isadora, originally from California and by then from Berlin, Paris and other points, arrived bearing her gifts as a Greek. She came like a figure from the Elgin marbles. The world over, and in America particularly, Greek sculpture was recognized to be almost notorious for its purity. The overpowering sentiment for Hellenic culture, even in the unschooled United States, silenced the outcries. Isadora had come as antique art and with such backing she became a cult.

Those were Isadora's great years. Not only in New York and Chicago but in the smaller, harder towns, when she moved across the stage, head reared, eyes mad, scarlet kirtle flying to the music of the "Marseillaise," she lifted from their seats people who had never left theatre seats before except to get up and go home. Whatever she danced to, whether it was France's revolutionary hymn, or the pure salon passion of Chopin's waltzes, or the unbearable heat of Brahms' German mode, she conspired to make the atmosphere Greek, fusing *Zeitgeists* and national sounds into one immortal Platonic pantomime.

Thus she inspired people who had never been inspired in their lives and to whom inspiration was exhilarating, useless and unbecoming. Exalted at the concert hall by her display of Greek beauty, limbs and drapes which though they were two thousand years old she seemed to make excitingly modern, her followers, dazzled, filled with Phidianisms, went home to Fords, big hats and the theory of Bull Moose, the more real items of their progressive age.

Dancing appeals less to the public than the other two original theatrical

forms, drama and opera (unless, like the Russian Ballet, dancing manages to partake of all three). Nevertheless, Isadora not only danced but was demanded all over America and Europe. On the Continent she is more widely known today than any other American of our decade, including Woodrow Wilson and excepting only Chaplin and Fairbanks, both of whom, via a strip of celluloid, can penetrate to remote hamlets without ever leaving Hollywood. But Isadora has gone everywhere in the flesh. She has danced before kings and peasants. She has danced from the Pacific to London, from Petrograd to the Black Sea, from Athens to Paris and Berlin.

She penetrated to the Georgian States of the Caucasus, riding third-class amid fleas and disease, performing in obscure halls before yokels and princes whom she left astonished, slightly enlightened and somehow altered by the vision. For twenty years her life has been more exciting and fantastic than anything Zola or Defoe ever fabricated for their heroines. Her companions have been the great public talent of our generation — Duse, d'Annunzio, Bakst, Rodin, Bernhardt, Picabia, Brancusi, and so on. Her friends have run the gamut from starving poets down to millionaires. She has been prodigal of herself, her art, illusions, work, emotions and funds. She has spent fortunes. After the war her Sunday night suppers in the Rue de Pompe were banquets where guests strolled in, strolled out, and from low divans supped principally on champagne and strawberry tarts, while Isadora, barely clad in chiffon robes, rose when the spirit moved her to dance exquisitely. Week after week came people whose names she never knew. They were like moths. She once gave a house party that started in Paris, gathered force in Venice and culminated weeks later on a houseboat on the Nile.

In order to promulgate her pedagogic theories of beauty and education for the young, she has legally adopted and supported some thirty or forty children during her life, one group being the little Slavs who are still dancing in Soviet Russia. During her famous season at the New York Century Theatre where she gave a classic Greek cycle, "Oedipus Rex," "Antigone," and the like, she bought up every Easter lily in Manhattan to decorate the theatre the night she opened in Berlioz' "L'Enfance du Christ," which was her Easter program. The lilies, whose perfume suffocated the spectators, cost two thousand dollars. Isadora had, at the moment, three thousand dollars to her name. And at midnight, long after all good lily-selling florists were in bed, she gave a champagne supper. It cost the other thousand.

Isadora, who has an un-American genius for art, for organizing love, maternity, politics and pedagogy on a great personal scale, had also an un-American genius for grandeur.

After the lilies faded, Isadora and her school sat amid their luggage on the pier where a ship was about to sail for France. They had neither tickets nor money. But they had a classic faith in fate and a determination to go back to Europe where art was understood. Just before the boat sailed, there appeared a school teacher. Isadora had never seen her before. The teacher gave Isadora the savings of years and Isadora sailed away. Herself grand, she could inspire grandeur in others, a tragic and tiring gift. There have always been school teachers and lilies in Isadora's life.

In the three summer programs which Isadora recently gave in her studio at Nice, one with the concordance of Leo Tecktonius, the pianist, the other two with Jean Cocteau, French poet and *éphèbe*, who accompanied her dancing with his spoken verse, her art was seen to have changed. She treads the boards but little now, she stands almost immobile or in slow splendid steps with slow splendid arms moves to music, seeking, hunting, finding. Across her face, tilting this way and that, flee the mortal looks of tragedy, knowledge, love, scorn, pain. Posing through the works of Wagner, through tales of Dante, through the touching legend of St. Francis feeding crumbs and wisdom to his birds, Isadora is still great. By an economy (her first) she has arrived at elimination. As if the movements of dancing had become too redundant for her spirit, she has saved from dancing only its shape.

Where will she dance next? In one of her periodic fits of extravagant poverty and although needing the big sum offered, she once refused to dance in Wanamaker's Auditorium, disdaining for her art such a "scene of suspenders." She has refused other theatres because they contain restaurants. She has just refused to appear at the Champs-Élysées because it is a music-hall. She talks of giving some performances in Catalonia. She might dance in a castle in Spain.

There is also much ado about her now in the Paris journals because of the recent sale of her house in Neuilly, a sale she was forced to make to pay a debt of ten thousand francs, and her refusal of a legacy valued at 300,000 francs from her one-time husband, Yessenin, the Russian poet. The Neuilly house has just been repurchased by a group of friends who will make it into a school as a memorial to the dancer's two children so tragically drowned in Paris in 1913.

All her life Isadora has been a practical idealist. She has put into practice certain ideals of art, maternity and political liberty which people prefer to read as theories on paper. Her ideals of human liberty are not unsimilar to those of Plato, to those of Shelley, to those of Lord Byron which led him to die dramatically in Greece. All they gained for Isadora was the loss of her passport and the presence of the constabulary on the stage of the Indianapolis Opera House where the chief of police watched for sedition in the movement of Isadora's knees.

Denounced as a Russian "red" sympathizer, Isadora does not even receive a postal card from the Soviet Government to give her news of her school which she housed in its capital. For Isadora has had a fancy for facts. As she once told Boston it was tasteless and dull, so, when they were fêting her in triumph in Moscow, she told the Bolsheviks she found them bourgeois.

Great artists are tragic. Genius is too large; and it may have been grandeur that proved Isadora's undoing—the grandeur of temporary luxury, the grandeur of permanent ideals.

She is too expansive for personal salvation. She has had friends. What she needed was

an entire government. She had checkbooks. Her scope called for a national treasury. It is not for nothing that she is hailed by her first name only as queens have been, were they great Catherines or Marie Antoinettes. Isadora is now writing her memoirs. Her private life, which always aroused public interest, is therein detailed. By her, the truth can then be told. ♦

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