

DANCEMAGAZINE

A photograph of a woman, likely a dancer, in a white leotard with colorful polka dots. She is posing with her arms raised and hands near her head, looking towards the camera. The background is a solid dark brown color.

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"the turning point"
american ballet theatre
new york city ballet
alexandra danilova
isadora duncan, part iv

leslie browne

isadora reexamined: lesser-known aspects of the great dancer's life

by nesta macdonald

The Times, July 7, 1908:

In the years that have passed since Miss Isadora Duncan delighted London with her artistic dancing, the art of which she is the exponent, and in modern times the pioneer, has attained an unexpected degree of popularity, and its vogue must in a great measure be accredited to her. . . .

Last night. . . she danced numerous ballet pieces from Gluck's *Iphigenia in Aulide*. . . which with slight additions and repetition, made up a short evening's programme. With the exception of two numbers, all the dances were executed by Miss Duncan alone, so that the contrast between individual and collective dancing, which is the essence of the classical ballet, was almost entirely absent. . . .

Her dancing is as finely imagined as it was, and she still presents an embodiment of youthful grace and winning innocence. If it is the beauty of early summer rather than of spring, it may be observed that the artist has gained in command of her resources. Her variety of attitudes is very remarkable, and all are truly classic in their grace. Here is the art of posing as an accompaniment to the music, rather than an inevitable series of movements for the sake of which the music seems to have been composed. Rhythmical as her performance was, it seldom follows with minute fidelity the notes of the music translating them into steps; and in this respect some of the earlier dances were a little disappointing. The famous gavotte which first appeared in *Elena e Paride* might have been more accurately rendered into dance; but the later portions of the entertainment were much better in this respect, and the interpolated 'musette' from *Armida* and the *Blue Danube* waltz given as a second encore were as rhythmical as could be. . . . One of the cleverest pieces of miming was a Scythian dance near the end, and the final *bacchanale* was quite effective. Miss Duncan's costumes were all in excellent taste, notwithstanding the extreme tenuity of some of them. . . .

Fuller-Maitland was still Music Critic of The Times. This review is clearly written by one who remembered Isadora as she was in 1900, and seems to bear his stamp.

Isadora's London season arose because, in the early summer of 1908, Paris was suffering from Russian fever, and the season she had started at the Gaité Lyrique could not compete.

The situation Isadora met, however, was explained in the Illustrated London News on July 11:

"Miss Maud Allan has found a rival at last," said this journal, introducing a name which has not so far appeared in this tale, "and, to those people who cannot appreciate two different exponents of an art without wanting immediately to institute comparisons, Miss Isadora Duncan's appearance. . . will give an excellent opportunity for indulging this habit."

Here, in London, Isadora was for the first time in confrontation with one of her "Barefoot Dance" rivals. Maud Allan had been installed at the Palace Theatre since March 17. Maud Allan would, in fact, remain at the Palace for two whole years, until Mr. Alfred Butt engaged Anna Pavlova in 1910.

Maud Allan was a Canadian, several years younger than Isadora, much prettier, and much slighter. (Isadora had thickened with the birth of Deirdre; never did she regain her girlish slenderness.) Maud Allan was intensely musical. She had been to Rome to study under Boselli; she had won the Joachim scholarship. Since her debut as a dancer in Vienna in 1903, she too had appeared all over Europe. Her half-hour solo act included several numbers to music which Isadora also used, but culminated in her *pièce de résistance*, Salome's *Dance of the Seven Veils*. She wore flimsy draperies and, as Salome, breastplates, beads and little else. She was especially famous for her expressive arm, hand and finger movements.

To most of the public, Isadora and Maud were just two barefoot dancers, but their managers seem to have promoted a contest, refereed by the critics, in which the public could take sides.

On July 6, the opening day of her season, Isadora had a normal two-inch entry in the "Theatre Advertisements" column of the Daily Telegraph: In the same paper, Mr. Alfred Butt paid for ten-

and-a-half inches, in which Maud Allan's name was printed twenty times in capital letters, and eleven of her glowing notices cited. Next day, though she was the subject of critiques in many papers, Isadora was not even mentioned in The Daily Telegraph.

Continuing the article already quoted, the Illustrated London News discussed the rivals, saying:

But really, the styles of the two dancers do not lend themselves to comparisons that are profitable. Miss Allan's style is more lithe, more unconventional, more full of romantic feeling and girlishness and temperament than that of Miss Duncan: the latter belongs to the classical school, and possesses the restraint, the resourcefulness, the poetic grace of that school. Her dress—the garb of old Greece—is symbolical of the peculiar quality of her art.

