

ISADORA DUNCAN: HER INFLUENCE ON THE FOUNDING AND DEVELOPMENT OF
BRITISH MODERN DANCE

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A research study was based on the working hypothesis that Isadora Duncan (b. 1877 d. 1927) influenced the founding and development of British early modern dance, albeit unwittingly. Other pioneers, such as Loie Fuller and Ruth St. Denis, who also performed in London, may well have been influential too; indeed Maud Allan had several long-term contracts in London theatres. Nevertheless, it was postulated that, by virtue of her many performances in London and mainland Europe, her forceful exposition of the ideas and theories underlying her work, her remarkable impact as an innovator of a new theatre dance genre and her international reputation as a radical artist, Duncan could be identified as the prime inspiration for the British early modern dance movement.

The three main protagonists of early modern dance in the UK, Madge Atkinson (b. 1885 d. 1970), Ruby Ginner (b. 1886 d. 1978) and Margaret Morris (b. 1891 d. 1980) neither regarded themselves as belonging to one school nor acknowledged Duncan as their common inspiration, except in an incidental or marginal way. However, place and time parameters supported the working hypothesis and similarities between aspects of their emergent dance styles and in their writings both to each other and to Duncan indicated that this was a potentially rich research area.

The research problem was to conduct a comparative analysis of Duncan's work and that of the British protagonists and to devise an acceptable model for so doing.

In the absence of extant Duncan choreography (the reconstructed dances are not readily available to a researcher in the UK) and only partial evidence of Atkinson's, Ginner's and Morris' early compositions, a two stage procedure was followed. [The first stage has been completed at Doctoral level. The second stage has been taken to postgraduate level with particular research on Madge Atkinson and Margaret Morris being developed further by Judith Chapman and Joan White respectively - two of my former postgraduate students, now colleagues at the University of Surrey and its associated college, Roehampton Institute.] In the first stage wide-ranging written, visual and aural sources on Duncan were amassed and collated. These were used to compile a detailed chronology and two choreochronicles, to articulate the contexts in which she lived and to identify the influences upon her work. A comprehensive choreographic analysis was carried out on Duncan's oeuvre (using the Adshead et al 1982 model) and, finally, the results of this were compared with her writings.

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From the first stage of the research eight statements characterising Duncan's work were generated. These can be substantiated by reference to her choreography and to her writings. The statements may conveniently be summarised as:-

- the relocation of the body centre,
- the acceptance and exploitation of gravitational forces,
- a reverence of the body and all 'natural' phenomena,
- an allegiance to ancient Greek ideals,
- a preference for the music of Romantic classical composers,
- a commitment to an eclectic range of subject matter with particular emphasis on socially relevant themes,
- the pursuit of a harmonious, lyrical choreographic and performance style,
- a vision of dance as expression.

These statements relate particularly to Duncan's work as an innovator of a new theatre dance genre but they also bear relevance to her wider concerns such as her belief in dance education and her nascent feminism.

In the second stage of the research the conclusions reached from the detailed study of Duncan were set alongside the results of previous studies of Atkinson, Ginner and Morris (Layson 1970 and subsequently) which had also been based on extensive written, visual and aural documentation.

Madge Atkinson originally studied several forms of dance in Manchester and during the period immediately prior to the 1914-1918 war she began to visit London to widen her dance experience. It was there that she met Annea (Annie) Spong. Spong, variously described as a pupil of either Isadora or Raymond Duncan, had a studio in London where she taught the "Spong method of natural dance". This link in the Duncan chain of influence on British early modern dance is interesting and in need of further research since it is through Spong that Atkinson traces the origins of her work to Duncan.

From this contact Atkinson subsequently developed her own dance ideas and by 1918 had established the Madge Atkinson School of Natural Movement in Manchester. In 1925 the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) invited Atkinson to found the Natural Movement branch of the organisation. Throughout the 1920s and up until the mid 1930s Natural Movement (NM) developed widely from its Manchester base and was seen to fulfill both theatrical and educational purposes. In 1936 the then School of Natural Movement moved to London and, particularly during the 1939-1945 war, developed its work in education further. In 1944 NM held an important place in the curriculum of the newly opened London College of Educational Dance

not see her own work as Duncan-influenced but rather regarded it as springing from the same source, that is, the "Greek ideal". The specific dance form associated with Ginner and, ultimately, her co-worker Irene Mawer, is the Revived Greek Dance (RGD).

The facts about Ginner's early career have yet to be fully established although it seems that one of her first theatrical engagements was with F.R. Benson's company. [Duncan was a member of Benson's company in 1900.] Certainly by 1914 she had formulated the theories and also the main steps and exercises which became the basis of RGD. Subsequently Ginner developed her work in the theatre both as a dancer and a choreographer although increasingly in the 1920s and 1930s RGD came within the dance education context particularly in the private sector. The Association of Teachers of the Revived Greek Dance was formed in 1923. Later known as the Greek Dance Association it was affiliated to the ISTD in 1951 and still thrives within that organisation.

The basic principles of RGD are clearly set out in Ginner's three main texts (1933, 1960 and 1963) and many issues of the Dancing Times from 1921 onwards contain reviews of her performances and RGD displays, as well as reports of the Ginner-Mawer school and its activities.

