

DANCEMAGAZINE



september
1977

\$1.50

season reviews:

alvin ailey
american
dance theater

twyla tharp
dancers and dances

paul taylor
dance company

martha graham
dance company

san francisco ballet

isadora duncan,
part III

tim wengerd

isadora reexamined:

lesser-known aspects of the great dancer's life

by nesta macdonald

Isadora Duncan with daughter Deirdre, born 24 September 1906. (Photo: Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.)



*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments*

wrote Shakespeare, nearly three hundred years before the meeting of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig. How apt in their case! Their minds met at many points. Their taste matched remarkably. There were strong similarities in their temperaments. Both felt that their arts needed reform. (Both put over afresh something which someone else had conceived earlier; Isadora progressed upon the work of Delsarte, and Gordon Craig had the same base for his theatrical productions as Appia.) The differences lay in their backgrounds and education, and in the drive with which each could organize personal abilities.

Both had genius, that unclassifiable, maddening attribute. As in both it was a form of theatrical genius, it is not hard to imagine that for a spell, during the heat of a passionate attachment, this should bind them in companionship.

What were these two like when, on December 14th, 1904, they met in Berlin and, in modern parlance, "the chemistry worked"?

Isadora was nearly twenty-eight. She had enjoyed large-scale success only since 1902. She had built a repertoire on what she had prepared for the second and third of her New Gallery recitals in 1900, those devoted to Music and Painting, which became her "Chopin" and "Botticelli" or "Dance Idylls" programs. She still included some of her old favorites, such as Mendelssohn's *Spring Song* and Ethelbert Nevin's *Narcissus*.

By 1904, the "simple, frightened girl" she had seemed to Kathleen Bruce to have been in 1903 had been left behind. She had become a notorious woman. People speak of men with whom no woman's reputation is safe: by this time, no man's was safe with Isadora. She had shocked even her own family by her behavior at Bayreuth in the summer, when she had fallen madly in love with Cosima Wagner's son-in-law, the art historian Heinrich Thode. He had kept things on an intellectual level, discussing art and philosophy, but Isadora seemingly burned for him, and worked herself up into such a frenzy of desire that she made herself ill. Her emotions were still in turmoil in December.

By now, however, Isadora was a great star. At a time when, other than in Russia, "dance" occupied a lowly position in the hierarchy of entertainment, Isadora was unique. With the minimum of equipment, she appealed to the intellect more than to the senses; and her work was held to be Art.

Gordon Craig's was a very different story. Though illegitimate, he had status, being the son of the enchanting actress, Ellen Terry, and a highly original architect and designer, Edward Godwin. (Ellen had been married at sixteen to the middle-aged painter G.F. Watts, but set aside by him within the year.) When the children were young, she returned almost by accident to the stage, and soon joined Henry Irving at the Lyceum in what was to become one of theater's most famous partnerships. Her children grew up in a household visited by many eminent men and women from the worlds of literature, art and the stage, and their surname was invented for them by their mother, on a whim.

Ted (as Gordon Craig was called) went to a minor English public school and then was rapidly expelled from the English School in Heidelberg. Irving took him on an American tour as a child actor, and later into his company as a juvenile lead. Aided by his dashing good looks, Ted had seemed all set for success on the boards, when he suddenly deserted acting (and earning) for designing for the theater and for graphics (and losing money).

His private life was sensational. In 1893, he celebrated his majority by marrying an artist, May Gibson. To his surprise and resentment, they had four children. Ted then ran away with a girl he had known even longer, Jess Dorynne. When she became pregnant, he ran away again. This time he went to live with a man friend, the composer, Martin Shaw, with whom he had put on interesting productions; and he fell in love, this time more safely, with the Theater.

Then Craig met Elena Meo, violinist daughter of a portrait painter, Gaetano Meo. She was the gentle creature he subsequently loved forever, though his ways of demonstrating this were eccentric and never included fidelity. She bore him two daughters, the first dying immediately after the birth of the second. In 1904, she was pregnant again. Craig, at the suggestion of Count Harry Kessler, a wealthy patron of the arts, went to Germany. When Isadora and Craig met, Elena Meo was once again near her time. Three weeks later—weeks during which much had happened—he received a letter from Elena telling him that he had a son. This was Edward

Craig, who became his father's assistant and biographer.

