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**SPECIAL
HOLIDAY
ISSUE:
LOOKING
AT
DANCE**

Massine
Regional Festivals '77
Isadora Duncan, Part VI
Bruce Marks & Toni Lander
Jo Ann McCarthy
Mangrove
Valentino

Gelsey Kirkland in "Nutcracker"

part VI: isadora in london, 1921
isadora reexamined:
lesser-known aspects
of the great dancer's life
by nesta macdonald

When Isadora returned to London in April, 1921, nearly thirteen years had passed since her only serious theatrical season in England. The war which separated life from the Edwardian scene she had known had been over for two-and-a-half years, but though the shadow of war had lifted, the gap left by 2,000,000 men killed in it still showed in Britain. "The Twenties," in the image now instantly conjured up by set-dressers' clichés, all knee-length skirts, cloche hats, shingles and jazz, had not even begun. Nor, believe it or not, had radio—the B.B.C. was formed only in 1922.

It is astonishing to find that the Diaghilev Ballet had been in London for a total of sixty-two weeks between September 1918 and July 1920, and would be back in May 1921. There is absolutely no question but that this company was the artistic sensation of the era. A new generation of dancers had joined it, and of its older generation, so deeply loved by the public, Karsavina had danced in some performances, including creating the role of The Miller's Wife in Massine's ballet, *Le Tricorne*. She started a two-week season at The Coliseum on April 4, with Novikoff and a corps de ballet.

Not only did the public flock to see dance in the theaters, however. Everybody danced. Ballroom dancing classes flourished, including even at The Pheasantry, in Chelsea, where Princess Astafieva had an exceptionally gifted boy pupil called Patrick Healey-Kay—who was subsequently re-named Anton Dolin. But in 1921, large salons existed for the popular tea-dances, with Palm Court orchestras playing foxtrots and waltzes, and spacious floors; in the night clubs, better bands played for couples jammed together on pocket-handkerchief-sized floors; in the most exclusive of these, if you were lucky, you might catch sight of the most popular man in England—the Prince of Wales.

The heir to the throne enjoyed unparalleled popularity; he had already made several long tours of the Empire, and would soon leave on yet another. Everything he wore became a fashion overnight; any establishment he patronized could turn away crowds. He danced in night clubs. There was just one thing which flourished without his patronage—ballet.

Fashion, of course, was decided only in Paris. It is fascinating to find that in January, 1921, Vogue solemnly announced the very latest news from Paris—the short skirt was dead! Women were wearing dresses about mid-calf length, many with points hanging down, and in the evening, with vestigial trains. In April, Poiré decreed a lowered waistline, longer skirts, and width at the hips. Hair was either "up," or bobbed.

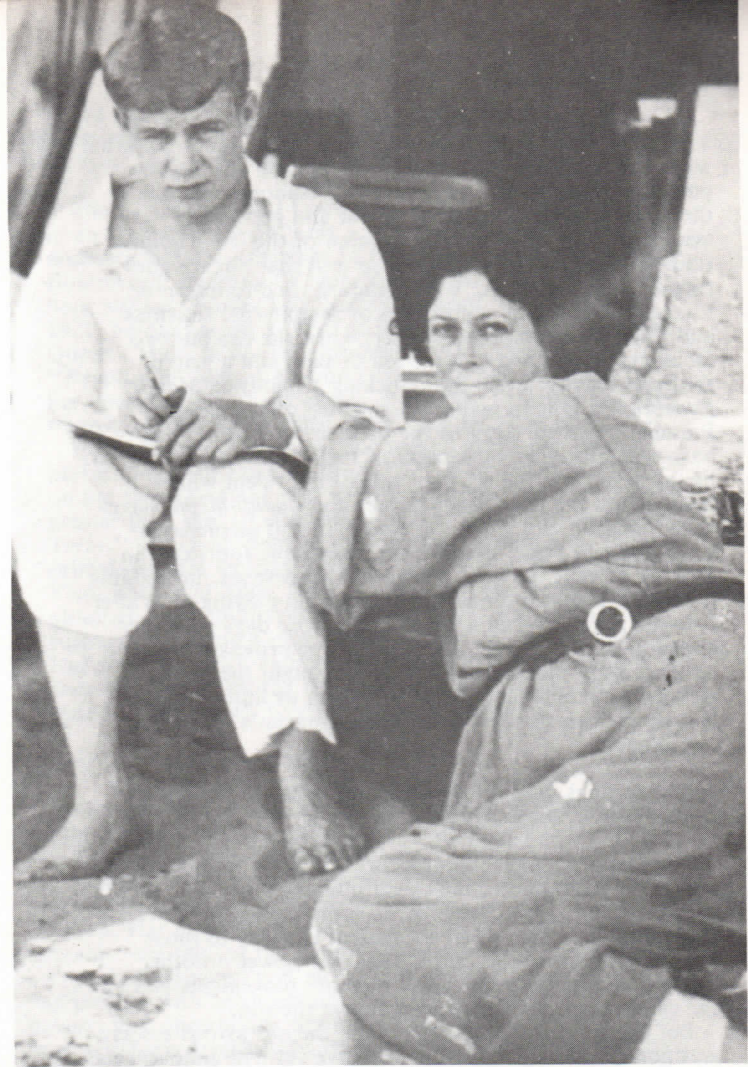
Isadora's short season in 1921 arose from the need to earn money. Her affairs were chaotic. Not only was she without funds, but she was also in a state of disagreement with the "Six Isadorables," her principal pupils, now independent young ladies in their twenties. They had danced very successfully in America under the management of Sol Hurok. Her pianist was now Walter Rummel, who looked like the young Liszt; they were having an *affaire*.

