

DANCEMAGAZINE

july 1977

\$1.50

special:
isadora duncan
centennial

maurice béjart
ballet
of the
20th century

ohio ballet

ballet west

dance awards
1977

isadora duncan

isadora's childhood

clearing away the clouds

by paul hertelendy

Isadora Duncan came out of California and took Europe by storm. Europeans asked themselves how such a mesmerizing innovator could have emerged from an American wilderness at the turn of the century; and no one really knew. Even her autobiography, completed not long before her death in 1927, raised as many questions as it answered with its sketchy recollections. She was a legendary figure; her book kept it that way.

New research sheds light on Duncan's upbringing, fills in areas clouded over by time, and corrects a number of apparent errors—including her accepted birthdate, and even her name.

Museum directors who thought that they still had ample time to prepare for Isadora's centennial have now been brought up short by the recently rediscovered baptismal certificate at Old St. Mary's Church, in the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown. According to the register, she was baptized October 3, 1877. She was born not 1878 but 1877, and not May 27 but May 26, "in this parish."

Her name, too, is a surprise: Angela.

Since this baptismal certificate is the closest to a birth record found to date, it has to be considered authoritative. It has been corroborated by both her brother Raymond and her early playmate Florence Treadwell Boynton, both of whom outlived her by many decades. Living on different continents, each insisted to relatives that Isadora was actually born in 1877.

Isadora was the fourth of four children, offspring of a classic mismatch. Her mother, Mary Dora Gray Duncan, had been born of a staunch Irish-Catholic family in St. Louis in 1849. She was well-bred, well-read, and very musical. The father, Philadelphian Joseph Duncan, was thirty years his wife's senior and father of four grown children by a previous marriage that had ended in divorce (one of them, William, acted as Isadora's godfather). The father was typical of many flamboyant figures dominating the young city of San Francisco: a daring entrepreneur, well-to-do speculator, banker, journalist, poet, bon vivant and ladies' man.

Five days before Isadora's baptism, Joseph Duncan's Pioneer Bank closed, and he allegedly vanished with \$10,000 of depositors' funds. The ensuing embarrassment, coupled with the hounding of creditors predictably made life miserable for Isadora's mother,



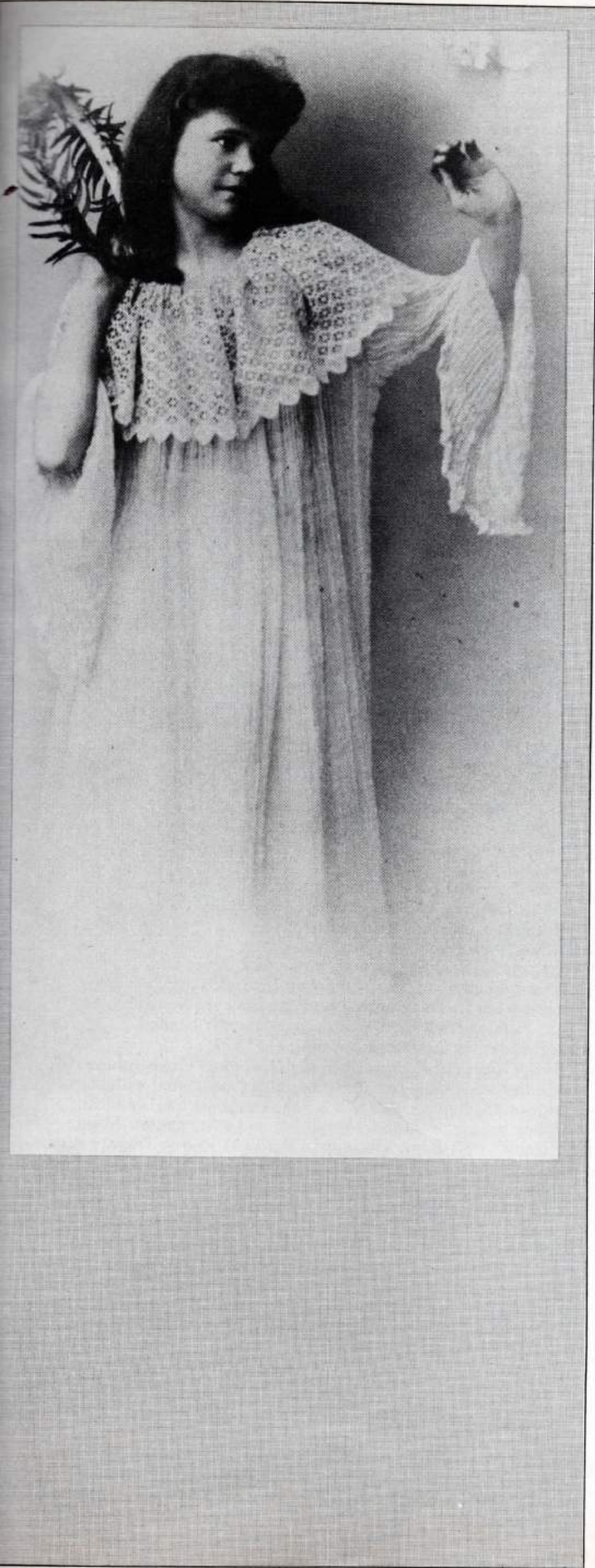
whose marital relations were already strained by her husband's extramarital love affairs. Before long Mary Duncan moved her brood across San Francisco to Henry House (now the Portland Hotel) in Oakland, and Joseph Duncan was apprehended by the law hiding in a seamstress' apartment. The Duncans divorced after their separation, and Joseph had to stand trial for absconding.

"Joseph Duncan kept many woman friends, and after she found out, Isadora's mother never wanted to have anything more to do with him," explains Aia Bertrand, widow of Isadora's brother Raymond.

Between the flight, the irate creditors, the family disgrace and Joseph's being denounced as a crook and scoundrel, the situation was traumatic enough to have overcome a lesser woman than the resilient Mary Duncan. Before long abject poverty was thrust upon her. When she wasn't giving piano lessons, she was staying up nights slaving on farmed-out knitting for the local shops. The plunge from bank president's wife to struggling breadwinner meant a rude jolt, but she was up to it. The dwindling funds drove the Duncan brood out of Henry House after two years. They hid out for six months in 1880 at a rented Napa farm, miles from anywhere. The rural life had a lasting influence on all of them, Raymond recalled. Then they returned to Oakland, occupying a sequence of ever dingier flats, always a step or two ahead of the landlord's rent demands. They moved annually. Mrs. Duncan was forced to pawn family keepsakes such as miniatures of George and Mary Washington, on which their good friends the Treadwells loaned them money as a favor.

The hard knocks turned little Isadora into a girl who was fiercely independent, resourceful, ambitious, adventurous, fatalistic and relatively mature, of necessity. These attributes would be indispensable for her self-styled revolution in dance in later years. The Duncans became "very clannish and self-sufficient. They had no close friends," states Isadora's niece, Andrea Duncan Ellis.

Isadora went to school, but barely. She spent at most five absence-riddled years at Cole School before dropping out for good before her twelfth birthday in order to earn a living. Her studies thereafter became impromptu: help from the sympathetic poet-librarian Ina Coolbrith (whose sympathy may well have been



Below:
The First Unitarian Church at 14th and Castro Streets in Oakland, California; this was the site of one of Isadora Duncan's first public performances. (Photo: Lonnie Wilson)

Left:
A rare photo of Isadora Duncan taken in Fresno in 1889, age 12. Isadora was touring various California towns with her sister, Elizabeth, and her brothers, Augustin and Raymond. (Photo: Archives for the Performing Arts)

Opposite:
Oakland's Portland Hotel at 476 9th St., the residence of Isadora Duncan in 1887-1878, when it was called the Henry House. Built circa 1875. (Photo: Lonnie Wilson)



spurred by her earlier affair with Joseph Duncan), long recitals of Chopin and Schubert by her piano-playing (and -teaching) mother, and copious readings of Dickens, Greek mythology, Thackeray and Shakespeare. Mary Duncan was decidedly a liberated woman; instead of reading fairy tales or saying prayers to the kids, in the evenings she read them lectures of free-thinker Robert Ingersoll. By day, the 1.3 miles to the public library became a hop, skip and jump for Isadora, and the mud and dust be damned.

Many times after a long day's work was done, the kids were put to bed and the mother would play classics on the piano well into the night. Little Isadora would sneak out of bed and improvise dances—barefoot, in her nightie, by the light of a kerosene lamp—while her mother pretended not to notice.

According to her brother Augustin, Isadora danced spontaneously and creatively from her earliest years. And it was a lucky thing she did. Oakland was a country town off the main touring theatrical circuit, and it is very doubtful that the family's finances allowed many ferry excursions to see dance in the flourishing San Francisco theaters. Isadora's isolation from the stage and the (then) decaying world of ballet probably proved an asset in formulating her original works later on. Unfettered by tradition, she began to do her own thing.

By the time she was eleven, the worst was past. The family moved into a permanent residence with a stable on the attractive, poplar-lined Eighth Street. Both Raymond and Augustin had jobs with the railroad; the women gave classes in sewing or music or what-have-you. Isadora's mother was formally listed in the city directory as Mrs. Dora Duncan, piano teacher. Isadora gave her first dance lessons for neighborhood children and playmates, the admission price being empty sacks. She taught social dances like the schottische and waltz—plus, no doubt, her own inventions.

Her only known dance instruction came from scant sources. She attended the Oakland Turn Verein, an active German-American club that met at Germania Hall and boasted singing, dramatic and gymnastic activities. Isadora took both dance and gymnastics there, recalled her friend Florence Treadwell Boynton. According to

(over)

Isadora's Childhood (Cont'd)

Raymond Duncan, Isadora's first real teacher was Jay Mastbaum, a San Francisco dance instructor listed in the city directory during the years 1885-90. He briefly commuted to teach the children waltzes and social dancing. Given to teaching while wearing an outdated sort of cassock, the hot-tempered maestro stalked out for good after arguments with Mrs. Duncan over her piano tempos. Elder sister Elizabeth Duncan then took over Isadora as her dance pupil. Isadora also learned at some point from a woman familiar with Delsarte's philosophy of free, natural movement.

Augustin Duncan's famous barn theater was not in San Francisco, as we all used to think, but in Oakland. Aia Bertrand attests to this with photos of it taken in the late 1950s. Augustin and Raymond Duncan converted the vacant stable into a makeshift theater and presented their youthful adaptations of *Faust*, *Rip van Winkle* and other classics. While the neighbors watched, Isadora inserted dances and made history with her very first performance. "The little theater grew and became quite celebrated in the neighborhood," Isadora later wrote.

Striking while the iron was hot, the enterprising Duncan youngsters embarked on tours. Their first serious performance outside the home was in Santa Clara, an old mission town across the Bay. A photo attests to Isadora and her siblings in front of Elizabeth Lightner's house, where they stayed. "But nobody came to the theater to see their show," Mme. Bertrand recounts ruefully. Another photo of the twelve-year-old Isadora taken in Fresno, 170 miles away from home, shows the precocious girl with a wreath in a dance pose. The tours, wrote Isadora, went as far as Santa Barbara and Santa Rosa. "The boys like to play impresario," Mme. Bertrand tells. "Raymond would go into a hotel somewhere and say that he had the greatest actor in America with him, Augustin Duncan. Sometimes they would get free lodgings in the hotel for performing and reciting. Isadora would dance."