What a situation! Here were two people, either side of thirty—both, as one might say primly, “old enough to know better”—ignoring every obligation and continuing unrepentant throughout two years of liaison. Isadora was at the peak of her success; Craig had acknowledged promise as a stage designer, with but little completed work to point to. She was a huge earner; he had debts everywhere.

In 1968, Edward Craig described the affair between his father and Isadora (whom he never knew) in thoughtful terms:

At that moment a new personality entered Craig's life; this was Isadora Duncan, and through her art he was to discover the final ingredient necessary to the formula that was to be the basis of all his future ideas for the theatre.

Isadora's approach to life was the same as Craig's. They shared the same insensibility to other people's feeling, the same vague attitude towards money matters, the same disregard of man-made morals, the same reverence for beauty, the same love and dedication each to their own art, and the same desire to make known to the world the magic they had discovered.

They found it easy enough to ‘fall in love’—both regarding sensual gratification as a necessary spur to artistic inspiration, and over the next two years they were bound together in a fitful dream of adventure, love, art and disillusionment, from which only one of them would escape unscarred.

The names of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig have been coupled as ‘lovers’ for so long that their real significance to each other has been lost under the fast growing weeds of sentimentality and sensationalism.

It was not Isadora's physical appearance that particularly attracted Craig (Martin Shaw even said that she was lacking in sex-appeal). But she had the plump prettiness of a Colleen, the tip-tilted nose and the little firm chin, and the dream in her heart of the Irish, who are so sweet to know, most important of all, she was ‘full of natural genius which defies description.’ . . .

Isadora had discovered someone who could say all that she thought, and Craig, someone who held part of the secret for which he was searching.

When Martin (Shaw) helped him to understand the secrets of music, a lifelong friendship resulted from their association. Isadora helped him to understand the secrets of ‘Movement,’ and because she was a woman and he a man, a love affair resulted which momentarily swept them off their feet in a whirlwind of mutual enlightenment and admiration.

Edward Craig implied that Isadora and his father were together for the whole two years. Not until 1974, when their correspondence was published under the title *Your Isadora* (Macmillan, New York and London), was the most surprising and intimate detail of the *affaire* made public.

The fact is that they were frequently separated, and for long spells. When they were apart, they wrote. Isadora wrote hundreds of letters and notes to him—often several in a day. When he wrote to her, he kept either a draft or a copy—a self-conscious procedure. He also started “Book Topsy” (his pet name for his Terpsichore) in which he recorded thoughts about her. Many of these were uncomplimentary; moreover, (in some cases, many years later) he annotated her letters with contemptuous, virulent remarks. Gordon Craig kept this correspondence almost to the end of his long life, selling it eventually to New York Public Library's Dance Collection for a huge price. The formidable task of editing this mass was sensitively carried out by Francis Steegmuller, and *Your Isadora* must be read completely for understanding of this bizarre love affair.

But, of course, when they were together, they didn't write, and so the most important periods in their relationship are not chronicled, other than in the memoirs of friends, notably Kathleen Bruce and Martin Shaw, neither of whom set them down until years later.

This is not the place to go into detail about the first few days after Isadora and Craig met. Isadora disappeared with him, and performances had to be canceled. Even Isadora, however, had to pull herself together and fulfill an engagement which was certainly important to her, but whose importance in the history of dance could not have been predicted. This was her first visit to Russia, where her recitals were to have the biggest effect on ballet since the invention of the pointe shoe.

The organizers of a charity gala, who need to sell seats at very high prices, have two options. They can put on established favorites

whom everyone will *want* to see, or they can present the excitingly unknown, whom everyone will *have* to see. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children decided on the second course when they invited Isadora in 1904.

Into the Salle de la Noblesse, a beautiful concert hall, was packed “*tout* Petersburg,” headed by the Grand Duke Vladimir, uncle of the Czar and President of the Academy of Fine Arts, with his wife and one son. Mathilde Kschessinska, the most powerful ballerina, who had formerly been the mistress of the Czar, had seen Isadora in Vienna the previous year, and spoke enthusiastically about her. Others dancers included Anna Pavlova and Tamara Karsavina. There were the designers Bakst and Benois, and critics and balletomanes led by Svetlov. Michel Fokine, a young dancer who wished to reform the ballet and release it from the rigid conventions into which it had fallen, had already thought that Greek ballets ought to be performed in Greek costumes; a few years later, he was to be the choreographer on whose work Diaghilev's Ballets Russes were founded. Diaghilev was also present, though he did not go with Fokine; at that time they barely knew one another. In 1904 Diaghilev had just published the last number of the magazine, *Mir Iskustva (The World of Art)*, and had spent several years running the magazine and organizing art exhibitions. He was occupied then with the great Historical Exhibition of Russian Portraits, which was to open in February 1905; at that time he was not concerned with ballet other than to the same extent as other members of society.

