Wrapped in Greek Robes of Spirituality:
Isadora Duncan’s Dance Performances, Gordon Craig, and Ancient Greece

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In this essay I will not focus on the tempestuous love affair of Gordon Craig and Isadora Duncan, as brief, all-consuming, and incandescent as it was, but rather on Duncan’s approach to her art and the context within which it developed, including their shared viewpoint regarding the classic aesthetic of ancient Greece as foundational to their aesthetic expression.¹ It should be briefly noted that one of her biographers, Victor Seroff, who knew her in person, was convinced that for Isadora, Gordon Craig was a paramount figure in her life. According to him, while seeing his failings, she admired, respected, and loved him more than any other man in her life. Of Isadora, Craig declared that “she was the only true dancer he had ever seen.”² She was his inspiration, his muse. However, in his profound misogyny, he resented any woman who might occupy that role, and Duncan was well aware of this and how corrosive his ambiguous feelings were to their relationship, which burned out within two years. She wrote in her autobiography that “his jealousy as an artist, would not allow him to admit that any woman could really be an artist.”³ Craig’s son and biographer Edward A. Craig agreed with Isadora and wrote, “He felt admiration for what had been to him the greatest artistic experience in his life, resentment that this revelation should come from a woman.”⁴ What they shared on the artistic level was, in Peter Kurth’s words, “a sense of proportion and the Greek ideal.”⁵
Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig

At the very end of his essay “The Art of the Theatre: The First Dialogue” Craig wrote the following: “Since you have granted all I asked you to permit, I am now going to tell you out of what material the artist of the theatre of the future will create his masterpieces. Out of ACTION, SCENE, and VOICE. Is it not very simple? And when I say action, I mean both gesture and dancing, the prose and poetry of action. And when I say scene, I mean all which comes before the eye, such as the lighting, costume, as well as the scenery. And when I say voice, I mean the spoken word or the word which is sung, in contradiction to the word which is read, for the word written to be spoken and the word written to be read are two entirely different things.”6 It is Thomas Leabhart who brought to my attention that “This is the part that everyone knows. But the part one does not know, unless one digs around in the papers at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is this: In some pencil notes on the back of a Decroux performance program, Craig wrote:

YG the Voice
ID the Movement
AA the scene

AA is certainly Adolph Appia, and ID is definitely Isadora Duncan.”7 [“YG” almost certainly refers to Yvette Guilbert, the French cabaret singer and actress.]

Duncan and Craig admired each other as artists. In a speech broadcast on the BBC in 1952, Craig said that she had a kind of power. “She projected the dance into this world of ours in full belief that what she was doing was right and great. And it was.” He called her “a forerunner,” meaning that she was an original. He recalled her costumes seeming like torn rags, which she “transformed into marvels of beauty.”8 In her autobiography, My Life, Duncan referred often to Craig as a genius. There were also practical aspects that the two brought to one another. On the most practical level, when Craig and Duncan first began a serious relationship, Isadora’s business had been arranged by her brother Augustin, who was “a lovable person, but hardly a business man” and Craig attempted to remedy that. Craig brought some rational shape to the management of Duncan’s career through putting her under the organization
of Maurice Magnus who was to “organize everything on a truly businesslike basis—at a rented office with a secretary.” They opened a joint bank account, but only Isadora was able to contribute to it. The second contribution Craig made to Isadora’s career was to redesign all of her publicity material, ensuring that drawings of her dancing were to accompany her on her tours and to be exhibited in the foyers of theaters where she performed, as well as on posters advertising her performances.