"Oakland is the cradle of dance," boasted Raymond grandiosely but implausibly when he returned home in 1948. "It all started here—this is the fundamental home of the art. It was in our stable that my brother Augustin made our first theater. Next we played the [First] Unitarian Church [on 14th and Castro]. I and Isadora danced together, and my mother played the piano." The date of this concert is unknown, but the Treadwells, who probably arranged it, formally joined the church membership in 1899, and the church edifice was completed in 1890. Many cultural events were presented there in the early years. The church still exists on the same site.

The Duncans never joined that church, nor apparently any other. After the disillusionment of her marital breakup, Mary Duncan turned against institutional religion, and all four children followed suit, to the extent of taunting their church-going nurse Mary, "If God created man, who created God?" and bringing the simple woman to tears on more than one occasion.

Florence Treadwell Boynton vividly recalled the salons regularly held at the Duncan home, at which Shakespeare was recited and dances exhibited by members of the family. A generation later, a Boynton daughter was still using Raymond Duncan's old

Shakespeare books for her high school classes. In a community where touring theatrical or dance groups were almost nonexistent, the Duncans' potpourri evenings for their friends, neighbors and pupils doubtless enlivened and enriched the cultural life while providing the family with much-needed income. Years later ex-Oakland writer Gertrude Stein's brother, Leo, documented that the Duncan girls down on Eighth Street were wonderful teachers of polka, mazurka, waltz and other fancy social dances.

By the time the 1892-93 Oakland city directory appeared, the one-time Angela Duncan was formally listed as "Miss A. Dora Duncan, dance teacher"—in an A-Dorably cute play on words. Known as Dora to one and all through most of her youth, she had yet to turn into Isadora. Some chroniclers have theorized that the name Isadora was bestowed on her years later in the East by the theatrical producer Augustin Daly, but new evidence suggests that she probably dreamed up the name herself. Long before she ever stepped into professional theater, Langley's 1894 San Francisco City Directory already listed the sixteen-year-old by the name that became famous around the world:

"Miss Isadora Duncan, teacher, dancing."

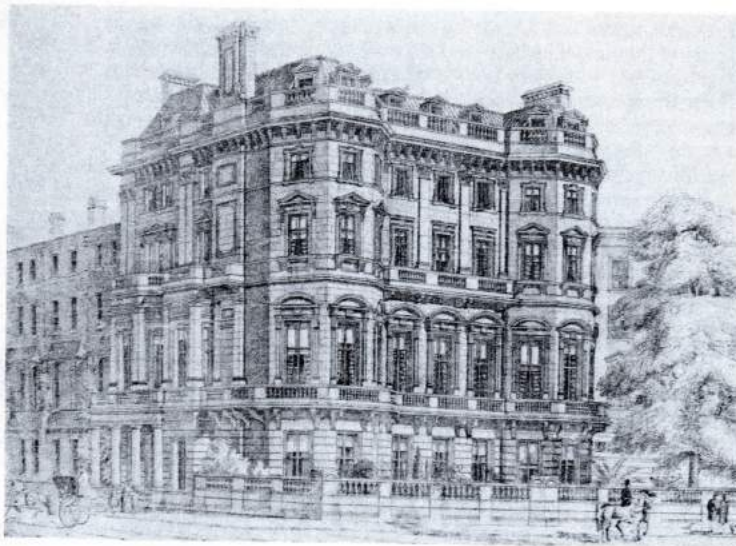
Having lived virtually all of her first sixteen years in Oakland, Isadora moved back to San Francisco with her family when her long-absent father, now seventy-four, bought them the Castle mansion. Joseph, living in Southern California, had married his son William's sister-in-law Mary and fathered children numbers nine and ten. If that were not surprise enough, he had amassed yet another small fortune, which he spread around his various fragmented families. The entrepreneur, as volatile as quicksilver, also moved back to San Francisco to dabble in gold mines. Not long after, he died in a shipwreck off Cornwall en route to seek another fortune in England.

The Duncan brood's two years at the Castle mansion have been amply documented. The family wanted to create an art center, but "we couldn't even pay the rent," Raymond recalled dolefully. The dance classes went on, and Isadora had opportunities to attend the many touring productions, dance-pantomimes, and *Black Crook* spectacles crossing the city's stages. But no impresario would hire her. One of them dismissed her after a solo tryout in tunic to Mendelssohn's "Song Without Words" by advising her mother to take "your little girl" home (Isadora, we remember, was only about 5'6"), as the demonstration was more suitable for the church than the theater. In June 1895, the Duncans bitterly threw in the sponge and journeyed East, almost penniless once again. Raymond sounded what later became a familiar American refrain: "In order to become known, a person with talent must leave the country."

From this rags-to-rags beginning of Isadora's life, one could hardly expect the great blossoming to come. From the penury of teaching polka to self-conscious city kids, she migrated to theatrical engagements in Chicago, then New York (managing to utilize yet another pseudonym, Sara Duncan). It would take Europe to establish her trailblazing style and launch her solo career, and it was to Europe that the Duncans foresightedly headed on a cattleboat (under yet another pseudonym) in 1899.

Surprisingly little tangible evidence of these California years remains today. Only two of the buildings associated with her in California still exist. Much of her memorabilia has been lost through her casual management, fire and other causes. Mme. Bertrand's Left-Bank Museum in Paris (31 Rue de Seine) has two rooms of photos and a few effects such as letters, sandals and tunics, but the museum only opens on and around her birthday. With the Isadora Duncan centennial, special museum exhibits in America may spotlight unfamiliar Duncan material held in private hands. Between the exhibits, new biographies, and danced tributes to Isadora, the veil of mystery and neglect about this magical dance pioneer may yet be lifted. To date, the permanent U.S. memorials to this dancer have been confined to a bronze plaque mounted near her birthplace in San Francisco. Surely, after what she gave us, she deserves much, much more. □

Chelsea House (now demolished) where Isadora danced for the Countess Cadogan, possibly in 1897, when Isadora was on tour to London with Augustin Daly's company. This enormous mansion stood in the heart of Belgravia and is typical of the homes of the richest "hostesses" for whom Isadora danced while in London. (Photo: Chelsea Library)





part one

isadora reexamined

lesser-known aspects
of the great dancer's life,
1877-1900

by nesta macdonald



This article is the first in a six-part series, in which the author, Nesta Macdonald, has explored less well-known periods of Isadora Duncan's life. The remaining installments will appear in future issues of *Dance Magazine* in this, the centennial of Isadora Duncan's birth.

Nesta Macdonald, born in London, is the author of *Diaghilev Observed* (Dance Horizons, 1976) and *History of the Pheasantry* (Private, London, 1977). In addition, she is a contributor to *Dancing Times*, for which she wrote the series "First Diaghilev Seasons in London."
—Editor

Michel Fokine, in his memoirs, has written of Isadora Duncan: "She was the greatest American gift to the art of the dance. Duncan proved that all the primitive, plain natural movements are far better than all the richness of the ballet technique, if to this technique must be sacrificed grace, expressiveness and beauty."

From the first decade of this century (to be treated in future installments in this series):
Preceding page: Isadora Duncan, circa 1908 in a photo-portrait by Haensel and Jones (Irma Duncan Collection, Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts)

Above:
Isadora Duncan in 1902. (Collection of Paul Hertelendy)

Opposite:
Isadora's mother, Mrs. Mary Dora Gray Duncan, with the sculptor Walter Schott, whose sculpture of Isadora appears on a pedestal behind the group, and Isadora Duncan. 1903, photo attributed to Ottomar Anseltin. (Dance Collection, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts)

The historian is given the responsibility of applying hindsight to the task of setting in order events which seemed higgledy-piggledy in their time, and of analyzing personalities full of contradictions. Worst of all is the need to explode myths, especially those created by their own subject. Desperately clutching at the occasional date which can be corroborated, and frustrated by patches of total blank, only one course remains—to hunt for more *documented* facts. In the case of Isadora Duncan's visits to London, about which relatively little had been set down, the hunt produced far more than mere dates: it revealed the foundation of her repertoire and career.

Two themes emerge: her development as an artist and her development as a woman. In both, London played not merely a significant but, indeed, a crucial part.

As an artist, it was in London that Isadora first found an audience which could appreciate her vague cultural aspirations; as a woman, it was in London that she discovered or developed her power over older men, important men; may one say, gentlemen? Until she was about twenty-four, Isadora thrived in such company, adored by eminent men of intellect, their delightful and novel artistic plaything. In her most successful years as a performer, she clove to those nearer her own age; in her forties, the men around her became younger and younger. They brought her adoration as her *charms—but not her charm—faded*.

Isadora varied her own versions of events in her youth. She took years off her age, and amalgamated her first two visits to England. It is, however, imperative to study that early period of false starts, which she later wanted to conceal. She returned to London in 1908, 1912 and 1921, but after that final season, her life changed so *dramatically that it became a different subject, and has been amply dealt with by those who were with her at the time*. So this study ends in 1921.