On July 7, The Standard sounded a petulant note, encompassing the whole matter, which seemed to hinge largely on the question as to "who came first."

Miss Isadora Duncan has previously appeared here semi-privately, but so far as the present entertainment is concerned, Miss Allan. . . has made it her own in London by being the first in the field.

One can really have too much of this kind of thing, and ladies dancing without tights, with naked legs and feet, clad in diaphanous drapery, may be the executants of a very high art, but run the risk of giving the public a sense of satiety. . . .

The movements of Miss Duncan are full of apparently effortless grace and spontaneous mobility of every limb—she seems to flutter over the ground rather than to tread it, and her reproductions in movement of the classical figures as seen in the Greek carvings and relief work were wholly delightful.

On July 11, The Era, a theatrical paper, had this to say:

She is very finely proportioned with a long neck and arms, strong and shapely legs, well-formed feet, and features beaming with openness and expression. . . . Miss Duncan's dances had little reference to the old Greek story [*Iphigenia in Aulide*]. Indeed, it would often have been agreeable to have had a hint. . . from the program as to what was the meaning of some of the dances. . . .

On one occasion Miss Duncan appeared to be throwing a dart; on another she seemed to be playing at some game with cards or counters. Most memorable of all was the one expressive of the most perfect delight. To see Miss Duncan tripping round the stage, which was enclosed in brown [sic] curtains, was to witness an entrancing exhibition of human happiness. . . . The mystic 'elevation' of the *Bacchanale* was admirably shown, and the collapse and final fall at the end of the dances were very effective. . . . It made a very favorable impression on the well-pleased audience, who recognised. . . that they were in the presence of a saltatory genius. . . .

In The Observer, Austen Harrison had concocted his notice with a bit of quiet fun—scholarly fun, peppering it with words of Greek, or pseudo-Greek, derivation:

Miss Duncan is no gymnopaedic acrobat. . . . Her art is orchestric—I apologise for these pedantic words—the art, that is, of imitative dancing. . . the art of prose gesture. . . she is Graeco-Roman, saturated with the spirit and beauty of that age, sternly classical, so true, so beautiful, that almost, herself, she would appear mythological. . . .

She has an aggravating set smile. . . . Then she disdains all attempt to 'get over the footlights.' She is sternly—too sternly, I think—epicene. There seems a lack of soul, blood, fire, humanness at times about her dancing. She

(over)

Isadora Duncan (Cont'd)

is absolutely unsensuous. Possibly she is somewhat too much the 'artist.'

In the Sunday Times, J.T. Grein injected a note of dance history. Born in Amsterdam, he had become an all-'round man of the theater in England, and had just celebrated his silver jubilee as a critic. He said:

Everything comes to him who waits. Even good old Delsarte, fairly forgotten in Europe, is having his day. For the Duncans and the Maud Allans, what are they but Delsartians? If proof were needed it would be easy to harmonise their every movement with the doctrines of the French aesthete and the fact the both ladies hail from the American continent, where the Delsartian theory is taught in many girls' schools, explains the origin of their art and the similarity of their method. . . .

The art of Miss Duncan. . . is often monotonous—as monotonous as her perennial smile—a thing manufactured, unreal and unsympathetic, which does not successfully mask somewhat rigid features. . . .

If I were asked to differentiate between Isadora Duncan and Maud Allan, I would say the latter brings youth and intuition and inimitable grace of manuection—indeed, Maud Allan's play of hands is poetry itself; the former is a consummate mistress of technique, an inventive subtle mind, with some, but not complete, sense of music, and her feet in step and undulation have something unspeakably beautiful. . . .

In the end, London awarded Isadora the palm. Her dance was considered to be more "artistic" than Maud Allan's, excellent, fascinating, sensuous and sensational though her Canadian rival's performance undoubtedly was; Maud Allan must be considered the more popular entertainer.