Since her youthful but formative year, 1899-1900, Isadora had given only about two dozen actual performances in London—the successful month in 1908, and the odd recitals in 1912. In the interim, London had seen many beautiful dancers: Genée, Kyasht, Maud Allan, Pavlova, Karsavina, and the whole Diaghilev Ballet with the miraculous Nijinsky. In 1921, Isadora was no longer a novelty. She was, in fact, almost an anachronism. Twenty years had removed from her the air of lightness and innocence which had so charmed people of taste at the turn of the century. Life and tragedy had given her a more mondaine air, and an epic style.

She devoted her opening program to interpreting the tragic history of Poland. The notices were very mixed.

The Times gave the clearest analysis of her program, on April 13, 1921:

At the Prince of Wales' Theatre yesterday afternoon Miss Isadora Duncan "interpreted" a programme of music entirely taken from the works of Chopin. There were various separate



A snapshot taken in Venice in 1922 of Isadora Duncan, by this time grown thick, and her husband, the Russian poet

Aleksandrovich Essenine. (Photo: Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts, Lincoln Center)

compositions but the programme was continuous in that it was intended to be a kind of musical history of the tragedy of Poland.

Miss Duncan's share of the entertainment is described on the programme as dancing but she does very much more than dance to music. She interprets it. When she first introduced her so-called "classical dancing" audiences were inclined to be amused at her methods, but she has overcome criticism, and in these days her genius is realised. She found dancing an art: she will leave it a language.

The programme yesterday afternoon was divided into three parts, described as "Tragic Poland," "Heroic Poland," and "Happy Poland."

In the first she interprets the enslavement and oppression of Poland. There is little action. She hardly moves more than a few steps during the whole of the interpretation, but she expresses in a natural and perfectly comprehensible way the tragedy of the country. In the second part she shows the heroism of the country under the heel of the conqueror, and in the third its exultation at the recovery of freedom. There is no lack of movement here. Whatever the mood, Miss Duncan interprets it with extraordinary art and fidelity. She plays with the human emotions as the pianist plays with the keys of the piano, and the whole afternoon was a triumph for both the dancer and her methods.

Not all the critics saw such depth of feeling or success in portraying it: but J.T. Grein, who had written about her in 1908, had this to say in the *Illustrated London News* on April 23rd:

(over)

Let us rejoice that Isadora Duncan has returned to us with a crown of Titian hair on a Junoesque figure, and that when she is herself—in real dance—she still realises the poetry of motion. For there are two Isadoras: the one is the artist who knows what is “great and good and beautiful”; the other is a kinswoman of the late Thomas Phineas Barnum, he who knew so well that a blare goes further than a whisper. When Isadora tried to interpret Liszt and Chopin in contortions of sempiternal slowness and often of incomprehensibility; when she has but two facial expressions—a contraction of pain and a grin of artificial suavity; when in mimicking a hallowed *March Funebre* she fails to realise the opening of the gates of Paradise after the elegy of the prelude, I, for one, who have seen all the great dancers of half a century, am not to be taken in. It is the Barnum side of her talent which bamboozles the uninitiated masses and *quand-même* slaves at her chariot. But when she dances in still picturesque undulation of arms, in grace of picturesque footsteps, in wafting of veils, designing beautiful arabesques, in wedding her whole being to the magnificent piano-playing of Walter Rummel, then I recall with pleasure those days when her appearance in the great cities of Europe provoked a joyful revolution of choreography, and she taught the public as well as her pupils that nature has given us limbs to vie in eloquence with the lips. To Isadora Duncan's better half, my salaams!