Isadora Duncan’s Dancing

Craig and Duncan shared an interest in ancient Greek arts and mythology, which is the context within which Duncan developed her art; the various influences that inspired her choreography; and the historical period that influenced many of her decisions. Several preliminary comments are due before proceeding to my main claim, namely, that Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and other “barefoot” dancers were not the mothers or grandmothers or inventors of modern dance, as is repeated as if it were a religious tenet of faith in dance history courses across the nation, a point that I made in an earlier study. Rather, I will make the case that Isadora was an interpretive dancer, who like the other barefoot dancers left no lasting pedagogical technique—that is, a method of movement that could be conveyed to others as a means of teaching. In this, they differed from the true “mothers” of modern dance, Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and others of that period. Dance historian Henrietta Bannerman states, “Graham’s radical movement was inspired to some extent by her German counterpart Mary Wigman, but it was fed by her own uncompromising determination to forge a new aesthetic—one that would express the surging vitality, hard edge, and revolutionary spirit of the American Dancer” in which Graham moved in the exact opposite direction of her mentors St. Denis and Ted Shawn with their “decorative excesses.” The techniques that Graham, Humphrey, and others left are not only a movement legacy, but also contributed to the development of the radically different choreographies and movement vocabularies they created. Supporting my argument, Duncan dancer, teacher, and scholar Julia Levien called her “an interpretive dancer.”

Helen Thomas notes that “Duncan’s work did not give rise to a definite technique” and in this she differed from the early American modern dancers like Graham. She adds, “The majority of her classes were devoted to very

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simple movements such as walking, running, jumping, rising and sinking.”  
And indeed, recorded performances of Duncan dancers reveal that her dances consisted primarily of those movements, accompanied by nineteenth-century arm and hand gestures to the sides and front that were popular in Delsartist parlor declamations. This is borne out by a brief analysis of *Mother*, Duncan’s choreography from 1923.

Irma Duncan, one her six protégées known as the Isadorables, who ran her dance school, described Isadora’s attempts at teaching: “Her method consisted in demonstrating the sequence of a dance perfectly executed by herself. Then, without demonstrating step by step, she expected her pupils to understand immediately and repeat it.” Seroff notes that Duncan “arrived at the depressing conclusion that she did not know how to teach.”

Duncan herself said, “I hate dancing. I am an *expressioniste* of beauty. I use my body as my medium, just as the writer uses his words. Do not call me a dancer.” I argue that the genius of Isadora Duncan lay in the profound stage charisma that she undoubtedly possessed. Certainly, Gordon Craig wrote of her “magnetism onstage.” Few observers of her work could express what she did in clear choreographic language, but they attempted to convey that which eludes words of description because of her command of the stage—her sheer power of presence. Toward the end of her career, it became clear that her impressionistic choreographies were the last gasp of nineteenth-century Antique Greek urn dancing rather than the gateway to a new dance genre—just as St. Denis’s old-fashioned impressions of “oriental” dances constituted the dead end of the largely nineteenth-century love of naïve exoticism. Thomas notes that her movement style “appears to have been pantomimic, emotive and with much emphasis on facial expression.” This is hardly the stuff of modernism.

**Isadora Duncan and Modernism**

I suggest that Duncan was very much a product of the long nineteenth century. Dance historian Lillian Loewenthal notes that in the 1920s Duncan “voiced her concern about the trendy avant-garde movement in the arts around her.” That would certainly have included dancers like Graham. She adds, “With the individualism of her approach to art, the demarcating line between the traditional dance and the modern esthetic she proposed was irrevocably
drawn.”19 I differ from Loewenthal on which side of that line Duncan stood. That concern about the avant-garde would certainly have included the revolutionary choreographic art that Graham, Humphrey, Wigman, and Tamaris were creating, placing Duncan on the opposite side of that aesthetic chasm, rather than on the modern side. In a passionate essay, “I see America dancing,” modeled on Walt Whitman’s poem, Duncan describes her ideal of how America should dance. Nancy Lee Chalta Ruyter notes wryly, “Her vision was to be realized in the 1930s, albeit in dance styles she would have found harsh and ugly,” and modern in a way that hers were not.20

Carrie J. Preston voices the most persuasive claim for the position that Duncan falls into the modernist aesthetic, writing that “dance criticism and modernist studies alike have failed to recognize the extent of Duncan’s participation in international modernism.” To support her argument Preston refers repeatedly to Duncan’s use of the phrase “motor of the soul.”21 However, if we apply conventional definitions of modernism to an analysis of Duncan’s choreographies—rather than emphasizing what she said about them in her famous after-the-curtain polemical speeches—we see that Duncan looked consistently to the mythical past, following Delsarte for the inspiration for her dances. I follow critic and dance scholar Ann Daly’s summation that Duncan “‘never completed the leap’ from Victorianism to modernism,” an evaluation shared by others as well.22 Thomas agrees that Duncan’s practice did not fully embrace modernism. By taking the art of ancient Greece as her dance model and by relying on music as the emotional stimulus to release the substance of dance, her work also embodied elements of romanticism.23 Viewing performances of Duncan’s dances supports the idea of her art as a direct descendant of Delsarte’s nineteenth-century philosophy of health through positive gestures.