The origins of Ginner's work are essentially "Greek derived" and "artefact based". [It is interesting that in 1963 Ginner stated "My method, though originally inspired by and based on the arts and ideals of Ancient Greece, was transformed by my personal interpretation into a modern idiom" (p.1). This claim is not dissimilar to that made many years earlier by Duncan and was possibly written in response to Lawler's (1962) criticisms of revival attempts.] This gives a definite two dimensional look to the RGD set exercises and steps, although the dance itself has a more sculptured, rounded form. The links with Duncan's choreography are clear in the emphasis on a free, lyrical movement style with a similar choice of costume and musical accompaniment. Furthermore, in Ginner's texts the same principles that Duncan identified as being central to the development of her choreography are evident. Some statements, such as "the beauty and sanctity of the human body" (Ginner, 1933 p.v), "[dance as an] expression of modern life and thought" (Ginner, 1963 p.83) and "in Nature the student will find stability, poise, rhythm, every degree of force and speed" (Ginner, 1963 p.88), are so redolent of Duncan's writings (even in the use of capitals to emphasise) that it is difficult to conceive of Ginner as being other than directly influenced by her. Yet Ginner's own testimony and, to an extent, the RGD itself, supports the view that although this British early modern dance style originally had much in common with Duncan's work and shared basic ideals and values it evolved along a different and possibly a much more restricted route. Even today it has retained its Greek allegiance and in a far more tangible form (for example, in choice of subject matter) than in Duncan's choreography. The fact that it currently exists in an educational rather than a theatre context reflects the impact of two world wars at crucial stages in its development but also it is a consequence of Ginner and her colleagues deliberately cultivating a dance style more participatory

than audience based. Perhaps in its later educational role it has come full circle to one of Duncan's cherished beliefs in a participatory dance experience accessible to all. Nevertheless, its implicit essence and aesthetic of another era, both in terms of the first quarter or so of the 20th and ancient classical Greece, has undoubtedly limited its growth since the late 1930s.

Revived Greek Dance exists in the 1980s as an interesting dance phenomenon loyally promoted by its adherents although to others it is highly anachronistic. Yet, however it is perceived, its niche in history seems to be within the British early modern dance style and, as such, Duncan-influenced.

The life and work of Margaret Morris, the founder of Margaret Morris Movement (MMM), is comparatively well documented (Morris 1967, 1971, White 1980) and, with a substantial amount of archival material as yet unresearched, is likely to become increasingly so. Morris spent the early years of her life in France and then in London where she first received ballet classes. In 1909 she met Raymond Duncan and from him learned the six Greek positions and variations which she incorporated into her own embryonic system. A year later she had her first professional engagement when she choreographed dances for Gluck's "Orpheus" and also opened her school. Morris' aim was to train dancers for the theatre where her own choreographic and performance interests lay but by the mid 1920s her work had widened to include educational aspects and a decade later, after qualifying as a physiotherapist, she embraced medical and therapeutic concerns. The widening scope of MMM did not deflect Morris from her commitment to theatre dance and her founding of the Celtic Ballet (1947) and the Scottish National Ballet (1960) are clear indications of this.

MMM is a highly structured form of dance in terms of its technique, in the carefully designed learning levels through which the dancer progresses and the different teaching levels established. The basic Greek positions are evident in MMM class work, particularly in movements in opposition, and these are studied together with exercises for spinal mobility and correct breathing. The aim is to achieve balance and purity of line and an overall sense of the aesthetic in anatomically and physiologically correct movement. In addition dance is regarded as an art with natural links to music and visual art, and the co-existence of the arts and their expressive potential is paramount.

Morris developed a detailed notation system (also based on the anatomical structure of the body) and this has facilitated current performances of many of her early compositions. The MMM dance style is very fluid and often surprisingly three dimensional, given its Greek basis. Its dynamic range is wide and, unlike most of the other early British modern dance styles, is not orientated solely towards female performers. Although its earlier context was the theatre MMM developed into a widely accessible dance form. Today its place is largely in recreation with the remedial aspects making it particularly relevant for dancers of all ages and abilities.

The work of Atkinson, Ginner and Morris can be seen to form a varied

but nevertheless identifiable British early modern dance style. Taken together their work exhibits many features in common with that of Duncan. The British innovators were all choreographers, dancers and ultimately teachers and they developed their ideas from a theatre context to education and beyond. Atkinson, Ginner and Morris shared basic premises on the origins of their work since the influence of ancient Greek ideals and/or ancient Greek dance and the return to a natural form of movement were of crucial importance. Their overall choice of costume, set and music closely echoed that of Duncan as did their selection of subject matter and their total commitment to a lyrical, harmonious and expressive dance style.

However, none of the British early modern dance pioneers achieved the international acclaim that was accorded Duncan and none was as daring as Duncan in her use of dance as political and social comment. Perhaps because they all came from fairly stable, middle class backgrounds the path of the revolutionary artist was not for them. But each in her own way made a substantial contribution to the development of dance in the UK. Between them, Atkinson, Ginner and Morris spanned almost a century and the fact that they each lived to guide the development of their work over several decades has ensured its survival to today. Duncan, unlike Graham and Cunningham who followed her, did not contribute directly to the development of modern dance in the UK but she gave the British early modern dance pioneers their several starting points and perhaps this was all that these remarkable women needed.

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