Press coverage of every aspect of the dance acts of the two Transatlantic ladies was prodigious. The weekly glossy Society magazine, *The Tatler*, had no fewer than three articles on Isadora on separate feature pages on the first possible date after her season had started, July 15. In "Society from the Green-room," the magazine explored the history of the rise of the phenomenon of barefoot dancing, pointing out that not only the two dancers then in London, but also Ruth St. Denis, who had paid a brief visit the previous year, were all Americans—but said that Isadora was undeniably the first to revive this form of dance. It devoted one whole page to considering the psychology of public response to the phenomenon—Eve's page, this time headed "*Eve—and the Art of the Fig-Leaf*"—a mob reaction, it considered. Other theater managers had hastily sent for what they mistakenly considered to be comparable "acts," such as Odette Valery, for the Coliseum, and a burlesque artiste for another music hall. No one wanted to be left out.

But in the same number, on one of the principal Society pages—*In Town and Out*—the *Tatler* ended a recital of facts about Isadora's career in Europe with these words:

In London, now that the success of her disciple, Miss Maud Allan, has paved the way, she should be particularly appreciated, especially as she is married to the eldest son of Miss Ellen Terry—Mr. Gordon Craig.

Well, there it was, in cold print. However inaccurately expressed, the connection was in an English magazine read by thousands of subscribers. Isadora Duncan—Gordon Craig—Ellen Terry.

So now it is time to turn to Isadora's private life during this visit to London. This is dominated by two large question-marks; the first, what happened between Isadora and Ellen Terry? and the second, whatever happened about Charles Hallé and her New Gallery circle of 1900?

In order to piece together the answers to the first of these questions, it is necessary to return to Isadora's friend, the sculptress Kathleen Bruce.

After the birth of Deirdre in September, 1906, Kathleen had gone to Greece, re-visiting Hymettus, where Raymond Duncan and his Greek wife lived and continued building the house. At the end of the year, she found a flat in Chelsea, overlooking the river, and a studio in Ebury Street. "I fell in with every civilised amusement London had

to offer," she wrote later. "I danced: I went to concerts and plays. I began a series of portraits, for which I had a gift, of young men of note and character. . . . At night I was seldom short of an invitation to dinner. . . ."

Just about the time that Isadora came to London, Kathleen became engaged; she was to marry Captain Robert Falcon Scott, R.N., at the beginning of August. "Scott of the Antarctic" had already made one long journey of exploration in those terrifying wastes; he was a serving officer in the Navy, but preparing another expedition. He, and Kathleen, and Ellen Terry, all lived near each other in Chelsea.

Space does not permit me to elaborate on the sources, in memoirs and letters, of the contacts between Isadora and Ellen Terry in 1908. The facts emerge something like this:

Ellen had sent Isadora at least one postcard in 1906, but how much she really knew about her son's liaison with Isadora is uncertain. By the time Deirdre was born, Ellen had not as yet met Elena Meo or seen her children (though in the future, she was to take them to live with her, and become very fond of them.)

Years later, Ellen reminded Kathleen that when they had first met Isadora had been there too. As the first of the notes Isadora wrote to Ellen from the old Hotel Cecil in London shows that Ellen had attended one of her performances, it is permissible to imagine that the meeting took place in Isadora's dressing-room, where Kathleen would have been helping her. The note says:

Dearest, Thank you for the joy and inspiration
you brought to us all Love Isadora.

One can see that Ellen invited Kathleen to visit her quietly, and that Kathleen will have told her about Isadora and the birth of Deirdre in such terms that Ellen was won over.

The second note says:

Dearest Ellen,
All this week I have been filled with the joy and remembrance of you and I know I will see you again. I dance tomorrow only a matinée and the children dance the rest of it—as it is given for children. Couldn't you come Friday evening instead? May I come and see you some morning. All my love, Isadora.

The dates of performances place this note as being written on July 15—the day when the *Tatler* was on the breakfast-tables of Society, with its "news" about Isadora and Craig. It would seem that Ellen Terry was a sufficiently large person to ignore tittle-tattle. She formed a real affection for Isadora, whom she thereafter referred to as "My daughter-in-love, not my daughter-in-law." Ellen Terry adored the dancing children, and took them to the Zoo and to a Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

After her London season, Isadora undertook her first visit to the United States since she left in 1899, again under the management of Charles Frohman. The tour started disastrously, in a New York empty for the summer holidays. A tour was also a failure, and then Isadora returned to New York. Walter Damrosch, conductor of the Metropolitan's orchestra, was entranced by her work when he saw her dance at a private party, and offered his orchestra to accompany her. She had a triumph at the Met, which was reported in the London newspaper, *The Times*, and must have been read by Ellen Terry. Isadora's letter is obviously written in answer to one of congratulations from Ellen. She said, "I will sail about Dec. 20th. . . ." Of course, this means "sail back to Europe." But Isadora wrote to Ellen as to a confidante—as if the two of them were in a conspiracy to bring Ted to his senses, by which Isadora would mean that he should return to her. This letter is published in full in *Your Isadora* (p. 304), but included such remarks as "I feel so much about him that I can't write—when I take up a pen—it all comes over me—choking. . . . Well perhaps we can all sit about the same table some day soon and drink to his Health and Glory. . . . You are the only one who understands how I love him. . . ." Once again, one can only be amazed at the lack of reality with which Isadora viewed her Ted, and wonder whether such a fantasy was any more than just a

matter of words.