In fact Duncan’s movements, according to reconstructions and descriptions, ran to the simple—running, skipping, simple turning, striking poses, etc.—a trait noted by scholars including Loewenthal.24 I suspect that she used what appear to be “childlike” movements, inspired by the social Darwinist belief that what children performed was “natural” and “spontaneous,” terms that she used frequently to describe her dancing.25

Mother (1923), a late choreography, demonstrates the simplicity of the movements. A woman in a black robe enters upstage right, moving diagonally
toward downstage left. She looks longingly to her right side and alternatively to
the front as she stretches right with her right hand, then with both hands. The
left hand makes caressing movements, as if fondling a child. She then lifts her
left hand above her. During all of this her grief-stricken face looks toward the
audience and then down or to the side. All of these movements are repeated.
She reaches toward the audiences as she kneels. She sways back and forth with
hands clasped or almost closed, as if holding a baby. Hands to her sides, she
reaches up both hands above her head, and then places her left hand on the floor
and reaches up. She ends the dance with her left hand placed on the floor
reaching up with her right hand and the light fades.26 I strongly believe that
many of the gestures and movements of this choreography derive from or were
inspired by Delsartism, even this late in her career. Certainly, Craig noted that
she carried a copy of Delsarte’s books in her trunk, and he seemed to believe
that to be a source of inspiration for her dances.27 Duncan’s dances for groups
utilize the same movements as her solo dances. She did not create very
sophisticated ensemble works, largely keeping her dancers in simple line and
circle formations.28

Because Duncan spoke at length about “natural” dancing, it is at this
point that I wish to address the oft-mentioned notion that Duncan and other
barefoot dancers were turning their backs on classical ballet, hardly a more
respectable art than dancing in musicals in that period. This was patently
untrue. There were no real ballet companies outside Russia, France, Italy and
Denmark; as dance historians Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick state,
“It is popularly believed that these creators of a new dance were rebelling
against ‘the ballet.’ But none, in her formative years, was in a position to see
any ballet worthy of the name.”29 Aside from ballroom dancing, the only form
of dance that women of that period performed was skirt dancing, and many of
the dancers like Fuller, Duncan, and St. Denis had to perform it at least briefly
early in their careers out of necessity, to earn a living at a time when few
employment opportunities existed for women. Skirt dancing, the primary form
of dance on Broadway and London stages, which from all descriptions was
similar to the can-can and consisted of step dancing with high kicks and the
shaking of the skirt to reveal undergarments of the dancer.30

The music Duncan used, such as the Romantic Chopin, Schuman,
Brahms, and other nineteenth-century composers, provides another clue to her

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romantic aesthetic bias. While I agree with Preston that analyzing Duncan’s speeches, writings, and utterances “tends to foster a divide between studies of her dance and analyses of her published aesthetic theories,” I think the analysis of her dances reveals her actual romantic nineteenth-century aesthetic more than her writings do.\(^{31}\) Duncan lived in a period in which modernism was dawning; however, I agree with Daly that while Duncan may have been a bridge between the two, “she never did emerge fully into the new aesthetic order.”\(^{32}\) And while Ruyter notes that Duncan was “influential or at least prophetic” in her use of dance for “political or social statements” and “breaking the barrier between the audience and performer,” she notes that Duncan “never went beyond the ideal.”\(^{33}\) This observation underscores the point that although Duncan may have thought herself to be modern, her movements and choreographies support Daly’s evaluation that her aesthetic remained in the nineteenth century. I argue that if we analyze what it was that Duncan did in her dances and choreographies, as opposed to what she articulated verbally, many would conclude that her work has little of modernism in it, and becomes almost a choreographic version of Maxfield Parrish’s or Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s idyllic paintings of classical Greece. This does not mean that she was not innovative. She brought the solo dance form as a performing art to new heights. She often appeared on stage with minimal lighting and sets and, through her considerable charisma and charm, kept audiences rapt in admiration.