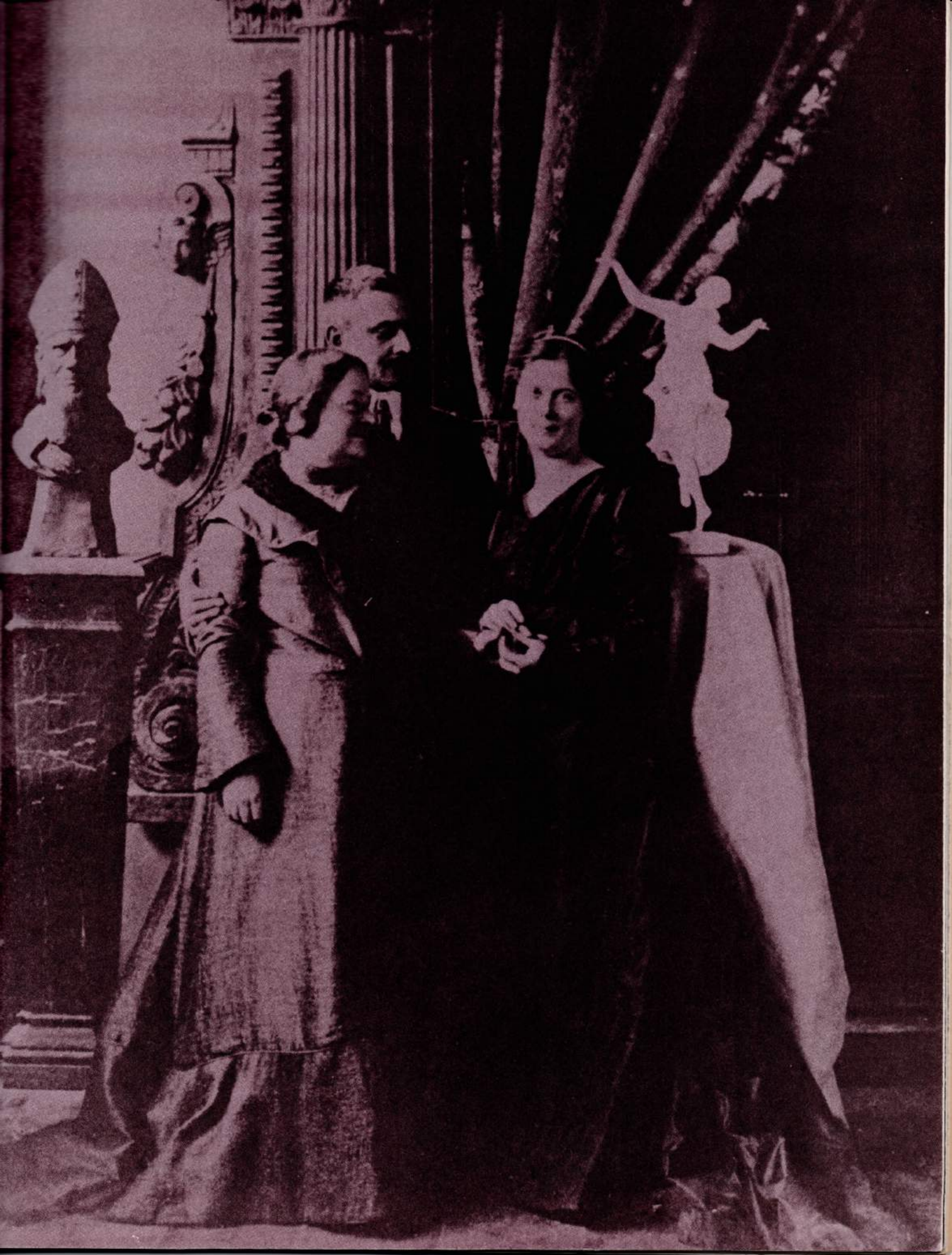
This is the same limit as in *My Life*, Isadora's so-called *autobiography*, which, alas, *everyone* seems to have read since it appeared in paperback to coincide with the film in which Vanessa Redgrave impersonated her. It must be one of the most deceptive *autobiographies ever published*, but one of the most willingly believed. As Isadora, desperate for money, was trying to concoct it, she was constantly adjured by the publishers to make each chapter more sensational. To them, her inaccuracies mattered not one whit, and they knew nothing and cared less about the debt she owed to London for her start. Mercedes de Acosta, her Editor, enpurpled any patch Isadora had made less lurid.

Reference books have given the year of her birth as 1878, and biographers have often pointed out that she was two years older than she usually stated. (She sometimes took even more years off than that.) The true date of her birth was May 26, 1877, a full year earlier still. This year means a great deal in youth. In order to avoid repetition of errors, I shall write her actual age wherever it appears in my own text, and where it comes into quoted passages, will correct it in brackets at the point, or refer to it in my surrounding text.

Isadora was baptized "Angela I." in San Francisco on October 13, 1877. Her father, of Scottish descent, was much older than her Irish-American mother. He had gone West in the Gold Rush of 1847, but was seemingly a prosperous banker by the time she was born. Isadora was the youngest, coming after Elizabeth (1871), who taught social dancing; Augustin (1873), who became an actor and impresario; and Raymond (1874), the oddest of them all, who eventually owned an art gallery in Paris. Whilst Isadora was still a young child, her father's earlier peccadilloes caught up with him; after prolonged trials, he was given a jail sentence. The house was sold up and Isadora's mother supported the family by giving piano lessons. They moved frequently, leaving a trail of unpaid rents behind them. Traits of responsibility, irresponsibility, initiative and fecklessness jostle each other throughout Isadora's life.

She turned professional at the age of about twelve or fourteen, giving dancing lessons to younger children to earn the money to pay for lessons for herself. She read omnivorously. The Duncans, a remarkably united family, all seem to have had intellectual yearnings which remained largely untutored. They all seem to have shared a passion for ancient Greece.

The youthful Isadora was described as "stagestruck." Certainly, many great stars made tours which brought them to San Francisco, and any Duncan worthy the name would have wangled an entry if not the price of a ticket. Yet, though she had a melodious speaking voice, Isadora's ambitions do not seem to have included any desire to play Portia or Lady MacBeth, or even a leading role in a musical play.



Isadora Reexamined (Cont'd)

If she ever made a recording, I have failed to locate it. Wishing to know more about points which eluded me, I asked a man who knew her during the last years of her life—Sewell Stokes.

First—something I never found mentioned in books about her—what color were her eyes? Blue. Her hair was originally dark, but by 1921 she had bleached it to auburn, and by 1927, “she changed it weekly.” She was five foot six. Sewell Stokes said that her voice was charming; that she spoke slowly, with an almost Southern drawl, but with not too pronounced an accent. He said, moreover, that the thing people never seemed to realize was that she was tremendous fun to be with—absolutely maddening, but, above all, fun. If this could be the case in 1927, when she was forty-nine years old and had lived through unspeakable tragedies, then what must she not have been in the way of super-fun when she was twenty, on her very first visit to England, at twenty-two, when on her more important trip?

In 1896, with her mother as accompanist, Isadora left California to try her luck in the Eastern states. From now on, many of the clues which I have followed up came from interviews which she gave to the Press years later. In these, either deliberately or through sheer confusion, she muddled dates; she approximated to actual names, but these clues were well worth pursuing because there was no deliberate distortion by others as was the case in *My Life*.

To the story of her attempts to succeed in Chicago, Isadora added, in 1921, that she had “danced on a billiard-table” and that her success must have been due to this improvised stage. She called the venue “Bohemia.” Presumably this was the same occasion as was referred to by Troy and Margaret Kinney when they wrote of her performing before an audience of dramatic students, painters and sculptors. Writing in 1914, the Kinneys said that “the general conclusion arrived at after hours of acrimonious argument—was that the young woman had an idea, but that clairvoyancy was required to understand it. At that time, it must be added, Miss Duncan was far from mature in grace, surety or any other of the technical qualities; and her art, naïve though it be, has its technical requirements just as surely as any other art.”

However, as a result of this performance, Isadora obtained an introduction to the New York impresario, Augustin Daly, who happened to be in Chicago. For an audition the following day, she wheeled materials out of the young manager of the Marshall Field store—Gordon Selfridge, later to become a multi-millionaire storeowner himself. Possibly Daly was clairvoyant: possibly he just couldn't resist her pleadings. He took Isadora into his company. Later, she completely twisted the tale of the next two years, when she was a very minor young girl in a respected theatrical company. What experience, in fact, did those two years comprise?

They comprised the playing of tiny roles in a large variety of productions, varying from Shakespeare through modern plays to musicals. They comprised the opportunity to learn all routine stage techniques on the job. They comprised the chance to observe two established stars in repertory—Ada Rehan, Daly's leading lady (of whom Sargent painted a portrait), and Tyrone Power, a handsome actor of the old school whose son, another Tyrone Power, was to become a star in Hollywood talkies.

Isadora made her debut in New York on September 9th, 1896, in *The Geisha*. She was put into a quartette although, as she herself said, she couldn't sing a note. (Programs later in the season show that she had been replaced.) She had many small parts, and on March 12, 1897, with Mabel Thompson and Helma Nelson, performed a gypsy dance in *Meg Merrilees*, an adaptation of Scott's novel *Guy Mannering*.

During this season she was The Fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Daly, who made frequent trips to Europe, had commissioned scenery and costumes from an English artist, Graham Robertson (himself the subject of one of Sargent's famous portraits), who later described Daly: “On first meeting him most people decided that he was a remarkably disagreeable man...his manners were remarkably bad...Still, there was a force about him, something dynamic and compelling, and even those who disliked him usually found themselves almost involuntarily doing exactly as he bade them...”

Isadora's engagement by such an experienced man of the theater must give rise to speculation as to whether he just gave in to help her, or whether he really felt that he had spotted a talent. Isadora said that as The Fairy she “stopped the show,” and that Daly's reaction to this was to be so angry because this messed up the timing that he retaliated by having the lighting so reduced that she appeared just as a dim, flitting figure. This struck Isadora as pettish;

is it not possible that Daly altered the lighting plot to give her a more supernatural appearance? Thereby anticipating the lighting ideas of Franco Zeffirelli, for example.

Daly seems to have shown great tolerance, for apparently Isadora adversely criticized just about everything to do with his productions. Nevertheless, when he brought his entire company to England in August, 1897, Isadora was clearly named as a member of it.

The tour opened on August 26, 1897 with a charity performance of *As You Like It*, which started on the greensward outside the Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. Alas, it rained halfway through, and the second half had to be given inside. Ada Rehan's Rosalind was famous. Eight girls, including Isadora and Mabel Thompson, were listed as “Persons in the Train of Hymen.” Naturally, Isadora was still too insignificant to be named in any of the notices, but I am indebted to Roger Pringle, of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, for finding a tidbit in the local paper the following day which he described as “exceptional”: “Nothing could have been more picturesque—and it is a new feature to Stratford—than the procession which accompanied Hymen of dancing and singing girls, prettily costumed, bearing garlands of flowers.” (The masque was traditionally omitted from Stratford productions, which for the past ten years had been managed by F.H. Benson, of whom more anon.)

Daly's company went on to tour Nottingham, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London (where it appeared for two weeks at The Grand, Islington, not in the West End), Liverpool and Manchester. Isadora's name still appeared in a list of the entire company at the end of the Manchester program. However, it is not possible to be sure whether she stayed the course, or dashed off midway on some adventure, because after that first detailed program, not one other mentioned the “Persons in the Train of Hymen” at all.

Isadora's own elimination of this visit in 1897 leads one to conjecture that she had, indeed, something to hide. She later described how she became stranded, but for reasons which will become apparent, that could not have been in 1900. The story which she told in 1921 of starving in London must apply to the end of *this* visit. She said that she had danced at “Chelsea House,” at “a society function given, if I remember rightly, by Lady Callaghan.” And that she had refused the crumpets offered her afterwards, knowing that had she taken one, she would have wolfed the lot. Well, she was not so far out, for Chelsea House, a magnificent mansion, was the London home of Earl and Countess Cadogan, immensely wealthy landowners, and it stood where nowadays is a block of flats of the same name, next to the Carlton Tower Hotel, in Belgravia. (She also danced for the famous Mrs. Ronalds, who had sung in Leonard Jerome's private theater in New York, and become the favorite of one of Edward VII's brothers; and had an audition for the Empire Theatre with Katti Lanner, but was not accepted.)

Somehow Isadora made her way back to New York, where she found her family living in one of the studios of Carnegie Hall. It seems probable that she re-joined Augustin Daly's company, as she always said that she spent two years in it, which would bring it to about 1898 before she left it. She also danced as before for private hostesses, and took a few lessons from Maria Bonfanti, a classical ballerina, who, when aged nine, had been a pupil of Carlo Blasis, and had completed her training at *La Scala*, Milan. In 1866 Bonfanti had been the dancing star of a musical spectacle at Niblo's Garden, New York, which ran for nearly five hundred performances, and which has been described as of “unparalleled and unabashed sensuality.” Bonfanti had subsequently been the Met's ballerina, and had started a school. “Nothing could have been farther apart than the outlook on dance of Maria Bonfanti and such dancers as Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, and other protagonists of free dance,” says the *Spettaculo*.

