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Wrapped in Greek Robes of Spirituality: The Historic Context for Isadora Duncan's Dance Performances

Anthony Shay

In this paper I will not focus on the tempestuous love affair of Gordon Craig and Isadora Duncan, as brief, all-consuming and incandescent as it was, but rather on Duncan's approach to her art, and the context within which it developed, including their shared viewpoint regarding the classic aesthetic of ancient Greece as foundational to their aesthetic expression. It should be briefly noted that one of her biographers, Victor Seroff, who knew her personally, was convinced that for Isadora, Gordon Craig was a paramount figure in her life. "While seeing his failings, she admired, respected, and loved him more than any other man in her life" (1971, 81). Of Isadora, Craig declared, "she was the only true dancer he had ever seen" (Kurth 2001, 133). She was his inspiration, his muse. However in his profound misogyny, he resented any woman who might occupy that role, and Duncan was well aware of this and how corrosive his ambiguous feelings were to their relationship, which burned out within two years. She wrote in her autobiography "his jealousy as an artist, would not allow him to admit that any woman could really be an artist" (1928 183-186). His son and biographer Edward A. Craig agreed with Isadora and wrote: "He felt admiration for what had been to him the greatest artistic experience in his life, resentment that this revelation should come from a woman" (quoted in Kurth 2001, 134). What they shared on

the artistic level was “a sense of proportion and the Greek ideal,” a subject to which I will return (Kurth 2001, 134).

Thomas Leabhart, my colleague in the Theatre and Dance Department at Pomona College, uncovered an interesting observation that Gordon Craig at the very end of his essay “The Art of the Theatre: The First Dialogue” wrote: “Since you have granted all I asked you to permit, I am now going to tell you out of what material the artist of the theatre of the future will create his masterpieces. Out of ACTION, SCENE, and VOICE. Is it not very simple? And when I say *action*, I mean both gesture and dancing, the prose and poetry of action. And when I say *scene*, I mean all which comes before the eye, such as the lighting, costume, as well as the scenery. And when I say *voice*, I mean the spoken word or the word which is sung, in contradiction to the word which is read, for the word written to be spoken and the word written to be read are two entirely different things.”

Leabhart says: “This is the part that everyone knows. But the part one does not know, unless one digs around in the papers at the Bibliotheque National in Paris is this: In some pencil notes on the back of a Decroux performance program, Edward Gordon Craig wrote:

YG the Voice

ID the Movement

AA the scene

AA is certainly Adolph Appia, and ID is definitely Isadora Duncan. I am trying to find out who YG is” (Personal Communication Nov. 15, 2012).

However carnal the relationship between the two was, there were also practical aspects that the two brought to one another on a more practical and artistic level that I will mention briefly that show Craig's interest in Duncan's art. First, on the most practical level, when Craig and Duncan first began to have a serious relationship, Isadora's business had been arranged by her brother Augustin, who was "a lovable person, but hardly a business man" and Craig attempted to remedy that (Seroff 1971, 94). Craig brought some rational shape to the management of Duncan's career through putting her under the organization of Maurice Magnus who was to "organize everything on a truly businesslike basis—at a rented office with a secretary" (ibid). They opened a joint bank account, but only Isadora was able to contribute to it.

The second contribution Craig made was to redesign all of her publicity material and ensured that drawings of her dancing were to accompany her on her tours and to be exhibited in the foyers of theaters where she performed as well as on posters advertising her performances in the streets of the cities in which she appeared. "Thus, Isadora's association with Craig was not merely emotional" (Seroff 1971, 95).

In this paper I want to address Craig and Duncan's shared interest in ancient Greek art, which is the context within which Isadora Duncan developed her art, the various influences that inspired her choreography, and the historical time period that influenced the decisions that she made. I want to make several preliminary comments before proceeding to the main claim that I am making, which is that Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and other "barefoot" dancers were

not the mothers or grandmothers or inventors of modern dance, as is repeated as if it were a religious tenet of faith in dance history courses across the nation, a point that I made in an earlier study. (Shay 2008). Rather, I will make the case that Isadora was an impressionistic dancer, who like the other barefoot dancers, left no lasting pedagogical technique, that is a method of movement that could be conveyed to others as a means of teaching, as was in fact the case with one of the true mothers of modern dance, Martha Graham. “Graham’s radical movement was inspired to some extent by her German counterpart Mary Wigman, but it was fed by her own uncompromising determination to forge a new aesthetic—one that would express the surging vitality, hard edge, and revolutionary spirit of the American Dancer” in which Graham moved in the exact opposite direction of her mentors St. Denis and Ted Shawn with their “decorative excesses” in the words of dance historian Henrietta Bannerman. (2010, 262-263).