Mixed feelings, and disappointment, afflicted the critic of *Lloyd's Weekly News* (April 17, 1921):

The Isadora Duncan matinee was of absorbing interest, and yet it disappointed me dreadfully. It is probable that she is still the finest dancer in the world, and, anyhow, there were moments when she caught us away to those magic fields where the fairies dance—a power no other modern dancer possesses. And then her movements had all the careless rapture of spring-water in the sun.

But except at these rare moments, the old joyous ecstasy was gone, and with it that air of naive yet wise innocence as of a goddess leaping fully armed out of the brain of Jove into a new-born world.

...It must be premised that Isadora was always a lyric and never a tragic dancer. She sometimes seemed like a figure in a bas-relief, but it was always a lyric figure.

Now she tries to tell a story in dramatic poses, and there she fails. She fails most of all in her dancing to Chopin's *Funeral March*, which one of her imitators, “La Magdalen,” did so tremendously. [This was Maud Allan.] Here it was little more than stage trickery with a mantle.

In some of the other tragic pieces there were splendid poses, heroic gestures, but there were also untidy poses, ugly gestures, and there was an irritating repetition.

Isadora Duncan was meant for simpler and more joyous things. There is for her considerable danger in trying to represent the underground emotions of the soul.

As so often, *The Lady* (April 21, 1921) looked thoughtfully at a performance which it could regard as a development from the dancer's early days:

...Miss Isadora Duncan, who has been dancing for over twenty years, does not show us now the physical aspect of dancing so much as the spiritual aspect of dancing. We associate the dance with agile youthful movement, and are apt to forget that this is but one form of dancing. During the first part of her programme...Isadora hardly moved. She gave us a hundred gradations of gesture, however, which perhaps only a highly-trained eye could follow, exactly as only the highly-trained ear can follow gradations of sound...

Pictorially, the effect was injured by the prominence given to the grand piano as an object in the scene. Of what use was Miss Duncan's mysterious background of grey curtains when in the foreground was one of the ugliest objects man has ever made? However, the association of a single musician of genius with a single dancer of genius produced an effect to which no lover of beauty can be indifferent.

In the last group. “Poland Triumphant,” Miss Duncan deserted her new static methods for her old mobile ones. The grace and originality of her decorative movements are as wonderful as ever, but her feet and ankles are naturally not so supple as in the old days...At the end she made an interesting little speech which threw a great deal of light on what she had shown us.

It is amusing to find what a contrary opinion of the decorative effects was voiced in *The Dancing Times* by G.E. Fussell (May 1921). This is what he said:

The performance...was an example of economy of décor very striking in its effectiveness. The stage was curtained off into a rectangle by grey back and side curtains, the only relief being provided by Miss Duncan's costumes. The grand piano on the stage also added its quota to the general effect.

Colour in her costumes was apt, and the use of the blue spot limes in the first and third numbers was clever, while it was quite inevitable that “Heroic Poland” should be shown under the lurid rays of red light.

The choice of colours used in the costumes was perfect. “Tragic Poland” was represented first in white, a purple scarf being introduced in the second dance, followed by a heavy purple cloak in the “Funeral March,” which brought out the culminating grandeur of the death scene. “Heroic Poland” was interpreted in a brown costume, and the sombre but gorgeous hue was emphasized by the addition of an orange scarf. The same costume, with simple additions, was used in “Happy Poland,” and all three dances gave a vivid impression of careful consideration of the effect to be made as well by the use of decor as by the genius of the dance.

Isadora naturally gave newspaper interviews, and a fine hotch-potch they became. She even told one paper that on her first visit to London she had been only seventeen! (And had intended that to be taken as when she came in 1899 and was twenty-two.) She said that at the age of twenty-two, she had adopted forty children and founded a school in Berlin. But she had continued, “I thought I had found there the atmosphere I desired for my work and that the artistic life of Berlin would be a continual inspiration to me. But after three or four years I found that life in Germany became impossible to me. I was antagonized by those elements which have since antagonized the world, and I returned to France.