Possibly these lessons represented Daly's last attempt to groom Isadora for a normal stage career, in which case it certainly failed. Her own account of her last meeting with Daly, when she harangued him about wasting her genius, is not dated. What is certain is that, after two years, she claims to have resigned. Perhaps it was mutual.

The remaining events of Isadora's winter of 1898-99 include the encounter with Ethelbert Nevin, his capitulation when Isadora danced for him, her “interpretations” of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (still wearing her little tunic despite the Persian origin of the recitation by Justin M'Carthy, an Irish actor friend of Daly and Ada Rehan), the loss of all their family possessions in the Windsor Hotel Fire in March, and Isadora's unsuccessful performance “in aid of the victims of the fire” (to recitations of verse pronounced by her brother Augustin, described in the notices as “melancholy”).

New York was not taking to Isadora and her "little Greek tunic." The decision to try Europe was hers. All the family except Augustin (who had married, and whose wife was pregnant) set sail in a cattleboat for England.

At this turning point in Isadora's life, what had she to offer?

At twenty-two, she was slender, a dark-haired, blue-eyed colleen. She had been on the stage for two years. She had built up a repertoire of solos, some to recitations, some to rather banal music. In this respect one must draw attention to the matter of her favorite composer, Ethelbert Nevin, whose most famous works were *Mighty Lak a Rose* and *The Rosary*. These were much to the popular taste of the time. *Narcissus*, Isadora's own favorite, was in time to become the stock-in-trade of every exponent of the Mighty Wurlitzer, for which there was a precedent.

Despite his death in 1901, Nevin's popularity had not waned by 1912, when Henry Clay Frick built his sumptuous mansion on Fifth Avenue. "It was Frick's custom to have an organist in on Saturday afternoons," said S. N. Behrman, "to fill the gallery with the majestic strains of *The Rosary* and *Silver Threads Among the Gold*, while he himself sat on a Renaissance throne, and every now and then looked up from his *Saturday Evening Post* to contemplate the works of Van Dyck and Rembrandt...."

As yet, more important music does not seem to have come Isadora's way. Her visual taste appears to have been superior to her musical choice. She was able to picture herself, and had grasped that figures showed up better against plain backgrounds than before realistic scenery. The thing I find hard to equate is the force of her character, her initiative and joyousness, not so much with a gentle voice as with the slow speech. One would imagine a more impulsive manner; yet we were told that Isadora never hurried.

The other question is that of her sexual awareness and personal allure at this period. There are so many innuendoes in *My Life* that one hesitates to suggest the possibilities of others, but what, one wonders, led Isadora to suppress the tale of her visit to England in 1897?

Isadora had tremendous confidence in her genius. Possibly her early precocious success as a breadwinner came between her and the realization of her own very individual art. She was to be shown her path in London.

The London season was in full swing when Clan Duncan arrived in May, 1899. Entertaining then was on a scale hardly imaginable nowadays, hostesses vying with each other to produce novel cultured diversion for their guests, and paying generously for it.

One may accept Isadora's story of a few weeks of careless enjoyment of what was, to the others, a new city, followed by the inevitable rude awakening to penury. When Isadora managed to obtain a cheque, one must applaud Raymond's sense in paying the rent for a roof to their heads. This was for a studio in Manresa Road, Chelsea. Then they all moved to Kensington. I am indebted to Mr. Andrew Patrick, Managing Director of the Fine Art Society, who put me on to a full account of this sojourn in *Reviewing the Years*, published by Crown Publications Inc., N.Y., 1963.

A young painter, John Young-Hunter, son of a wealthy artist, decided to let his studio whilst he went off to Brittany to paint. It was one of a group of twelve, purpose-built, around a small garden. "That it was an excellent studio is no exaggeration," said John Young-Hunter. "It was large...also there was a bedroom, a bathroom and a small entrance hall." It had a gallery, and a good pine floor. He continued:

...A few days later a very attractive young lady called. She said she was a dancer, and the large studio fascinated her. The agent seemed satisfied with her so-called credentials, but he must have been more impressed with her appearance, for I doubt if he investigated any possible financial prospects, the lady being none other than Isadora Duncan!

A week or two later letters began to arrive with complaints about my tenant, who with her friends was hilariously noisy both inside and outside the studio, a rented piano adding an accompaniment to the din throughout the night. I learned that Miss Duncan was not alone, that her brother and sister were with her. I do not know all the excesses that occurred, although dancing in thin veiled draperies out-of-doors was mentioned. My expostulating letters to Miss Duncan went unanswered, and the intercession of the agent seemed to have no effect.

George Watson, my close friend, who had a studio next to



Left: Joseph Duncan, date unknown, photo probably taken in California circa 1870. (Dance Collection, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts)

Below: Another statuette (see preceding page) of Isadora Duncan by Professor W. Schott, 1903. (Courtesy of Richard Buckle)



(over)

Isadora Reexamined (Cont'd)

mine, got Isadora to pose for a portrait, but one 'sitting' seems to have been as much of her society as he could contend with... I cut short my Dinan trip and returned to London. ... Miss Duncan greeted me cordially, wearing a red silk oriental shawl of mine that I had left in a locked cabinet. I also detected the aroma of a particularly fine cigar, of a kind also left in the cabinet. I was then introduced to her sister, Elizabeth, and to her brother, Raymond. I explained that I needed my studio. Dismay and expostulations on their part followed; how could I be so hard-hearted when they had no place to go? I gave them time.

When a month or more went by with no evidence of a move I became exasperated and put the matter into the hands of a lawyer. He wanted to know what rent I had received, and when I said 'none' his smile was indulgently sarcastic. What were their personal possessions, he asked? By a brilliant stroke of inspiration I remembered that they had rented a piano. 'We'll distraint on that,' he said. This incensed Isadora, and she called at our house in Melbury Road. I was not at home; my father interviewed her. The exact details of what happened I am ignorant of to this day. There was a violent scene, with much emotional vituperation on her part. Undoubtedly as she surveyed the luxury of our house she was outraged. 'Why should they move out, why indeed?' The fact that I needed my studio for my winter's work was of no consequence, nor was the fact that they had paid no rent, and apparently intended to pay none.

It must be remembered that Isadora, then only nineteen or twenty years old, was the Cleopatra of modern times. Her consummate skill in the art of creating an impression was the basis of her professional career. She was an actress as well as a dancer. It is not likely, therefore, that vindictive expostulation was her only technique. What about persuasive appeal? How about the charm of an alluring personality that eventually made her famous? Was my father quite unmoved, I wonder?

The name of John Young-Hunter is well known in the United States, for some years later he fell in love with New Mexico and settled there, becoming famous for his paintings on subjects to do with the Indians. It is interesting to realise that, whilst he could refer to Isadora as "the Cleopatra of modern times," he never seemed to realise that she had so successfully deceived him that throughout his life he thought that she had been only nineteen or twenty when all this happened, though she was, in fact, twenty-two—a big difference at that stage of anyone's experience.

Elizabeth somehow returned to New York, re-opened her school, and sent the others money. So, as Isadora put it, "as the term of our studio had expired [sic] we rented a small furnished house in Kensington Square. This gave us the privilege of a key to the Square gardens...."

If the billiard-table in Chicago was Isadora's most important stage in 1896, the lawn of Kensington Square was to prove even more valuable in 1899.

Kensington Square is a charming backwater, behind the busy High Street. The houses surround a communal garden which, with its old trees and flowering shrubs and dappled lawn, has the appearance of a natural dell.

Was it pure coincidence that Raymond and Isadora should have been tempted by that lawn to dance together in their Greek costumes at a moment when Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the celebrated actress, whose house was on the west side of the Square, would pass by and notice the odd sight? Mrs. Pat was amused and invited them in. She wrote a letter of introduction to a famous political hostess, Mrs. George Wyndham. She, too, was hospitable, and in her house at 35 Park Lane introduced Charles Hallé to Isadora.

Hallé, a painter, was the son of the pianist who had founded the Hallé Orchestra. A bachelor in his middle years, he lived with his sister in Milner Street, in the pleasant area on the Chelsea side of Sloane Street, and also had a studio in The Avenue, Fulham Road, which he had inherited from his father. He had been one of the founders, and Manager, of the famous Grosvenor Gallery which had been pilloried in the Gilbert and Sullivan opera, *Patience*, as the home of the "greenery-gallery, Grosvenor-Gallery, foot-in-the-grave young man"—the pale aesthete! In 1888, Hallé and other partners had broken away and founded the New Gallery, in Regent Street. The joint Managing Directors were Hallé and Joe Comyns Carr, also a man of the theater. His wife, Alice, was Ellen Terry's best friend, and for many years designed all her theatrical costumes, including the famous Lady Macbeth robe in which Sargent had

painted the actress.

How easy it is to imagine what ensued! There must always have been something faintly comic in Isadora's determination to earn for her family—to earn it herself—and yet to demand and accept much beholdenness. Now, one feels sure, one came her gifts as an actress. Hallé, who obviously adored her, spoilt her himself, and also introduced her to the world of successful artists, writers and musicians. Isadora learned that Society hostesses, though they loomed large in the lives of the artists, too, were not the only patrons for her art.

Charles Hallé did everything he could to further her career. Graham Robertson, who had described Augustin Daly, also described Hallé:

I saw a good deal of Hallé and found him a delightful companion and kind friend... Charles Hallé was certainly an artist; he loved art truly and well and served her faithfully, yet he never found his proper mode of self-expression. What he ought to have done I do not know; what he should not have done was apparent to all—he should never have attempted to paint. His pictures do not bear thinking of, so I will not think of them, but only of the witty, interesting man who I feel sure could have done something or other most beautifully if only he had happened to find out what it was....

His appearance was romantic, contrasting oddly with his impish sense of humor, and his most fascinating accomplishment to me was the narrating of screamingly comic and slightly Rabelaisian stories with a look of brooding melancholy in his great dark eyes that would have done credit to Manfred or the Corsair....

I have seen of some of Hallé's pictures—they were awful. But Isadora visited his studio frequently, and Hallé must have found her deliciously receptive as he told her stories of great men he had known, such as Tennyson and Burne-Jones, and filled her with ideas in poetry and ancient literature. Her passion for Greece—which was genuine—amused his artist friends, most of whom had painted large compositions based on classical mythology at some time. He took her to the theater, too, and she saw Irving and Ellen Terry for the first time, and idolatry set in.