Irma Duncan, one her six protégées, known as the Isadorables, who ran her dance school, described Isadora’s attempts at teaching: “Her method consisted in demonstrating the sequence of a dance perfectly executed by herself. Then, without demonstrating step by step, she expected her pupils to understand immediately and repeat it” (quoted in Seroff, 1971, 183). Seroff notes, “she arrived at the depressing conclusion that she did not know how to teach” (ibid., 182).

Duncan herself said: “I hate dancing. I am an *expressioniste* of beauty. I use my body as my medium, just as the writer uses his words. Do not call me a

dancer” (quoted in Kurth 2001, x). I will argue that the genius of Isadora Duncan lay in the profound stage charisma that she undoubtedly possessed. Few observers of her work could express what she did in clear, choreographic language, but rather, they attempted to convey that which eludes words of description because of her command of the stage, her sheer power of presence. But, toward the end of her career, her impressionistic choreographies were the last gasp of nineteenth-century Antique Greek Urn Dancing rather than the gateway to a new dance genre, just as St. Denis old-fashioned impressions of “oriental” dances constituted a dead end to a largely nineteenth-century love of exoticism.

In this paper I suggest that Isadora Duncan was very much a product of the long nineteenth century. Dance historian Lillian Loewenthal notes, “During the twenties she voiced her concern about the trendy avant-garde movement in the arts around her” (1993 7). That would certainly have included dancers like Martha Graham. She adds “With the individualism of her approach to art, the demarcating line between the traditional dance and the modern esthetic she proposed was irrevocably drawn” (ibid.) I differ from Loewenthal on which side of that line Duncan stood. That concern about the avant-garde would certainly have included the revolutionary choreographic art that Graham, Humphrey, Wigman, and Tamaris were creating, placing Duncan on the opposite side of that aesthetic chasm, rather than on the modern side.

In fact her movements, according to reconstructions and descriptions, ran to the simple: running, skipping, simple turning, striking poses, etc. Loewenthal

writes, “She walked, ran, strode, skipped, jumped, leapt, knelt, reclined, fell, spun crouched lunged, galloped” (1993, 10). The music that she used, such as the Romantic Chopin and other nineteenth-century composers, provides another clue to her romantic aesthetic bias. ¹

She was most likely self-taught and very much influenced by Francois Delsarte and his disciple Genevieve Stebbins, as was all of America and Europe where “emotional expression” and “classical statue posing” were the rage. So ubiquitous was Delsarte and his disciples that George Bernard Shaw said that Delsarte had founded a “quack religion.” Dance historian and critic Ann Daly observes that Isadora Duncan appropriated “the dominant discourses of the 1880s and 1890s—evolutionary theory, Hellenism, and physical culture, to name a few” (1995, 17).

In order to contextualize the world in which Duncan, born in San Francisco in 1877, created her career, we have to consider several points. First, in her time and place, she was considered a great beauty, and being the intelligent woman that she was, she capitalized on it, and parlayed that beauty into a fortune, until it failed her late in her career. Her first audition ended in failure because the manager of the theatre said that her dance was “more suited to a church.” (Kurth 2001, 30). His comments were not lost on her. She now took to wrapping herself in classical uncorseted, gauzy, limb-revealing garments that titillated the male part of her audiences, while inspiring the female part. Loewenthal describes her dances as “completely devoid of the erotic” (1993, 10). Thus, her sensuality could be shown to be hidden under the respectability of being wrapped in the

spirituality and classical historical associations of ancient Greece, a powerful image in the late nineteenth century, due to the influence of Winkelmann.

What is often forgotten is that Isadora was not the first to think of using Greek clothing and poses; the earliest mention we have of this was a century earlier: “During the late 1780s, [Sir William] Hamilton’s mistress, and later wife, Emma, developed and displayed her famous ‘Attitudes’ for guests attending his Naples home. This dancing of sorts was inspired by both pose and dress on ancient works of art, and to some extent by the Greek vases in Hamilton’s own collection” (Smith 2010, 79). She was thus able to provide those guests with a provocative view of her nearly nude body. “Not all ‘antique dancing’ disappeared around 1820: some survived as part of the ‘night scene.’ ‘Greek dance’ was an excellent pretext for women to undress; thus the 1841 London edition of *The Swells’ Night Guide through the Metropolis* directs young gentlemen in search of an enjoyable night about town in London to the ‘Temples of Voluptuousness,’ etc., where one could view ‘the slightly veiled daughters of Venus’” quoted in Narebout 2010, 43).