Let it not be forgotten that Isadora, about to confront the most critical audience for dance in the world, had frequently expressed her view that ballet was ridiculous, a decadent art not even fit to be called an art anymore.

One can well imagine a gasp as Isadora parted the blue curtains and stepped forward. She probably showed fewer square inches of herself than were regularly revealed by the tight décolleté ballet bodice and tiny tutu. Her clinging little Greek tunic reached to the knees and revealed legs that were bare. In the event, the bare legs were generally held to be inoffensive, with nothing sensual about them.

This critical Slav audience was, moreover, listening to Isadora's pianist playing Chopin—the Nocturne in F-flat major. Isadora had, by now, given Chopin programs everywhere that she had danced. In Paris, where recollection of the composer's residence had lingered, they were the most liked of her offerings. It was, however, the very first time that anyone had ever danced even to the dance-named compositions of the Polish musician in Russia. Isadora chose to dance only Mazurkas and four Preludes, but these included the Mazurka in D major (Op. 33, no. 2) and the Prelude in A major, (Op. 28, no. 7), both of which would be used by Fokine when, eventually, he created the exquisite ballet blanc in 1907 which, in 1909, was re-christened *Les Sylphides* by Diaghilev. In this ballet the spirit of the Romantic ballerinas was matched to the music of the great Romantic composer.

And so one may trace the pedigree of this great classic of twentieth century ballet back from Fokine to Isadora, and from Isadora to J.A. Fuller-Maitland, Music Critic of *The Times*, who, in 1900, first suggested to her that she should dance to the music of Chopin, helped her to understand the music, and played some pieces for her himself. What, one wonders, were his emotions in 1911, when *Les Sylphides* was first danced at Covent Garden?

When one looks back at Isadora's advent in the preserve of the classical ballet, out of all the accounts, the gossip and the press coverage, the most important result really seems to have been that, however grudgingly, Fokine was able to bring in his new ideas bit by bit within the framework of the Imperial Ballet, and did not have to resign. This, in turn, made it possible for him to attract the interest of Diaghilev, so that, in 1909, he could be used to create the new works for the venture outside Russia.

Three days later, Isadora gave her “Dance Idylls” or “Botticelli” program, and then rushed back to Berlin, and Ted.

For some weeks he traveled about with her, including going to Russia at the end of February 1905. In *Your Isadora*, Francis Steegmuller pointed out that “. . . certain aspects of the relationship. . . become rather striking; not only is Isadora paying for everything, but the lovers have ‘gone into business.’” Ted became her manager; and he batted on her for money for his own projects. Throughout the correspondence, however, Isadora's adoration of him glows; she, the great star, constantly abased herself before him, in letters full of passion disguised in baby-talk and pseudo-unedicated-Irishisms. (What possible appeal could such wording have had for a man brought up in an atmosphere of respect

(over)

Isadora and Gordon Craig (Cont'd)

for the sonorities of the English language, and who detested babies?) Two months after they met, this is what he wrote in a private notebook:

I am in love with one woman only (Elena Meo). . . But I am keenly attracted to another woman, who may be a witch or a pretty child (and it doesn't really matter which). . . She not only attracts me, she revolts me also. One moment I instinctively smile with her and love to be with her, and the next I want to be away from her and I shrink from her. It is not that she is at all ugly or repulsive—but merely that I am delighted with her or bored. When she talks about herself incessantly for a quarter of an hour—when she drinks more wine than she needs or wants—when she cuddles up to other people, men or women, relations or not relations—it is not that she does so repulsively but that I see they are equally attracted as myself—and I object to being equally anything in such matters. And my confession is that I have a contempt for her and do not like to feel that I have a contempt—because I find her so dear and delightful.

Still I cannot trust her, and even friendship, much more love, demands absolute trust.