Duncan was most likely self-taught and very much influenced by François Delsarte and his disciple Genevieve Stebbins, as were all sectors of America and Europe where “emotional expression” and “classical statue posing” were the rage. So ubiquitous were Delsarte and his disciples that George Bernard Shaw said that Delsarte had founded a “quack religion.”\(^ {34}\) Daly observes that Duncan appropriated “the dominant discourses of the 1880s and 1890s—evolutionary theory, Hellenism, and physical culture, to name a few.”\(^ {35}\) The verbal articulation of these discourses, no matter how modern they might appear, do not inform her dancing, only her stated perceptions of it. Although Thomas claims that Duncan’s emphasis on the solar plexus as the “center of movement” was new to dance, Preston notes that Genevieve Stebbins “anticipated Duncan’s solar plexus” in her widely-read books on the Delsarte method. Duncan soon denied associations with Delsartism in order “to claim originality, genius, and individuality.”\(^ {36}\) Reading books about Isadora Duncan,
one finds that she made contradictory claims for the origins of her dancing, especially in regard to the ancient Greek elements.

**Isadora Duncan’s World**

In order to contextualize the world in which Duncan, born in San Francisco in 1877, created her career, we have to consider several points. First, in her time and place, she was considered a great beauty, and being the intelligent woman that she was, she capitalized on it, and parlayed that beauty into a fortune, until it failed her late in her career. Her first audition ended in failure because the manager of the theatre said that her dance was “more suited to a church.”

His comments were not lost on her. She now took to wrapping herself in classical uncorseted, gauzy, limb-revealing garments that titillated the male part of her audiences, while inspiring the female part, at least in Europe. The more puritanical Americans were shocked, as much by her leftist politics and advocacy of free love as by her revealing dance costumes, while Loewenthal describes her dances as “completely devoid of the erotic.”

However, Elyssa Dru Rosenberg stated that early in her career she was “performing often in the homes of wealthy patrons. She took advantage of her beauty, and of the intimate space, and choreographic movements that allowed her to flirt with audience members and explore her sexuality on the stage.”

Thus, in order to continue a career at a time when professional dancers were assumed to be sexually available, her sensuality could be shown, but it had to be hidden under the respectability of being wrapped in the spirituality and classical historical associations of ancient Greece, a powerful image in the late nineteenth century, due to the influence of Johan Joachim Winkelmann, the champion of ancient Greek art, and others. The use of spirituality and Hellenism gave Duncan the opportunity to be taken as a serious artist.

What is often forgotten is that Isadora was not the first to think of using Greek clothing and poses; the earliest mention we have of this was a century earlier: “During the late 1780s, [Sir William] Hamilton’s mistress, and later wife, Emma, developed and displayed her famous ‘Attitudes’ for guests attending his Naples home. This dancing of sorts was inspired by both pose and dress on ancient works of art, and to some extent by the Greek vases in Hamilton’s own collection.” She was thus able to provide those guests with a provocative view of her nearly nude body. “Not all ‘antique dancing’
disappeared around 1820: some survived as part of the ‘night scene.’ ‘Greek dance’ was an excellent pretext for women to undress; thus the 1841 London edition of *The Swells’ Night Guide through the Metropolis* directs young gentlemen in search of an enjoyable night about town in London to the ‘Temples of Voluptuousness,’ etc., where one could view ‘the slightly veiled daughters of Venus.’”

Carrie Preston amply demonstrates the influences and genealogy of Emma Hamilton’s poses and dancing down to Isadora Duncan.