Second, she lived in an era in which women who performed in public, whether acting, or worse dancing, were equated with prostitutes. It is at this point that I wish to address the oft-mentioned notion that Duncan and other barefoot dancers were turning their backs on classical ballet, hardly a more respectable art than dancing in musicals in that period. This was patently untrue. There were no real ballet companies outside Russia, France, Italy and Denmark. Dance historians Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick state: “It is popularly

believed that these creators of a new dance were rebelling against ‘the ballet.’ But none, in her formative years, was in a position to see any ballet worthy of the name” (2003, 2). Aside from ballroom dancing, the only form of dance that women of that period performed, and all of these women had to perform it, at least briefly early in their careers, was skirt dancing, the primary form of dance on Broadway and London stages, which from all descriptions was similar to the can can and consisted of step dancing with high kicks and the shaking of the skirt to reveal the sexy, at least to the men of that period, undergarments of the dancer.

The answer to women with artistic ambitions or who at least did not wish their appearances equated with prostitution, quickly abandoned this form of dance and turned to spirituality to provide a respectable cover for dancing in revealing costumes. That spirituality was found in ancient Greece and the orient. “Just as Ruth St. Denis’s gimmick was the ‘exotic’ and Loie Fuller’s was the ‘picturesque,’ so Duncan’s was the ‘classical’” (Daly 1995, 103). Thus, we see the figures of Greek goddesses and Salome flooding stages and drawing rooms as Isadora, Ruth St. Denis, Maud Allen and Mata Hari donned clinging robes and bejeweled bras to show their new interpretive art, and for the time period, a considerable expanse of their anatomy.

Although she drew large audiences, not everyone was equally impressed by her dancing or her Greek references. The astute Count Harry Kessler, who saw her in Berlin in 1903 at the Krolloper commented sharply,

Both van de Velde and I took an equally strong dislike to Duncan.

She is affected, with a sentimental fluttering of the eyes, has only

one movement which she repeats until it's painful, dances without rhythm and without passion, and has in common with Greek art only what philistines consider 'antique,' that is dreary emptiness and saccharine beauty. Her chief attractions are that she is naked and conventional, exactly the same attractions of academic art.

She is the embodiment of the academic in dance. (289-90) **2**

Spirituality was an easy choice for it was everywhere in America. "This was the era of the table-rappers, ouidja boards, and theosophy, but it was also the era of Darwin, whose *On the Origin of the Species* "far from curtailing the wilder flights of spiritualist thought, instead gave birth to the most unscientific developments in popular culture" (Kurth 2001, 30-31).

Peter Kurth writes of Isadora's engagement with classical Greece, "In origin, at least, her life's devotion to classical Greece could be traced to the American search for cultural legitimacy and the romantic idea that 'ancient' and 'beautiful were one and the same. . . 'I did not invent my dance,' she repeated, 'it existed before me, but it lay dormant. I merely discovered and awakened it'" (quoted in Kurth 2001, 21). It was this highly popular vision of classical Greek art that she shared with Craig and which would draw her and her family to Greece in 1903. Dance historian Ann Daly notes, "The aura of Greece—as a symbolic suture between 'Nature' and Culture—clung most fiercely to Duncan early in her American career, when her audiences needed to make sense of her unfamiliar style of dancing" (1995, 110). Thus, associations with ancient Greece in an age of rampant Hellenism grounded her art for her viewers.

She seems to have first been moved to emulate Greek dancing in London, where “we spent most of our time in the British Museum where Raymond [her younger brother] made sketches of all the Greek vases and bas-reliefs, and I tried to express them to whatever music seemed to me to be in harmony with the rhythms of the feet and Dionysiac set of the head, and the tossing of the thyrsis” (Duncan 1927, 54-55). As art historian Tyler Jo Smith notes, “it is impossible to say exactly which kind of vases she used, and it is safe to assume that she was less concerned with technique. . . provenance. . . or chronology. . . than she was with the most helpful and, for her unique purposes, reproducible in terms of poses, gestures, or clothing. When she drew inspiration from vases, it seems she did so indiscriminately, though it is important to stress that she looked to the hand-holding line dancers that adorn many vessels, and may well have been attracted to their female subject matter” (2011, 84). As a solo dancer she also, curiously, frequently claimed that she was representing the chorus. “From the beginning I conceived the dance as a chorus or community expression” (Duncan 1927, 140).