By her defenders, the stories of Isadora's drunkenness and shameful behavior are said to be exaggerated nonsense. Yet here it was, written by the man she adored, at the same time as she was dizzy with her new love, floating on clouds of talk and art and talk and love. Did Isadora ever realize how she behaved? One may recall the words of John Young-Hunter, whose studio she had "rented" in 1899, and who referred to her "consummate skill in creating an impression—she was an actress as well as a dancer."

I said before that in matters of taste, Isadora and Craig were well matched. For her art, he had almost unreserved praise. The simplicity of her presentation particularly appealed to him. At that time, she used grey curtains, with just a hint of classical columns. (The famous blue curtains came later, and they were to argue about them indefinitely.) It was probably his influence as a producer which tempted her to seek once more music to accompany *Pan and Echo*; though not musical himself, Craig suggested his friend, Martin Shaw, to whom he wrote constantly, as a composer. In October 1905, Isadora added a message to one of Ted's letters to him: "Can you write music on Greek rhythms. . . It must be a *Pastorale* with flutes and oboe. Something about Pan and satyrs. *Long* rhythms." (Did she mean phrases?) In another letter, Craig instructed Martin Shaw: "Pan dance. Apollo dance. Dionysus dance. Dionysus Dance. Write the Apollo now!!!! Fine long rhythms, and as noble as hell."

And so the touring and the correspondence continued. Early in November 1905, when Isadora was in Amsterdam, Kathleen Bruce suddenly appeared, bearing an offer of a season from the manager of the Trocadero in Paris. Kathleen had been traveling a great deal, including a long stay doing relief work in Macedonia with refugees. In Amsterdam, she went down with what was probably a bout of 'flu, and had to stay in bed. Isadora wrote to Ted that all her maids fell ill and that she was the only one who could stand all the touring! It is odd to find her describing Kathleen as a "nice, quiet English girl," as if friendship with such a one added a note of respectability to her.

Isadora returned to Berlin in December, and a simple calculation will show how they celebrated the anniversary of their first meeting. In January, Isadora knew that she was pregnant.

It is at this point that one can observe the most courageous side of her complex character. Feeling that she was nurturing his art, Isadora had given much of her hard-earned money to Craig during their first year together. Now she looked ahead, and saw that she

must earn enough in five months to support her family, her school, and her Ted, for a whole year. Moreover, she would need money for the expenses of the confinement. She booked herself a punishing itinerary, involving such traveling and so many performances that they would have taxed the stamina of the fittest of women. And yet, at twenty-nine, she seems to have been hopelessly ignorant of the process of childbirth.

Whilst one feels confident that Craig was as mystified and annoyed as ever about the phenomenon, and anxious because the breadwinner was going to be out of commission for some months, he did make one excellent suggestion. He knew from experience that rehearsals with fresh orchestras everywhere were exhausting, and suggested that she should tour with her own conductor. Needless to say, this was to be Martin Shaw, but unlike some "jobs for the boys" recommendations, this one was very good indeed. Though he considered himself "no conductor," Martin Shaw took a great burden off Isadora's shoulders. He wrote an amusing and illuminating account of their experiences, much of which is printed as an appendix in *Your Isadora*. It is worthy of comment that while he tells a few stories about adventures when he and Ted, man-like, went off on their own escapades, there is not one story involving any social event with Isadora; nor does he say one word about what must surely have become obvious to anyone working with her for several months, her pregnancy. He obviously admired both her art and her guts. It is curious that Isadora always referred to him formally, as "Mr. Shaw" or "Martin Shaw," never calling him by his Christian name.

Probably hoping that he had noticed nothing and would not be in a position to gossip about her condition in England, Isadora dispensed with his services after three months, and battled on through the fifth and sixth months by herself. The robes she wore by day looked like modern maternity wear, but it must have been impossible to hide the truth with her little stage tunic.