Isadora said that she also had a younger swain at the same time, a poet "fresh from Oxford." The implication was that he was very young. In fact, Grant Duff Douglas Ainslie was born in 1866, and was an urbane and experienced man who had been left a Scottish castle and estate, which in those days permitted him to live the life of a man-about-town, and even to become an honorary Secretary in our embassies abroad. He was, however, about twenty-nine years younger than Charles Hallé, so perhaps there was some truth in Isadora's tale of animosity existing between these two men. She indicated that both these friendships were platonic, and that all her escorts were mere "beaux." She did, indeed, have a considerable band of such young men some of whom were attracted by her appearances in Benson's productions.

It was an age when decent men still had regard for the importance of virginity; perhaps Isadora found that it was more fun to have a reputation for being pure and chaste, to have many admirers eager to fulfill her lightest wish, than to commit herself to one man, and lose the advantages accruing from the many. The younger men might have the physical appeal, but the older ones had the influence.

From Kensington Square, the Duncans had moved to a less expensive area, known as South Belgravia—or Pimlico. It must be remembered that all these people in the theater and the arts knew each other; anyway, Isadora obtained an engagement with the well-known Shakespearean producer F.H. Benson (who had run his company at Stratford-upon-Avon for ten years), and who was taking over the Lyceum whilst Irving and Ellen Terry went on tour.

When the season opened on February 15, 1900, with *Henry V.*, Isadora was one of the girls in the scene "before the French camp," and on February 22, *The Stage* reported:

... Then follows a most picturesque and rather heretical representation of the French camp at Agincourt, with the Dauphin and his nobles dallying with lightly-clad dancing girls, who cause these over-boastful combatants to indulge in merry song and a wild Gallic measure.... The licentious revelry in the French camp is accompanied by catchy strains that, to my mind, are somewhat too near akin to comic opera, though the scene is played with much spirit by all the artists concerned....

(Cont'd on page 60)



Above:
Isadora in two portraits taken by Schloss in New York City in 1898. The photos show an Isadora who is supple, free, romantic, and very much in the spirit of Delsarte. Although she wears ballet shoes, her dancing hardly appears to be "classical." The costume is said to have been made from curtains belonging to her mother. (Photos: Dance Collection, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts)

At left:
Within a year of the above photos, Isadora was discovered dancing in Kensington Square by the famous actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, whose home faced on the Square. This resulted in some very useful introductions into society for Isadora. This photograph was taken in 1976 by Nesta Macdonald.

Overleaf:
Two photographs of Isadora Duncan taken in 1896, when she was a member of Augustin Daly's company. The pose on the left is from the Daly production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which Isadora danced the First Fairy, a portrayal which reportedly stopped the show. At right, Isadora is seen probably in costume for another Daly production, which may have been *The School for Scandal*. (Dance Collection, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts)





On February 16th, however, *The Standard* had had harsh words to say of the production:

...In his treatment of the text, Mr. Benson shows himself to be absolutely ruthless. ...Oddly enough, he introduces a scene showing the French revelling outside their tents on the eve of battle, while a number of women, clad in the scantiest apparel, perform a Bacchanalian dance on the turf. Yet, a few moments later, the English army is discovered shivering in the chill night air...

The following week, Benson put on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The Stage said: "...Five of the attendant Fairies are prettily played by Miss Isadora Duncan, who has a good many lines to speak, and by clever children...as Cobweb, Moth, Peaseblossom and Mustardseed." *The Era* described them as "tiny," and added that "Interspersed with the action which takes place in the wood are various dances and groupings of the fairies, who at times carry lamps. The children have evidently been carefully drilled, and go through their task with the utmost regularity and order."

It is not stretching imagination too far to envisage Isadora, their adorable half-child, half-woman, acknowledging the congratulations of Charles Hallé and his friends in her gentle voice and beguiling accent. Nevertheless, this engagement must have made her sure of all the negatives: that she did not want to perform other people's words or other people's steps; that she did not want to perform in plays at all. Yet, even though she had learned with certainty what she never wished to do again, there must still have been very little that was positive in the matter of what she could make "her line."

Somehow, the idea arose that she should give a recital in the New Gallery itself. Now, while it was many years since the *art* of the Impressionists had first shocked France, the artistic world in which Isadora was trying to make a name was one where convention in manners and deportment was still rigorous. It was, indeed, the more *artistic* members of Society who were the most willing to free themselves from bondage, a spirit made manifest by some of the women who were rebelling against restrictive whalebone and wearing the loose garments of the "Aesthetic Movement."

In the Victorian era, to be an educated man meant to have received a classical education: to be a cultured man meant to have added to that foundation an interest in the arts. Fluency in French, German and Italian, and familiarity with the art of Italy and the music of Germany, were to be expected. The Grosvenor Gallery set fulfilled all these requirements.

In *My Life*, Isadora gave little detail about her New Gallery recitals, confining herself to insistence on the hit she had made. She mentioned that Hallé introduced to her the three friends who were to talk before each recital, but said not another word about her program, music, costumes, accompanists, rehearsals, producer, or any practical matter. She also said that she left London for Paris in the spring, in response to urgent pleas from Raymond, who had already gone there - but she was still in London in July.

In fact, the importance of these three performances cannot be too greatly stressed in following Isadora's development as an artist; she preferred to leave no trace of them, always implying that everything she worked out came from her inspiration alone.

So, if her progress is to be understood, the New Gallery must be understood first. Both the Grosvenor and the New Galleries were run on original lines. The Grosvenor had been founded by a Scottish baronet, Sir Coutts Lindsay, and his charming wife, and both in this gallery and its successor and rival, business had always been conducted in an atmosphere of aristocratic taste and hospitality. Shows of contemporary painting and of Old Masters had alternated, but receptions had not been confined to Private Views alone. Week-ending not then being as prevalent as it was to become once the motor-car had entered everybody's lives, their "Sunday afternoons" were, for years, a delightful feature of London life. The Gallery replaced the hostess in running a *salon*. Luminaries from the worlds of Society, Art, Literature, Music, and even The Stage, mingled, and invitations were eagerly canvassed. The recipients were, indeed, mostly rich, but it was not wealth alone, but love of art as well, which brought about entry. Such a circle was, indeed, *élite*, and this was the audience offered to Isadora.

Once the decision to build the New Gallery had been taken, its construction had proceeded like lightning, thanks to the dedication of its creators. When, after only eight months, the New Gallery was

able to open in time for the London season of 1888, Alice Comyns Carr described what was later to be the setting for Isadora's *Dance Idylls*: "The effect of the Central Court...with its fountain fringed with flowers and its arcade panelled with fine, coloured marbles, was one of the sensations of the day, and deserved the praise of a critic: 'It is an Aladdin's Palace sprung up in the night...'"

In 1895, when the Gallery was mounting an exhibition of Venetian art, the Directors gave a party resembling a Venetian *fiesta*. "The young people were dressed up in costumes of the sixteenth century, and danced pavaues and forlanas...to the music of lutes, viole d'amore, and other ancient musical instruments." (The music had been provided by Arnold Dolmetsch and his companions.) In 1900, in order that they might charge admission and Isadora make money, the Gallery had to go to the trouble of obtaining a license from the L.C.C. for Music and Dancing. The tickets were priced at one guinea (a high price, at least twice that of a stall for a good play) and the performances started at 10 p.m.

It is easy to see the hand of Hallé in all the arrangements. The recitals were to take place under the patronage of Princess Christian and a committee of eighteen. Of these, the two ladies, the Countesses Valda and Feodor Gleichen (singer and sculptress, respectively) were related to the royal family, and actually lived in St. James' Palace. And when it came to the sixteen men—what a splendid list of educated, cultured sponsors did Hallé persuade to lend their names! All were eminent, all were well-to-do, many were men whose academic studies were made flesh and moved before their very eyes in the person of this enchanting, dancing young woman. And only one was under the age of fifty in 1900.

Art was represented by Sir William Richmond, K.C.B., R.A. M.A. (58 years old in 1900), Charles Hallé (54 years old), Holm. Hunt (73), Walter Crane (55), and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (64). Literature included Henry James (57), Andrew Lang (56), and a Canadian, Professor Warr (55). Music appeared in the persons of Sir Hubert Parry (52), J. Fuller-Maitland, Music Critic of *The Times* (46), and his friend Cecil Smith, a specialist in early music. There was also the distinguished pianist, Herr Rudolf Zwintscher. From the Theater came Joe Comyns Carr (51), and the collector and historian, Frederick Wedmore (56). For good measure, there was none other than the chairman of the L.C.C., Sir Arthur Edwin Arnold (67), and to give the blessing of the Church, the Reverend Herbert B. Gray, D.D.

In such a friendly and generous atmosphere, one may assume that Isadora was provided with new costumes, and that Alice Comyns Carr took charge of this department—and that these costumes would have been far removed from her former home-made amateurish "little Greek tunics." At her first recital, on March 16, 1900, Isadora must have looked ravishing:

...She dances Mendelssohn's musical poem *A Welcome to Spring* with frolicsome, laughing grace that makes one think of flowers and birds and lambs at play. Her costume for this is copied from Botticelli's *Primavera*. The robe appears to consist of several gauze slips worn one over another. The upper one has angel sleeves and is dim, pale green colour, painted here and there with delicate flowers. The draperies reach to the feet, and are full enough to blow about outlining the figure as she dances.

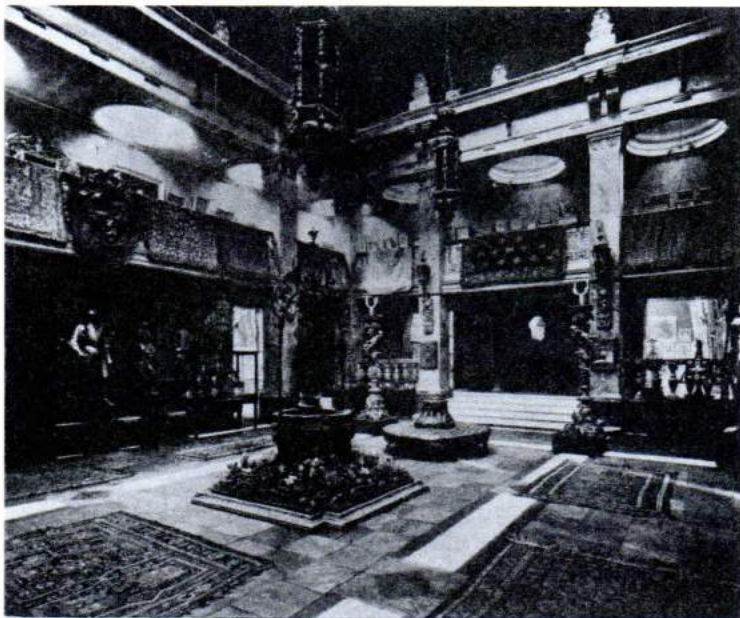
Very Botticelli-like is the long, dark hair crowned with roses, and falling in curls to the waist. Ropes of roses wind about her body and the feet are shod with gold sandals...