Duncan lived in an era in which women who performed in public, whether acting, or worse dancing, were considered to be prostitutes, and sexually available. Nice women stayed at home, while “public identities, including performing careers were equated to prostitution.” The answer to women with artistic ambitions or who at least did not wish their appearances equated with prostitution, quickly abandoned this form of dance and turned to spirituality to provide a respectable cover for dancing in revealing costumes. That spirituality was found in ancient Greece and the orient. “Just as Ruth St. Denis’s gimmick was the ‘exotic’ and Loïe Fuller’s was the ‘picturesque,’ so Duncan’s was the ‘classical.’” Thus, we see the figures of Greek goddesses and Salomes flooding stages and drawing rooms as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Maud Allen, and Mata Hari donned clinging robes and bejeweled bras to show their new interpretive art, and for the time period, a considerable expanse of their anatomy. Thomas notes that while Loïe Fuller probably rejected corsets and donned tights, “even she was shocked by the sparsity of Duncan’s dance attire, which made her appear nude.” This may explain her ability to charm money “from society ladies and rich lovers” in order to promote her art.

Although she drew large audiences, not everyone was equally impressed by her dancing or her Greek references. The astute Count Harry Kessler, who saw her in Berlin in 1903 at the Krolloper, commented sharply:

> She is affected, with a sentimental fluttering of the eyes, has only one movement which she repeats until it’s painful, dances without rhythm and without passion, and has in common with Greek art only what philistines consider ‘antique,’ that is dreary emptiness and saccharine beauty. Her chief attractions are that she is naked and conventional, exactly the same attractions of academic art. She is the embodiment of the academic in dance.
Spirituality was an easy choice for it was everywhere in America. As Kurth has observed, “This was the era of the table-rappers, ouija boards, and theosophy, but it was also the era of Darwin, whose *On the Origin of the Species* “far from curtailing the wilder flights of spiritualist thought, instead gave birth to the most unscientific developments in popular culture.”

**Isadora Duncan and Ancient Greece**

Peter Kurth writes of Isadora’s engagement with classical Greece, “In origin, at least, her life’s devotion to classical Greece could be traced to the American search for cultural legitimacy and the romantic idea that ‘ancient’ and ‘beautiful were one and the same. … ‘I did not invent my dance,’ she repeated, ‘it existed before me, but it lay dormant. I merely discovered and awakened it.” It was this highly popular vision of classical Greek art that she shared with Craig and which would draw her and her family to Greece in 1903. Daly notes, “The aura of Greece—as a symbolic suture between ‘Nature’ and Culture—clung most fiercely to Duncan early in her American career, when her audiences needed to make sense of her unfamiliar style of dancing.” Thus, associations with ancient Greece in an age of rampant Hellenism grounded her art for her viewers.

She seems to have first been moved to emulate Greek dancing in London, where “we spent most of our time in the British Museum where Raymond [her younger brother] made sketches of all the Greek vases and bas-reliefs, and I tried to express them to whatever music seemed to me to be in harmony with the rhythms of the feet and Dionysian set of the head, and the tossing of the thyrsus.” As art historian Tyler Jo Smith notes,

It is impossible to say exactly which kind of vases she used, and it is safe to assume that she was less concerned with technique … provenance … or chronology … than she was with the most helpful and, for her unique purposes, reproducible in terms of poses, gestures, or clothing. When she drew inspiration from vases, it seems she did so indiscriminately, though it is important to stress that she looked to the hand-holding line dancers that adorn many vessels, and may well have been attracted to their female subject matter.
As a solo dancer she also, curiously, frequently claimed that she was representing the chorus. “From the beginning I conceived the dance as a chorus or community expression.”\textsuperscript{54} This is a curious concept in light of her success as a soloist.

Although she never gave up the ideal, the reality of Athens, little more than a primitive village set amid the classical ruins in 1903, most likely dismayed her, as it had Lord Byron less than a century before. She describes “bedbugs, hard wooden planks for sleeping, the assorted perils of the countryside.”\textsuperscript{55} The French viscount Chateaubriand, Byron’s contemporary, quipped, “Never see Greece, Monsieur, except in Homer. It is the best way.”\textsuperscript{56} The Duncans bought land for a house “that was far from Athens, and was rocky soil, producing only thistles. Besides, there was no water anywhere near the hill. … We decided to remain forever in Greece.”\textsuperscript{57} Her brother Raymond remained there for years, living on a shepherd’s diet, wearing sandals and robes, which he wove himself. Hers was a more realistic viewpoint, and while she may have worn ancient robes on stage, she also liked good hotels and haute couture, which the considerable revenues from her performances enabled her to enjoy.