“In dancing simply as dancing I am not interested. To me dancing must be the expression of life, not merely a series of gymnastic tricks or pretty movements. That is why I dislike the ordinary ballet dancing, which constrains people to adopt unnatural attitudes and cramps the free expression of their emotions.

“To English people, with their fine athletic bodies, their wide, free movements, their natural grace of bearing, the ballet seems essentially unfitted. Perhaps that is why in the past there have been no great English ballet dancers.

“English people have, I think, the wrong idea of beauty. To the majority it means something suave, softly pretty. To the artist beauty has a sterner meaning. Beauty to him is expression. Rodin's head of Balzac is ugly according to everyday standards, but artists know that because it is completely expressive it is the perfection of beauty. So with my new Slav dance, while I think it is the best thing I have done, many may think it ugly.”

And then Isadora recited the Duncan credo:

“I want music, art and drama to come together. The spoken word is essential; it is the heart and brains of the theatre. The other two are its lyric ecstasy. Then with these three and architecture and painting combined our theatres will become temples. All drama should have its foundation in religion, for without that it becomes ignoble.”

Despite the element of adverse criticism of Isadora's performance as lacking the lightness and innocence of her youth, the press as a whole was favorable towards this season. On April 17th, the *Sunday Pictorial* said: “Isadora Duncan's return to London is an event for rejoicing...it seemed impossible for her to make one movement that was not rooted in beauty. She has more nobility and more classic profundity than any other terpsichorean interpreter of music of our time. Perhaps the greatest wonder of all was that such purity and depth of

emotion should be inspired in anyone by the gaudy sentimental displays of sound which have made Chopin so popular."

And in *The Tatler*, which had printed so very much about Isadora in 1908, the music critic and opera expert, Arthur Kalisch, wrote theater notes under the pseudonym of "ARKAY." This is what he said on April 27th:

I always think it was typical of the artistic intuition of the big public that for years it raved over the dancing of Maud Allan, and left the greater and finer art of Isadora Duncan comparatively neglected. In art, like in so many other things, it is the Press "boom" which decides. Now, however, it looks as if Isadora Duncan were to come into her own on this side of the Channel...The matinées...are attracting enormous attention.

Her interpretation of Chopin at the first matinée she gave was something so magnificently beautiful that it will live in my memory—as it will surely live in the memory of all those who were there—so long as we shall live. The grandeur, the passion of Poland seemed to live before us, resurrected in the exquisite attitudes, the grace, the emotional expression of the dancer. It was an exhibition of real genius.

Isadora was in the throes of the arrangements to go to Russia at the invitation of the Soviet Union, and start a school there. The "Grand Festival" became a single recital at the Queen's Hall on June 24th, 1921. The concert-platform is far from ideal for the dancer who is accustomed to a stage, and the most important aspect of the engagement was not her appearance there, but the fact that Ellen Terry gave in and attended it. There are brief notes in existence in which the great actress excused herself, saying that her health was not good, and that she was not well enough to go to Isadora's performances. She had been operated on for cataract; she was 74, and her sight was failing.

When Ellen's daughter Edy Craig edited her mother's memoirs, she said that Ellen "had a great affection as well as admiration for this wayward genius...the mother of her fairest grandchild. Little Deirdre's untimely death...was one of the tragedies of which Ellen Terry could not speak." (Ellen never saw the child.)

The greenroom was the setting for the last meeting between the renowned actress and her "daughter-in-love." An *Evening News* reporter described Isadora's tea-party:

...Our greatest actress, despite her disfiguring black-rimmed spectacles, was, I thought, the most compelling and charming figure in the gathering. She was led to an armchair in the centre of the room by a pretty dark girl, one of Miss Duncan's pupils. There she held her court.

Isadora Duncan, in a flowing gown with much gold

embroidery on it, reclined by the side of her chair...

In the edited edition of the *Memoirs* of Ellen Terry, Edy gave this description of the event—which followed close upon the final visits to London of both Bernhardt and Duse:

Ellen Terry had said farewell to Bernhardt and Duse alike in an hour of triumph, only a few minutes after an audience crowding forward to the stage had been throwing flowers and shouting "Come Back Soon." And in such an hour she said farewell to Isadora Duncan. On June 25th, 1921, before her departure for Russia, Isadora appeared at Queen's Hall. In her programme was that amazing "Revolution" dance, the most magnificent conception of her later years, perhaps of her whole life. "I never saw true tragedy before," said Ellen Terry, and left it at that.