This is, of course, derived from the figure of Flora in the painting. Fuller-Maitland's review in *The Times* on March 17 gave full weight to consideration of the promise contained in this program by a young performer:

MISS DUNCAN'S "DANCE IDYLLS"

The entertainment given last night at the New Gallery was entirely new to the public, and a pronounced success. Miss Isadora Duncan is a young dancer of considerable skill, whose art, though it might fail to satisfy the average ballet master, has wonderful eloquence of its own. It is as far from the acrobatics of the opera dancer as from the conventional tricks by which the pantomimists are wont to express the more elementary human emotions. Miss Duncan's exceptional beauty of face and figure fits her for the self-appointed task of illustrating in dance such passages as were chosen from the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and the *Idylls* of Theocritus...a small orchestra on more than one occasion rendered the reading inaudible. Neither the music itself nor its performance was good

(over)



Left:
The New Gallery, Regent Street, London. This photo was taken in 1895 during a Venetian exhibit; Isadora gave three recitals here in 1900. (Collection of Nesta Macdonald)

Left, above:
Orpheus Returning from The Shades, a painting by Sir William Richmond, R.A., which Isadora interpreted at the New Gallery in 1900. (Collection of Royal Academy of the Arts, London)

Above, clockwise from lower left: Andrew Lang, a sponsor of Isadora's New Gallery appearances, gave the opening address when Isadora "interpreted Literature" in March 1900 at the New Gallery (Sir William Richmond's portrait of Lang photographed by Annan, Glasgow; courtesy National Gallery of Scotland); Charles Hallé, a co-founder and managing director of the New Gallery (Collection of Nesta Macdonald); Sir Hubert Parry, Principal of the Royal College of Music and another sponsor (Photo: Histed); and J. A. Fuller-Maitland, critic for The Times, who first suggested that Isadora dance to the music of Chopin in 1900. (Collection of Nesta Macdonald)

Isadora Reexamined (Cont'd)

enough to make the incident easily pardonable, but the effect of the dancing was of course not impaired: both in the passages requiring the eloquence of gestures, and in the more lyrical measures of regular dances, such as the mazurka in *The Triumph of Daphnis*, or the rhythmic steps danced to Mendelssohn's *Frühlingslied*, the dancer made a success of no ordinary kind. Her powers were exhibited in a most favorable light in *The Water Nymph*, danced to some pretty music by Ethelbert Nevin, and from beginning to end the occasion was one of complete artistic enjoyment.

With such gentlemanly politeness did Fuller-Maitland convey the fact that the readings were a bore, and some of the music too trivial. As the former was a pet fad of Raymond's, and obviously deemed heavy going which detracted from the effect of the whole evening, is it not likely that he took the criticism badly, and took himself off to Paris in a huff? Isadora was surrounded by admirers offering suggestions. She was adaptable and quick to spot what could be good for her. Close as she and Raymond were, that very closeness would have bred jealousy.

As the first recital was based largely on subjects drawn from classical literature, it would seem a good idea for Andrew Lang to give the preliminary talk, for he was famous not only as the author of all the colored *Fairy Books* but also as a classical scholar, whose translation of Homer had just been published. Was he, however, quite as enthusiastic about Isadora as she herself has said? It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that some of the sponsors Hallé produced were less ardent than he was himself, or than Isadora has painted them. Here is a curious slant on this matter. Sir Hubert Parry (Principal of the Royal College of Music) had started a diary when he was a boy at Eton, and kept up the habit. His biographer, Charles Graves, running through a number of miscellaneous engagements described in this very social man's diary, had this to say: "This record needs to be completed by a curious episode. At the Holman Hunts he [Parry] saw Isadora Duncan, then a newly-risen star, perform on May 26th, and afterwards [sic] attended two of her performances at the New Gallery. At the first Andrew Lang, another victim of pre-war tarantulation, 'was in a bad temper at having to make some prefatory remarks,' and said he had never been asked. At the second Parry discharged this duty without protest. It is only right to say that his appreciation of the lady's evolutions stops a long way short of infatuation; the strongest epithet he uses is 'pretty.'"

Though the dates are slightly muddled, one can well imagine Andrew Lang being annoyed if asked to orate off the cuff, and feeling that he could have done himself more justice had he worked out something in advance. However, one is driven to the conclusion that this first recital showed those most concerned for Isadora's welfare that improved presentation was essential, hence the long gap between the first two recitals.

When Fuller-Maitland's memoirs appeared in 1929, he added this:

It was luckily my place to notice her performances and I ventured to give two hints, on one of which she acted, whilst I notice the other repeated (alas, too late) in the course of a review of her autobiography in *The Times' Literary Supplement* of 24th May 1928. The hint she took was that it would be an improvement if she would dance, not to poems (she used to announce that she would dance to 'an idyll of *Theocrates*') but to good music, and specially mentioned the waltzes of Chopin. She introduced herself to me and asked me to recommend music that she could illustrate in her art. I told her how anxious I was to have the *rubato* of Chopin carried out in the dance; and she came and went through one or two of the Chopin pieces until she could get the right elasticity of rhythm. I had the pleasure of playing for her in the New Gallery at one of her recitals. As it was her visit to Russia which transformed the conventional ballet of Russia into the exquisitely artistic product of the Diaghilev management, I am tempted to flatter myself by thinking that my words may have had some small effect in helping this transformation.

However, Fuller-Maitland had continued:

The hint she did not take was this; while her movements and poses were eminently picturesque, they were but few in number (the Greek vase type of beauty had been realised for us years before by Mary Anderson's *Perdita* in *The Winter's Tale*). I felt it would be a good thing if she studied the conventional ballet movements if only to know the technique so to avoid it

deliberately. I am amused to read the reviewer's words: 'Had she numbered discrimination among her gifts, she might have pushed her analysis far enough to elicit the merits as well as the fallacies of the older technique.' But people must have the defects of their qualities, and it is good to recall the classical grace of the dancer.

Obviously Isadora had never told Fuller-Maitland that she had, in fact, several times attempted to learn from ballet teachers, but without avail. Years later, watching a ballet performance, she said to a friend "I could never do that."

When, three-and-a-half months later, on July 4th, the theme of Isadora's second recital was *Music*; Parry was the man chosen to introduce it—presumably having been prepared in advance for the honor. Chopin and Mendelssohn were the principal composers, and obviously Fuller-Maitland had a great hand in preparing the program. As he played for Isadora on his own harpsichord, this must have meant visits to his house in Kensington for rehearsals. Mabel Dolmetsch described him as "tall, fresh-complexioned, and rather aloof." Isadora never seems to have been put off by a reputation. Certainly, his strictures had been taken to heart, and his positive suggestion taken up, as can be seen from the notice in *The Times* on July 6th, 1900.

MISS DUNCAN'S EVENINGS

The second of the charming entertainments given by Miss Isadora Duncan at the New Gallery took place on Tuesday, when the scheme of her programme showed a marked improvement on any that she has hitherto given in London. In the first place, almost all attempt to illustrate well-known stories or poems was dispensed with, and the reading, which has been felt as a wholly unnecessary and rather tiresome addition, was left out altogether. By way of preface, Sir Hubert Parry gave a short address on the relation of music to the dance. . . . The aptitude of the French for the dance led to a reference to Chopin, the composer most fully represented in the evening's programme. Zwintscher played with beautiful finish and artistic style three of the preludes, the waltz in C sharp minor, and a mazurka in A minor; the third of the preludes, that in C minor, was illustrated by an appropriate set of solemn gestures, and to the waltz and mazurka Miss Duncan made an accompaniment of exquisite grace. Mendelssohn's *Spring Song* and an encore were also danced, as well as the beautiful minuet from Gluck's *Orfeo* . . .

As Fuller-Maitland used the plural, it may be presumed that he wrote this notice too, carefully avoiding mention of his own part in the affair. As it had been his suggestion that Isadora should dance to music by Chopin, so must he have chosen the pieces. Isadora retained them in her repertoire, and this was to have unlooked-for repercussions. When he eventually wrote his memoirs, Fuller-Maitland was very modest in the way in which he expressed his own inadvertent influence on the Russian Ballet. An interesting query is whether Isadora told the truth when she used to say, years later, that as a child she had danced about at home to waltzes and mazurkas of Chopin played by her mother. A program of her recital for Mrs. Whitelaw Reid in New York in 1898 shows some unexpected names, but does not mention Chopin. When Fuller-Maitland described her interested reaction to his initial suggestions, in March 1900, that she should dance to works by this composer, he left the impression that it was a completely novel idea to her then.

Literature and Music had been interpreted in Dance: Painting remained.

On July 6th, it was Sir William Richmond, K.C.B., R.A., M.A., who gave the opening talk. Son of an R.A., given a very good musical education, a portrait painter, landscape artist and perpetrator of mythological subjects such as have been mentioned, his was a very uneven talent—at its worst in the latter. He had traveled much in Mediterranean countries, and was considered an expert on Italian art. He probably took a hand in the selection of the items which Isadora was to interpret in honor of Painting.

This time, the music was provided by Arnold Dolmetsch and his consort of players, which included his second wife, Elodie, and a pupil, Mabel Johnston, who was to become his third wife (and who will re-appear in Isadora's story). This culminating recital must have required much preparatory work, which would have been going on at the same time as rehearsals for the Chopin night, for Isadora had to work up new items to the esoteric music suggested, pre-

(over)



WM. S. KIMBALL & CO.,
CIGARETTES.

Duncan

Isadora Reexamined (Cont'd)

sumably, by Arnold Dolmetsch—music which he had probably discovered in manuscript in dusty collections, and laboriously copied out. Then again, more elaborate costumes were called for.

The complete program for this third recital exists. It was printed on expensive paper, and deckle-edged. Verses in Italian and English are printed and may—or may not—have been the words of songs which accompanied some items, or merely there to give the audience the required frame of mind. First on the program was the *Primavera*, this time to “old Venetian dance strains, dating from the early sixteenth century. (Song, with lute accompaniment.)” The masterpiece was attributed to Alessandro Filipepi, 1447-1510, a rather pompous bit of pedantry, as this was the family name of Botticelli, as we usually call him. To the different music, she once again interpreted the movements of Flora, scattering seed and dancing in the replica of her flower-strewn gown. She may also have portrayed some of the other figures in the composition, a thing she loved to do.

Next came *La Bella Simonetta*, in which, to a Minuet by Lulli, she evoked the central figure, for which that lady, adored by Botticelli but the mistress of Giuliano de' Medici, was the model. (Lulli, the French Court composer, qualified for this Italian evening because he happened to have been born in Florence.) The central figure, Spring, must have called for another lovely costume, gold bands outlining the white folds over the breasts, and a deep rose-red scarf draping the shoulders. The music was played on three viols, and Italian words accompanied the French minuet.

The third number, *Angel Playing on Viol*, was accompanied, appropriately, by music played on a single viol—but though the date of the picture was at the end of the fifteenth century, the music was nearly a hundred years later. The picture is one of a pair of angels playing instruments—the other has a lute—which were painted, along with a pair of singing angels, as side-pieces to accompany the *Madonna of the Rocks*, commissioned in Milan of Leonardo da Vinci. Two brothers, of whom one died young, were brought in to assist Leonardo, and these pictures are usually attributed to Ambrogio de Predis. They are coarse, but effective for Isadora's purpose. For Sir William Richmond's, they had the charm of being recent acquisitions, purchased for the National Gallery only in 1898. One can imagine that Arnold Dolmetsch must have explained all the technique of using the bow, for these viols were not played by being placed under the chin, but between the knees.