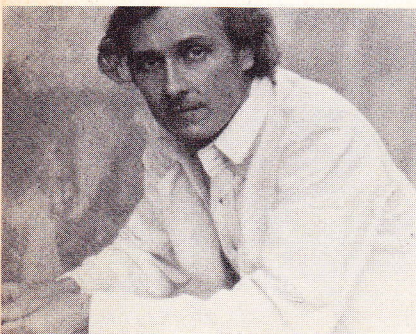
When she stopped dancing, Isadora prepared for her confinement at a remote villa by the sea at Noordwijk, in Holland. Ted went to London to arrange the setting for his mother's Jubilee matinee, which was held at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on 12 June 1906. He did not attend it himself; he did go to Elena Meo for a few days. By this time rumors were flying round the Continent about Isadora's pregnancy, and these even included the story that she and Craig were married. He was by this time free—having completed the divorce from May Gibson, and *not* having carried out his plan to marry Elena.

At the Villa Maria, Isadora craved real companionship, and once again summoned her fellow-artist, Kathleen Bruce, begging her to come urgently from Paris, but without giving any reasons. To Kathleen, Isadora's pleas were always irresistible, and she arrived without any inkling of the truth—the rumors had not reached her. In her memoirs, in 1932, she wrote thus: "I found her pitiful, helpless, and for the first time endearing. 'Poor darling, what is the matter?' 'Can't you see?' cried the dancer spreading high her lovely arms. Slowly and with many a lie the story came out at last. A well-known personage with a wife, a mistress, children, dissolute habits, and no money, had entranced her body and mind. . . ."

Broadminded as she thought herself to be, Kathleen found herself right back in the high principles by which she had been raised. She was shocked; but if Christianity had any message it was the message of charity. This, to Kathleen, meant that she must help, not censure. Kathleen was a born "coper," and she brought to Isadora's plight and complex emotions love and understanding. Craig came to stay nearby, and they met for the first time. Some friendly relationship was established: Craig decorated some little vellum-bound notebooks for her, and she modeled him. In one of the notebooks, in writing which became tinier and tinier as if she felt she was whispering secrets, she recorded the details of Isadora's dreadful labor. A girl child was born on 24 September 1906, and later given the name of Deirdre.

Both Isadora's observers of these difficult months remained friendly with her, each loving her in a different way. When he heard of her death twenty-one years later, Martin Shaw had this to say:

Poor wonderful Isadora! Her whole life was that of some tragic figure in Euripides. Indeed, it seemed as though she, in entering so thoroughly into the spiritual and artistic atmosphere of the great Greek period, had become an actual participant in that life, and had been claimed by Greek gods as the sport of fate. A wanderer, unhappy in love and family relations, her life was as



Gordon Craig, circa 1904, about the time he met Isadora. (Photo: Irma Duncan Collection, Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.)

much a tragedy as her death. . . .

Isadora was an idolator, who for years had worshipped Ellen Terry. His parentage had certainly enhanced Ted's glamour for her. Now, at twenty-nine, she was the mother of a grandchild of her idol, and uncertain as to the feelings of Ellen Terry, who was already supporting Ted's other children. Now life had to be faced once more; they all returned to Berlin. Isadora was very weak, but she accepted an engagement to dance in Warsaw at the end of the year. In Berlin, the idea arose that Craig should go to Florence to design a production of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* for Isadora's other idol, Eleonora Duse. This visit changed their lives, for Craig was to settle in Florence for many years. In November 1906, Isadora and the child were with him there, but when, in December, they went to Nice for *Rosmersholm* to be repeated, his beautiful backcloth was callously cut in half at the theater. Craig quarreled furiously with Duse. During this visit to Nice, his physical *affaire* with Isadora ended, though they met and wrote for years.

After her visit to Warsaw, Isadora became seriously ill. When she recovered, she again sent for Martin Shaw, but this time she dispatched him to Florence, ostensibly to seek out ancient music—but more likely as a ruse to please Craig. When he joined her in Amsterdam, Kathleen Bruce turned up again, too.

Not only was Isadora an idolator—she was also a declared worshipper of Free Love and an enemy of Matrimony, which she frequently denounced. Even in this, however, she could contradict herself. She could speak of the respectability of marriage as a dignity which she would enjoy. She fanned the rumors herself. At the end of October 1906, they must all have stopped off in Paris on their way to Florence. How, otherwise, could the magazine *Femina* have been able to publish an article on 1 November 1906, describing Isadora's school at Grunewald and the idyllic upbringing afforded the children there, but ending with these lines:

C'est un enseignement pratique qui fera, de celles et de ceux qui le suivent, de véritables artistes, dévoués à l'art pour lequel Isadora Duncan a consacré tous les instants de sa vie jusqu'au jour où le fils de Miss Ellen Terry lui offrit sa main et son nom.