Although Isadora never credited her sources, except vague references to “nature” and “ancient Greece,” she nonetheless at some point in her career considered herself to be reviving an ancient dance tradition that had not been performed for two millennia. She may well have been inspired by the work of a French musician Maurice Emmanuel (1862-1938) who “studied rhythm as such, in Greek poetry, in Greek music and in Greek dance—ancient Greek mousike.”\textsuperscript{58} For Emmanuel used the new technology, photography, namely chronophotography and early cinema, familiar through the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge. “Emmanuel looked at ancient images of dancing in the same way that he looked at modern photographs.”\textsuperscript{59} Through the taking of a series of poses, Emmanuel was convinced that he had found the authentic ancient Greek dance. Dance historian Frederick Naerebout is convinced that Isadora had access to Emmanuel’s work, which had rather wide circulation. It is well known that Isadora went everywhere to view Greek art. Other researchers were also attempting to recover authentic Greek dance. But as Naerebout notes of Duncan, “She never mentions Emmanuel. … But then she hardly ever
referred to influences within the field of dance: she apparently did not intend to detract from her own originality.”

The enthusiasm for Emmanuel’s work, classical posing, revival Greek urn dancing, and similar attempts at reviving the glory of ancient Greece lasted until World War I. I am sure many remember the brilliant moment in *The Music Man*, set in turn-of-the-century Iowa, in which Hermione Gingold and a bevy of middle-aged housewives, clad as nymphs in Greek robes declaimed in throbbing voices: “One Grecian Urn,” which gives the modern audience a notion of what that “artistic” enterprise must have looked like. And as Ann Cooper Albright notes, women like Duncan, Colette, and Fuller, “despite the quite different looks of their performances … were connected by the fact that, at some point in their careers, they all conjured a vision of ancient Greece to enhance the representation of their bodies as agents of self-expression.”

Greece was in the air, as well as in a great deal of columned architecture of the period.

There remains a large question as to whether Isadora, through viewing Greek art and statuary was attempting to recreate actual ancient Greek dance or whether she was interpreting it in an impressionistic way. “In 1903 she stresses that she does not seek to recreate Greek movement,” observes Naerebout, “but a 1909 Paris programme again speaks of ‘reconstitutions de danse antique.’ If Duncan’s position on this issue is unclear this is probably the result of both confusion and opportunism, in varying combinations. Whatever she said herself, from the evidence a good case can be made for antiquity being the main inspirational force in her career.”

In her autobiography, she writes that while in Paris she and her brother Raymond spent hours at the Louvre “absolutely absorbed in the Greek vases. … We spent so much time in the Greek vase room that the guardian grew suspicious and when I explained in pantomime that I had only come there to dance, he decided that he had to do with harmless lunatics, so he let us alone.”

In the early part of her career, at the turn of the century, French painter Eugene Carrière said of her dancing, “Isadora in her desire to express human sentiments, found in Greek art the finest models. Full of admiration for the beautiful bas-relief figures, she was inspired by them. Yet, endowed with an instinct for discovery, she returned to Nature, whence all these gestures came, and believing in imitating and revivifying the Greek dance, she found her own
expression.”64 And all of the drawings and photographs of Isadora at that period depict her in (very short) versions of Greek tunics.65