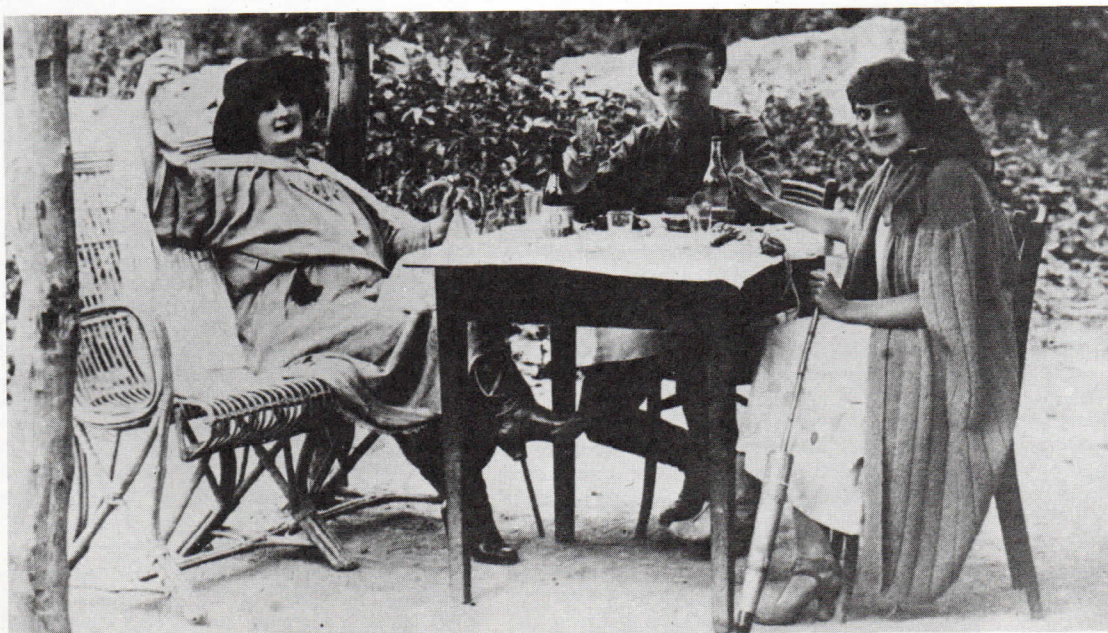
Isadora made a characteristic speech at the end of the performance—it came naturally for her to wear her heart on her sleeve—saying that there was one in the audience far greater than she. "Let us applaud her, let us rejoice in Ellen Terry," she cried, holding out her arms with one of those primal gestures which seemed to some almost indecent. "No, no!" said Ellen Terry, for she was genuinely humble, although her humility, like her simplicity, was often suspected of being a pose. And Isadora's audience, and Isadora's orchestra and conductor too, responded, and cheered Ellen Terry for several minutes. Then she went round to the artist's room. Farewell to Isadora.

And from Isadora—London, Farewell.

Convinced that no one in the West understood her aims and would back her school, Isadora set forth in July 1921 from London, on her first visit to Russia since the Revolution. Irma accompanied her on this first visit to the Soviet Union. Isadora believed that she was to be given a school for a thousand children. Her disillusionment, her marriage to the young poet Essenine, her tour of the United States accompanied by him and by political suspicion and moral outrage, her return to Europe and parting with her husband, his suicide, and her later years of poverty and uncertainty, are a story in themselves. They have, however, been described by those who were her companions in these years, so that the evidence is direct.

To some people, her dramatic death seems yet another tragedy. To me, it seems the finest thing that could have happened for her to meet death instantaneously and without misery. As she stepped into the car which would accidentally kill her, on September 15, 1927, in Nice, she ended with a typical gesture, as she flung her scarf round her neck—and with a typical speech, as she announced, "*Adieu, mes amis, je vais à la gloire!*"

She was, to the end, always the same Isadora. □



Isadora's passion for Soviet politics during the last part of her life was based on an imperfect understanding of Soviet goals and practices; her feelings were nonetheless very strong, and she gained notoriety for vocalizing exactly how she felt. She is seen here traveling in Russia with her manager (unidentified) and Irma, drinking Narzan water at Duncan Loubvie (Castle of Love) near Kislavodsk, August 1923. (Photo: Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts, Lincoln Center)

The six articles by Nesta Macdonald published in Dance Magazine, July through December 1977, are excerpts from Isadora Duncan, to be published by Oresko Books, London, in spring 1978.