After an interval, Isadora moved on to the sixteenth century, interpreting Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, a masterpiece which is also in the National Gallery. To a “Ballo for four viols, drum and tambourine” by Giovanni Picchi (1621), she seems to have been by turns Bacchus and Ariadne. In the painting, Ariadne, her back turned to the artist, flees as Bacchus leaps from his grape-festooned chariot to console her for the lost Theseus. Isadora was still slender in 1900, but later photographs bear a distinct resemblance to Titian's model. This item, too, she was to retain in her repertoire for most of her career.

It must have been very late by the time the last item was reached. Isadora interpreted Sir William Richmond's own Diploma work, *Orpheus returning from the Shades* (1895).

Which of them was the bolder—he, to have his work mentioned in the same breath as that of Botticelli, Leonardo and Titian (for there are those who rashly claim that Leonardo added a stroke here or there to the very inferior *Angel with a Viol*)—or she, to risk the displeasure and the titters of the elite?

Orpheus Returning from the Shades was the most extraordinary choice of subject for Isadora to make. Certainly, it is a musical theme, but its principal character is male. Even in order to flatter Sir William Richmond, it is hard to see why a feminine creature should ever have chosen to “interpret” such a fiercely masculine figure as Orpheus appeared on his canvas, with muscles bulging like a strong man at a fair raising a cardboard weight and putting on an act as strenuous as if he had been lifting a lead trunk.

The story of Orpheus is well known. He was the son of the god Apollo and the muse, Calliope. He fell in love with a human princess, Eurydice, and married her. She was bitten by a serpent and died. Orpheus descended to the underworld in search of her. There his music so charmed the deities that they promised to restore his wife to him if he would leave without looking back. But Orpheus did look back, and Eurydice was lost to him for ever.

In this picture, he is portrayed at the moment when he staggers out of the cavern, brandishing his lyre over his head. The instrument, however, is of a type never found in Greece at all. Isadora at moments interpreted Orpheus, and at others, Eurydice. The music was taken from Monteverdi's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and instrumen-

tal pieces for Viola, Violins and Harpsichord.

Who really produced the evening's entertainment? On the surviving program it is loyally credited to Raymond Duncan. The most modest reflection will show that this was impossible. No one but the Dolmetsch family, for instance, could have produced the repertoire of obscure early music. And Raymond never wanted to forego dance to words alone. Perhaps it was a joint effort, with Hallé, an expert in the hanging of pictures and therefore of proportion, Fuller-Maitland, performer as well as critic, Alice Comyns Carr, experienced costume designer, and Arnold Dolmetsch, combining forces. Yet not even this array could tempt any London theatrical management to offer Isadora an engagement.

A fortnight later, *The Lady* printed an account of this recital, preceding it by a retrospective glance at Isadora's career in London during the past years (which, in its turn, adds illumination to that dim period.)

ISADORA DUNCAN

2 August 1900.

In the summer of 1899 a young lady from New York was introduced to a London audience by Mrs. William Lowther at a garden-party at Lowther Lodge. She was Miss Isadora Duncan, a dancer of a new kind, who had already created some sensation in America. Mrs. Lowther's enterprise was not rewarded by any great enthusiasm: Miss Duncan's dancing was either too unusual, or dancing in a garden too bold a departure. But the whirligig of Time brings his revenges, and when Miss Duncan danced the other day in the 'Teraph' at the Court Theatre, she achieved a triumph over the very same class of audience she had failed to stir at Lowther Lodge, and is now talked about all over London. Miss Duncan had made her way in London to a certain extent by dancing in some of the Benson productions at the Lyceum. . . . In all of these she proved herself to be possessed of a very rare gift, used in a very rare way. Dressed in a simple white frock, Miss Duncan took up a series of graceful poses like those of figures on a Greek vase, but passed from one to another so quickly that the succession of postures resolved itself into a dance. Miss Duncan has both the elevation and the muscular strength of the dancer, but she makes it her chief aim to develop the pictorial side of the dance, and leaves feats of limb to others. At the New Gallery recently Miss Duncan. . . was particularly successful in reproducing the poise of the different figures in Botticelli's *Primavera*, though, curiously enough, she failed with the leading figure of Spring. Even better was her wonderful dance after *Bacchus and Ariadne*, the grace and spirit of which must have been obvious even to those wholly ignorant of the art of dancing. Of the other dances it is difficult to speak in the same terms of praise. Miss Duncan should beware of trying to interpret pictures and ideas which in no way lend themselves to the dance. It will be a thousand pities if she leaves her proper line for such ungrateful experiments as that of trying to portray the sorrows of Orpheus in dumb show. C.M.

Lowther Lodge, revealed in this article to have been the setting for Isadora's first appearance dancing for a society hostess in London, is a large house built by Norman Shaw facing Kensington Gardens, and well-known as the headquarters of the Royal Geographical Society. Exhaustive enquiries have failed to reveal the meaning of the reference to *The Teraph* at the Court Theatre; certainly there was no such production shown in any newspapers advertising theatrical entertainment. It was most probably a single item in some charity show, given once only.

It is interesting to see that, to the writer of this notice, it was obvious that Isadora could have a line of her own—indeed, should have a line of her own. This was what the trial and error of 1899-1900 in London was to give her.

Soon after this recital, Isadora and her mother left London for Paris. Isadora left London with something she had not had when she arrived: with self-knowledge. She now knew her way as an artist, both the negative and the positive aspects. She knew that “the stage,” in the conventional sense, was not for her; no plays, no musicals, no taking part in other peoples' creations. Sheer movement was to be her element, and it could be fettered no more than by good music and the thoughts this could provoke in her, and which she would transform into interpretation thanks to her gift for mime.

She had learned to hold an audience on her own. London, for Isadora, had worked well. □

Next month, Neta Macdonald describes Isadora's life in Paris in 1900, and her Continental successes up to her meeting with Gordon Craig.



Lincoln Kirstein has written in Dance Index: "Isadora Duncan is the capital figure in the dance of the first half of the twentieth century. She released possibilities of movement through the human body in a single decade which opened up the closed tradition of theatrical gesture developed in the previous four centuries."

*From the formative years, dealt with here and in later installments:
Preceding page:*

Isadora on a cigarette card, probably around 1897 during her tour to eastern parts of the United States. (Collection of Paul Hertelendy)

*Above:
Isadora and her brother Augustin in snapshots taken in 1905 in Brussels. (Irma Duncan Collection)*

*At right:
Isadora in Munich in 1904 in costume for her dance work Elvira. Note the bare feet which, by this time, had become a standard aspect of her performing. (Kay Bardsley Collection)*

*Overleaf:
Isadora Duncan, circa 1903, photo-portrait property of the Teater Historisch Museum. (Allan Ross MacDougall Collection; Dance Collection, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts)*



isadora duncan

A DANCEMAGAZINE PORTFOLIO PRODUCED BY WILLIAM COMO AND RICHARD PHILP DESIGNED BY HERBERT MIGDOLL



after isadora: her art as inspiration

by lois draegin

We see Isadora Duncan every time we look at dance—so fully have her innovations been absorbed into Western dance. It's a fact we tend to forget. But Isadora was not simply a unique phenomenon, an artist unconnected to an aesthetic past or future as is often thought. She inspired an entirely fresh approach to movement and creation, one which today we take for granted. In her day, however, everything about Isadora's art was revolutionary: her filmy, loose-fitting costumes; her bare legs and feet; her use of music (Isadora was virtually the first dancer to use major pieces of music, a practice judged scandalous); her abstract choreography which had the look of improvisation; and her concept of movement inspired by nature and art to express emotions, humanity, individuality, the soul. That young woman who stood, silently, in her studio, as Isadora describes in her autobiography, "seeking that dance which might be the divine expression of the human spirit through the body's movement," came up with truth, rough around the edges perhaps, but truth nevertheless. All this in the midst of a society which had little understanding of or sympathy for the dance. But the society changed, as did the dance.

One directly and deeply influenced by Isadora was Michel Fokine. In her memoirs, ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska describes the impact Isadora's 1905 visit to St. Petersburg had on the young Fokine. She says that after Fokine saw Isadora, he "at once began to cut out new patterns for classical ballet. . . without rejecting the framework of classical technique, he wanted a free expression of emotion." Kschessinska goes on to tell of the creation of his ballet *Eunice*, based on *Quo Vadis*, for which Fokine turned to the study of classical dances in ancient vase paintings to capture the flavor of

Isadora and her most direct heirs, the six pupils she adopted, in a 1917 portrait by Arnold Genthe: (l. to r.) Irma, Theresa, Anna, Lisa, Isadora, Erica and Margot Duncan. (Photo: Irma Duncan Collection, Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts)

ancient Greek and Roman art. The ballet premiered December 10, 1906, and, she says, "caused a great stir and provoked heated arguments and repercussions." Fokine obviously withstood the "taint of Duncanism," and by the time Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* hit Paris in 1909, the new order had been established.

It seems safe to assert that Isadora, too, made it possible for modern dance to develop and mature when it did. And her influence may have been felt most directly by her own students. Her art served as inspiration for many, both during her life and after.

From the start there were imitators; enterprising women who figured that they could just whip their tunics out of the closet, kick off their shoes, and proceed to dance in the "Grecian" manner of Isadora Duncan. (In 1911 Carl Van Vechten referred to Isadora as "the American girl who is directly responsible for a train of barefoot dancers who have spread themselves, like a craze, over two continents in the last five years.") And Isadora herself, commenting on this rash of imitators, said in an interview in the *New York Sun*, 1908:

Those that imitate me may take off thin stockings and other parts of dress and they may then do rather stupid and perhaps vulgar things; but they are proof in their little way of what the movement that I began here ten years ago has accomplished. There is at least a charm in dancing without shoes and stockings and stays that every public can appreciate.

Isadora's observation that this trend reflected an acceptance and enjoyment of her art form was astute: A 1911 housewife, describing the benefits she reaps from doing "Greek" dances (*à la*

(over)



Above: The Irma Duncan Company performed extensively in the early 1930s: here, a performance for the Architect's Relief Fund at Louis Untermeyer's Greystone Estate in 1932 with (l. to r.) Dvora Lapson, Ruth Fletcher, Sima Leake, Julia Levien and Hortense Kooluris.

*Opposite: (left) Vanessa Redgrave as she appeared in the film *The Loves of Isadora*; (right) Annabelle Gamson in a Duncan dance. (Photo: Herbert Migdoll)*

After Isadora (Cont'd)

Isadora—"It may be done with the help of a phonograph and combines pleasure and physical culture"—couldn't but extend the public's approbation of Isadora by taking the shock value out of her performances. The danger lay in the trivializing effect behavior like this must have wrought.