In relation to the claims of Isadora as the mother of modern dance, Naerebout states: “Isadora Duncan and the many others like her are not harbingers of ‘modern dance’ or even the modern age. … Their heyday was the final years of the long nineteenth century, until 1914. Duncan tried to reinvent herself, but it was the ‘Greek’ label——once a ticket to success—that stuck and that caused her to be out of fashion well before she died in 1927.”66 And although Duncan waffled between claiming to be resuscitating ancient Greek dance, and merely being inspired by it, with statements like “to call back to life again that ideal movement” or “to awaken an art which has slept for two thousand years,” her audiences certainly thought that she was attempting to embody that ancient art form.67 Even though she repeated over and over again “we were not, nor could be other than moderns” and that she was only attempting to revive the spirit of Greek dance, and that despite these statements “almost everybody was convinced that she was reviving Greek dance, or was trying to do so.”68 And, thus, I suggest that rather than being the mother of modern dance, she was, in fact, the last gasp of ancient Greece urn dancing and the nineteenth-century Romanticism that produced it. Her autobiography breathes the wonderment of Romanticism, not the stark lines of modernism.69

Notes

1 See Francis Steegmuller, Your Isadora: The Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig (New York: Random House, 1974).
3 Isadora Duncan, My Life (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1928), 183-186.
6 Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre (Chicago: Browne's Bookstore, 1911), 180.
7 Thomas Leabhart, personal communication with the author, November 15, 2012.
8 Quoted in Steegmuller, 360.
9 Seroff, 94.

Isadora Duncan Dance: Technique and Repertory, directed by Andrea Mantell-Seidel (Dance Horizons, 2012) DVD.


Quoted in Seroff, 183.

Seroff, 183.

Quoted in Kurth, x.

Steegmuller, 7.

Thomas, 67.


Quoted in Preston, 146.

Thomas, 66.

Loewenthal, 10.

Preston, 163-164.


Steegmuller, 363.

During the Edward Gordon Craig Conference held at Pomona College, March 28-30, 2013, Lori Belilove, one of the foremost interpreters of Isadora Duncan’s oeuvre, gave a recital featuring several reconstructions of Isadora Duncan’s works just a few hours after I had delivered my paper. I remained more than ever convinced, that not only were the “childlike” and simple movement descriptions correct, but that the aesthetic impulses of Duncan’s work were rooted in the nineteenth century. It is difficult to imagine a true modernist like Graham dancing to Brahms’ “Lullaby.”


Thomas, 62.

Preston, 145.

Ann Daly, Done Into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 209.

Ruyter, 51-52.


Daly, 17.

Thomas, 64; Preston, 152.

Kurth, 30.

Loewenthal, 10.
39 Isadora Duncan Dance.
42 Preston, Modernism’s Mythic Pose.
44 Preston, 19.
45 Daly, 103.
46 Thomas, 61.
47 Ruyter, 70.
48 Count Harry Kessler, Journey to the Abyss: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler, 1880-1918, ed. and trans. Laird M. Easton (New York: Knopf, 2011), 289-90. Kessler later relents in his opinion of her artistry. “Poor Isadora! She never could rid herself of something philistine and school-marmish, however much she tried by way of free love and selection her children’s fathers to break the bounds of convention and American Puritanism in her art. Yet she was a real artist, and art and tragedy constituted an ineradicable element of her private life as did her Californian philistinism. Dancing of the caliber which today we hold in high esteem, and even the Russian Ballet, would not have been possible without her” (1971, 330).
49 Kurth, 30-31.
50 Ibid., 21.
51 Daly, 110.
52 Duncan My Life, 54-55.
53 Smith, 84.
54 Duncan, 140.
56 Quoted in Maria Todorova, Imagining the Balkans (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 94.
57 Duncan, 124, 126.
58 Naerebout, “‘In Search of a Dead Rat,’” 42.
59 Ibid., 45.
60 Ibid., 50.
61 Albright, “” 59.
62 Naerebout, 51.
63 Duncan, 67.
64 Duncan, 82.
65 See Loewenthal, The Search for Isadora.
66 Naerebout, 55.
67 Quoted in Naerebout, 63.
68 Naerebout, 63.
69 One of the reasons that I rely on what she did rather than what she said she was doing is because having sat on dance panel after dance panel evaluating and awarding grants, it was not at all uncommon for a choreographer to write the most penetrating prose about their work and its innovative elements only for the panelists to view the work and come to completely opposite conclusions. Duncan may have been entirely sincere in the way she described her dances, but in viewing and analyzing it, I found no traces of a modernist aesthetic.

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