It was The Season. Kathleen was asked everywhere. Her engagement was the excuse, if ever they needed one, for her Chelsea friends to give parties. Isadora went to many, and also at many such a party was one of the "young men of note and character" of whom Kathleen had modeled a portrait, who often described them to his niece, Hester Marsden-Smedley, who in her turn described them to me.

The elder of Hester's uncles, Christopher Head (of whom Kathleen also made a portrait) became Mayor of Chelsea, and went down in the Titanic. His brother Alban Head was a dilettante of means who, but for helping with an exhibition of German art at the Burlington Fine Arts Club on 1906, never did any work. He became a lover of Isadora's more or less *en passant*—without any very serious involvement on either side. There was some excitement, but no heartbreak. This affair was going on at the very same time that Isadora was making friends with Ellen Terry and telling her of her utter devotion to Gordon Craig!

Alban Head, who was thirty-six, remembered a pattern of many parties, from which one stood out. This took place at Scott's house, 56 Oakley Street, and as he was giving it up on his marriage, was probably a "house-cooling" party. Isadora was there, and, quiet and still, stood Scott, a quizzical figure watching the lively and rather bohemian gathering. After it, Alban Head and Isadora and Ambrose Heal walked away in the warm summer night, and sat on tombstones in St. Luke's churchyard—not the first time that Isadora had sat on a similar resting-place in Chelsea! (One recalls her story of 1899.) In Paris, Isadora had made some friends among the artists, and now she was obviously part of Kathleen's set.

So that disposes of the Ellen Terry question-mark. She and Isadora made friends, but Ellen must have decided against seeing her latest grandchild, otherwise Isadora could have sent for Deirdre.

The second question-mark remains—what did Isadora do about her New Gallery coterie of 1899-1900? And what did they do about her?

Although all but Fuller-Maitland had been over fifty when they became her Committee of Patronage in 1900, only one had died in the interim. Were the rumors of her amours on the Continent too scandalous for them to wish to take her up again? Or did they feel sour as she performed the dances they had combined to help her develop, but received no word of recognition?

In addition to the Gluck program which was reviewed on her opening night, Isadora showed Chopin and Schubert dances, and her "Botticelli Evening," almost as it had been at the New Gallery. In the former she gave most of the pieces which Fuller-Maitland had helped her to study, and in the latter, *Primavera*, the *Angel with Viol*, and *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Sometimes she gave also *Orpheus*, sometimes (with verse on the program but nothing to indicate a musical accompaniment) *Pan and Echo*. She also brought back her favorite *Narcissus*, to the music of Ethelbert Nevin.

Hallé, the Comyns Carrs, Sir William Richmond, Hubert Parry, Andrew Lang, Fuller-Maitland—did she ever get in touch with them?

Negatives can be very significant. Fuller-Maitland's memoirs came out in 1929, and he wrote about Isadora's recitals in 1900. There is not one word to indicate that they met in 1908, nor that she ever recognized her debt to him. In press interviews, all she said at any time was that she had once given recitals at the New Gallery.

Who, one may ask, cold-shouldered whom? Many of Isadora's lovers on the Continent came from their own international circle of artists and musicians; the gossip was widespread. Had the young girl, whom they had helped, contracted a marriage—even a disastrous one—they could have felt interested or sympathetic, and avuncular.

As for her devoted Charles Hallé, what of him? The New Gallery was still active, and he still managing it. His memoirs came out in 1909. He described the Grosvenor Gallery and the birth and building of the New Gallery. He described the Venetian *fiesta*.

But he never even mentioned Isadora.

NEXT MONTH: Isadora and Paris Singer: behind the scenes in their domestic life.)



Isadora Duncan in 1908. (Photo: Haensel and Jones, courtesy of the Irma Duncan Collection, Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts, Lincoln Center)

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