Other imitators were judged to be more harmful. Maud Allan termed her style of performing "dramatic dancing," but Isadora accused her of copying her own style of dance. That Allan was greatly influenced by Isadora was obvious to all who saw them both perform. In pre-World War I England in particular (Isadora wasn't around), Allan established herself as quite a success, especially praised for her sensitive renderings of great works of music. In 1908 Isadora returned to the London stage after an absence of seven years, giving the public the opportunity to compare the two artists. A critic for *The Academy* (4/11/08) wrote: "Being a very warm admirer of Maud Allan, I could not help but comparing her art with that of Isadora Duncan, a comparison which was decidedly unfavorable to the former. . . Maud Allan is but a child beside Isadora Duncan."

Although Isadora scorned the imitators of her art, she was feverishly devoted to the idea of inspiring others through the canons of her teaching. The creation of a school—or the preservation of it when she had one—remained a constant throughout her life. In 1904, with earnings from her first financial successes as a performer in Europe, she established a very costly and ambitious school in

Grunewald, Germany. Pupils were to be trained according to a specific, systematic program designed by Isadora which would "awaken" their spirits to beauty while conditioning their bodies, through gymnastic exercises, to be able to express the "sentiments of the thoughts of the soul." Grunewald was to be only the first of her schools, though certainly not the last. Switzerland, England, Russia, the U.S., all loomed as potential sites, but France—at an estate in Bellevue purchased by Paris Singer for Isadora—was the next stop for the Duncan entourage. However, the experience at Grunewald was not without significance, for it was in this setting that Isadora concretely devised her program of education and here that she gathered her six adopted daughters—Irma, Anna, Marie-Theresa, Erica, Lisa and Margot—three of whom would eventually become vital links in perpetuating Isadora's method of teaching and choreography in the U.S.

"The Isadorables," all grown up, landed in New York in 1917 on their own—Isadora had returned to Europe to make some money. Financial necessity and artistic longings led the girls to strike out for their independence, making transcontinental tours as the Isadora Duncan Dancers, and teaching. Through the 1920s, Anna and Theresa taught many girls in their New York City studios and performed as well. Between their pupils and those of Elizabeth Duncan (Isadora's sister, whose school in Salzberg trained many in summer workshops), quite a supply of third generation Duncan dancers was being produced. At this time Isadora was leading her own group of red-tunic-ed little girls in Soviet Russia, with Irma's assistance. By the time Irma arrived in the U.S. for her second tour with children from the Russian school in 1930, there was plenty of indigenous Duncan activity. So it was no real problem for her when the Soviet government called the company back home (out of enemy territory) and Irma had to assemble replacements to finish out the tour contract. In this original group were: Anna Criss, Nadia Chilkovsky, Sylvia Davis, Ruth Fletcher, Mignon Garland, Abby Goodman, Hortense Kooluris and Julia Levien. Fletcher, Garland, Kooluris and Levien remained the nucleus of the company for a decade, joined also by Sima Leake.

Julia Levien who, herself, began performing with Anna in 1927, went with Irma in 1931, and later formed her own company, recalls



a survey done by the Duncan Guild in the '40s to ascertain how much Duncan dance was being taught in colleges. The results were remarkable: Levien states that there were approximately thirty-five teachers and 5000 students of Duncan dance at that time in America. Another project which the Guild undertook at this time was the codification of Duncan techniques for teachers. Duncan dancing began to die down: occasional performances in the '50s; some of the Duncan dancers branched out to other dance spheres; some retired. It wasn't until the mid-'60s, when Hortense Kooluris, Julia Levien and Gemze de Lappe resumed teaching the Duncan classes, and giving lecture-demonstrations, that a trickle of Duncan dance began. (De Lappe made her career in musicals, among them *Miss Liberty* (Robbins), *Oklahoma!*, *Paint Your Wagon*, *Juno* and the 1962 City Center revival of *Brigadoon* (all choreographed by Agnes de Mille). She was a frequent assistant to de Mille in the theater and on television, but de Lappe's roots go back to her early training with Irma Duncan.) Once the film, *The Loves of Isadora*, starring Vanessa Redgrave, was released in 1967, a new surge of interest ("if not truth" Levien says) in Isadora swept through the American public.

The film version of Isadora Duncan's autobiography, *My Life*, was criticized by some for its factual inaccuracies and its sensationalism. But Isadora's volume itself was far from factual. Vanessa Redgrave as Isadora did not try to duplicate Duncan's choreography—it would have been presumptuous even to try—but she, along with choreographer Litz Pisk, did seek to remain faithful to the spirit of Isadora's great works. Dancing in the film was used more to underscore dramatic points and to indicate passages in time than to portray accurately Isadora's art. Some were bothered by Redgrave's lack of intensity while dancing. But to the general public, Isadora became a romantic figment of popular imagination. Maybe it was for the wrong reasons, but the film did resuscitate curiosity about Isadora.

When Annabelle Gamson undertook her first performances of revived Duncan dances (staged by Julia Levien) in April 1974, she didn't know whether anybody would be interested. Many people were very interested—overwhelmed might be a better word. Gamson was a fourth generation Duncanite: she had begun her

training with Levien at the age of five, performed with Levien's company, but from there went on to study and perform in other areas. To a generation seeing the Duncan dances for the first time, as performed by Gamson, they came as almost a revelation: their simplicity and freedom, the basic emotions they conveyed. It came as a surprise to some that Isadora had even choreographed her dances, rather than leaving choreography to improvisation. Jack Anderson wrote of the concert:

The choreography was deceptively simple with much skipping and running—a low leap constituting the height of virtuosity. But the dances were exhilarating because of the fluidity of the upper body, the way every swoop had its rebound and the manner in which the arms floated, swayed and tossed in the air.

Gamson now offers an all-Isadora program as well as one which includes dances of Mary Wigman and her own choreography along with the Duncan. People want to see these works. Gamson performed two of Isadora's pieces for the Spoleto-U.S.A.'s all-Striabin program in June—*Mother* and *Etude*—and she was also seen in these works on Dance in America's *Trailblazers of Modern Dance* show. August 24 Gamson will be performing an all-Duncan program at the American Dance Festival in Newport, R.I., and a New York season is planned for January 12-15 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

A fifth generation of Duncan dancers flourishes, if on a small, small scale, today in the U.S. Levien says that "even to the fifth generation, the style remains intact, with personal differences." They perform the same choreography that Isadora did (as presented by Anna and Irma's companies), they study the style which Isadora devised, and probably some of them will go on to teach Isadora's dance of the spirit to a sixth generation of enthusiastic girls. The mentality which seems to pervade generations two through five is one of preservation: to pass along the Duncan traditions intact.

As a "birthday present to Isadora," the Committee for the Isadora Duncan Centenary (a group of dedicated Duncanphiles, a number of whom lovingly recall the days when they danced with Irma, Anna or Theresa) sponsored a concert, *The Dance of Isadora Duncan*, in New York City in May. Soloists Hortense Kooluris,

(over)

Right: Fourth and fifth generation Duncan dancers in a polka, May, 1977. (Photo: Sarah Banter).

Below: A 1976 photo of Hortense Kooluris in Duncan's famous Blue Danube Waltz. (Photo: Claudia Laabs)

Opposite: Sir Frederick Ashton's Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan is danced by Lynn Seymour. (Photo: Anthony Crickmay, for Dance in America)



After Isadora (Cont'd)

Gemze de Lappe and Julia Levien (their first major concert together since the '50s) and Sylvia Gold, plus a supporting group of twelve dancers (22-27 years old, mostly fourth, some fifth generation) and four children presented a program representative of Duncan's art. A demonstration of classroom technique was followed by a number of Isadora's dances to Schubert, Chopin, Gluck, Scriabin and Strauss. Isadora's centennial was celebrated, too, on the West Coast. The San Francisco Duncan Dancers, directed by Mignon Garland, presented "a legacy of fifteen original dances choreographed by Isadora" on May 27, thus carrying on, as their flyer put it, the "generational continuity of a quiet tradition."

There is a certain irony in the fact that these direct descendants of Isadora have limited themselves to preserving rather than revolutionizing, as their mentor did. While the heirs of Denishawn developed extensively from their own base, there is no parallel development in the Duncan world. Some of the young women in the Centenary company speak eventually of forming a company to present dances choreographed in the Duncan style. Some have already worked creatively in the idiom. Lori Belilove (a student of Hortense Kooluris and a member of the centenary performing group) is one who has extended the boundaries of the Duncan idiom: Last year Belilove featured a male dance in Duncan-style choreography she did for her students at Mills College. Over the years, the larger-than-life image of Isadora may have intimidated or discouraged any attempts at rivaling her artistry by her followers. But if Isadora was aiming to prove her theories of dance education true through the children, as she claimed, this legacy of preservation confirms her doctrines.

Renewed interest in Isadora can also be witnessed in ballet: Last year both Maurice Béjart and Sir Frederick Ashton choreographed quite different ballets about Isadora. Each choreographer created his ballet for a particular ballerina—that's where similarities end. In Béjart's *Isadora* for Bolshoi prima Maya Plisetskaya, he chose to create a portrait of Isadora as a woman and as an artist, not especially through movement or spirit, but by calling forth pop culture trademarks commonly associated with Isadora. The ballet opens with a dramatic rendering of Isadora's famous death:

Plisetskaya walks diagonally downstage, a piece of fabric stretched from her neck out into the wings. We hear the sound of a car crash, broken glass, a terrific bang and Plisetskaya lies crumpled on the floor. Quotes from Isadora are read between each section of the work: These represent her Art. Other scenes: a group of angelic looking children patter out, cluster around, lineup, and Plisetskaya tosses flowers to them; in the *Marseillaise* she moves forcefully, hands cupped to a silently shrieking mouth. A lovely segment had Plisetskaya seated on the floor pantomiming a kind of juggling act—referring perhaps to Isadora's interpretation of the maidens of Chalcis playing with golden balls in *Iphigenia and Orpheus*. Plisetskaya succumbs once again to death at the ballet's close.

Sir Frederick Ashton saw Isadora Duncan perform her *Brahms Waltzes* in 1921 when he was still a schoolboy. His *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan* expresses his admiration for the artist. Ashton describes Isadora's impact on him:

With melancholy grace and irresistible intensity, she moved through her new dance form—so fluid, so different from rigid ballet....I was absolutely carried away and went back to see her time and again. The way she used her arms, the way she ran across a stage—these I have adopted in my own ballets.

In Lynn Seymour, Ashton has found an ideal instrument to convey the spirit and essence of Isadora Duncan's art. The ballet works as a tribute to both Duncan and Seymour. Although the movement is frankly balletic, it succeeds as a sort of balletic extension of Isadora's movement. Ashton does say that the piece is "in the manner of," not an imitation of Duncan choreography. Seymour is a rich, mature Isadora. Her musicality and her ability to fill each movement with breath, her sweeping fluidity and emotional power are exquisite. It is a convincing spiritual evocation of Isadora's art.

Ultimately, we are all the inheritors of Duncan's unique dance and life style. What were scandalous concepts and attitudes in her day are now, fifty years after her death, part of our aesthetic. In a general way, her influence has been larger than this. As Agnes de Mille wrote in 1952:

Before Isadora...dancing was not considered important or dignified except to people who practiced it. After her it came to be....□