Which, being translated, means this:

It is a practical education, designed to make the boys and girls who receive it into real artists, devoted to the art to which Isadora Duncan has dedicated every moment of her life up to the day when the son of Miss Ellen Terry offered her his hand and his name.

Anyone who has read Irma Duncan's book, *Duncan Dancer*, in which she relates her experiences as a pupil who was taken into the Grunewald school in 1905 when she was eight years old, will doubt the veracity of the first part of this statement. This is what Isadora wanted her school to be like, but as she was always touring, she left the running of it to her sister Elizabeth, who made it more like a penitentiary—for girls. There were never any boy pupils. Isadora appeared, a goddess bearing candies, at rare intervals.

But when one examines the second half of the statement, one is bewildered by Isadora's folly in putting out such a story. Did she really think that the existence of their child would bind Craig to her, and even bring out the plain gold band? How much did she really know about his earlier families? Did she not realize that the difference between herself, as she awaited her confinement, and Craig, and May, Jess and Elena, among them the mothers of eight children by Craig, was financial? Isadora had been keeping Craig for two years, whilst Craig's mother, Ellen Terry, supported May and her four children. Isadora was willing to provide the funds for the magazine he planned, *The Mask*. Did she know her Ted so little that she thought this sort of talk would make him propose marriage to her? Remember, however, what Craig's own son wrote years later about his father's liaison with Isadora: that only one of them was to escape unscarred. Perhaps Isadora was already defensively rubbing salve on sore places. Even in this statement, she could only invent the offer of "his hand and his name."

Not of his heart. □

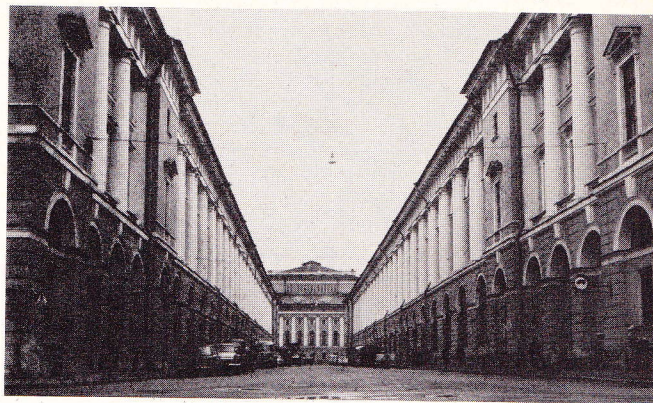
Next month, Isadora returns to London in 1908, for the first time since 1900, and performs in the West End, on the commercial stage. She also meets her idol, Ellen Terry.)

the children of theatre street: the heart of dance

by norma mcclain stoop

Below:

This is Theatre Street, famous for the Kirov School (on the right side) and for its perfect symmetry (giving the appearance of a theatrical set). Alexandrovsky Theater is at the end of the street.



Above:

Left to right, Robert Dornhelm, director of the film, Oleg Briansky, artistic director, and Jean Dalrymple, associate producer, with Konstantin Sergeyev, artistic director of the Vaganova Choreographic Institute or, as we familiarly know it, the Kirov School.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, there was a beautiful Russian city on the Gulf of Finland, off the Baltic Sea. Its name was St. Petersburg, and in 1738 The Imperial Ballet School of Russia was founded there.

That beautiful city, as fascinating as ever, is now called Leningrad and its famous ballet school, one of the most important in the world, is now called The Vaganova Choreographic Institute (in honor of the great teacher Agrippina Vaganova, its name was changed in 1957). We know it, informally, as The Kirov School, for the school, which boasts eighty teachers, feeds the internationally renowned Kirov Ballet with the dancers who, while with it or while with other companies, have spread the finest traditions of classical dance all around the world.

The Vaganova Choreographic Institute is on Theatre Street, and Earle Mack's lovely and evocative film *The Children of Theatre Street* brings to us the events of approximately one year in the very recent history of this school, whose illustrious graduates include Anna Pavlova, Michael Fokine, Tamara Karsavina, Vaslav Nijinsky, George Balanchine, Alexandra Danilova, Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Will eleven-year-old Angelina, Alec—one year older—or Lena, who at film's end has just graduated from the school and been accepted by the Kirov company one day carve their names in

(over)