Although she never gave up the ideal, the reality of Athens, little more than a primitive village set in the classical ruins in 1903, most likely dismayed her, as it had Lord Byron less than a century before. She describes “bedbugs, hard wooden planks for sleeping, the assorted perils of the countryside” (Albright 2011, 64). Byron’s contemporary the French viscount Chateaubriand quipped, “Never see Greece, Monsieur, except in Homer. It is the best way” (quoted in Todorova 1997, 94). The Duncans bought land for a house “that was far from

Athens, and was rocky soil, producing only thistles. Besides, there was no water anywhere near the hill”. . . We decided to remain forever in Greece” (Duncan 1927, 124, 126). Her brother Raymond remained there for years, living on a shepherd’s diet, wearing sandals and robes, which he wove himself. Hers was a more realistic viewpoint, and while she may have worn ancient robes on stage, she also liked good hotels and haute couture, which the considerable revenues from her performances enabled her to enjoy.

Although Isadora never credited her sources, except vague references to “nature” and “ancient Greece,” she nonetheless considered herself to be reviving an ancient dance tradition that had not been performed for two millennia. She may well have been inspired by the work of a French musician Maurice Emmanuel (1862-1938) who “studied rhythm as such, in Greek poetry, in Greek music and in Greek dance—ancient Greek mousike” (Narebout 2010, 42). For Emmanuel used the new technology, photography, namely chronophotography and early cinema, familiar through the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge. “Emmanuel looked at ancient images of dancing in the same way that he looked at modern photographs” (Narebout 2011, 45). Through the taking of a series of poses, Emmanuel was convinced that he had found the authentic ancient Greek dance. Dance historian Frederick Narebout is convinced that Isadora had access to Emmanuel’s work, which had rather wide circulation. It is well known that Isadora went everywhere to view Greek art. Other researchers were also attempting to recover authentic Greek dance. But as Narebout notes of Isadora Duncan, “She never mentions Emmanuel. . . But then she hardly ever referred to

influences within the field of dance: she apparently did not intend to detract from her own originality” (2011, 50).

The enthusiasm for Emmanuel’s work, classical posing, revival Greek urn dancing, and similar attempts at reviving the glory of ancient Greece lasted until World War I. I am sure many remember the brilliant moment in *The Music Man*, set in turn-of-the-century Iowa, in which Hermione Gingold and a bevy of middle-aged housewives, clad as nymphs in Greek robes declaimed in throbbing voices: “One Grecian Urn,” which gives the modern audience a notion of what that “artistic” enterprise must have looked like. And as dance historian Ann Cooper Albright notes that women like Isadora Duncan, Colette and Loie Fuller, “Despite the quite different looks of the their performances—these women were connected by the fact that, at some point in their careers, they all conjured a vision of ancient Greece to enhance the representation of their bodies as agents of self-expression” (2011, 59). Greece was in the air, as well as in a great deal of columned architecture of the period.

There remains a large question as to whether Isadora, through viewing Greek art and statuary was attempting to recreate actual dances or whether she was interpreting it in an impressionistic way. “In 1903 she stresses that she does not seek to recreate Greek movement, but a 1909 Paris programme again speaks of ‘reconstitutions de danse antique’. If Duncan’ position on this issue is unclear this is probably the result of both confusion and opportunism, in varying combinations. Whatever she said herself, from the evidence a good case can be made for antiquity being the main inspirational force in her career” (Narebout

2010, 51). In her autobiography she writes that while in Paris they spent hours in the Louvre “absolutely absorbed in the Greek vases. . . We spent so much time in the Greek vase room that the guardian grew suspicious and when I explained in pantomime that I had only come there to dance, he decided that he had to do with harmless lunatics, so he let us alone” (1928, 67).

In the early part of her career, at the turn of the century, French painter Eugene Carrière said of her dancing, “Isadora in her desire to express human sentiments, found in Greek art the finest models. Full of admiration for the beautiful bas-relief figures, she was inspired by them. Yet, endowed with an instinct for discovery, she returned to Nature, whence came all these gestures and believing in imitating and revivifying the Greek dance, she found her own expression” (Duncan 1928, 82). And all of the drawings and photographs of Isadora at that period depict her in (very short) versions of Greek tunics. (See Loewenthal).

In relation to the claims of Isadora as the mother of modern dance, Frederick Narebout states: “Isadora Duncan and the many others like her are not harbingers of ‘modern dance’ or even the modern age. . . their heyday was the final years of the long nineteenth century, until 1914. Duncan tried to reinvent herself, but it was the ‘Greek’ label—once a ticket to success—that stuck and that caused her to be out of fashion well before she died in 1927” (2011, 55). And although Isadora Duncan waffled between claiming to be resuscitating ancient Greek dance, and merely being inspired by it, her audiences certainly thought that she was attempting to embody that ancient art form. And, thus, I suggest

that rather than being the mother of modern dance, she was, in fact, the last gasp of ancient Greece urn dancing and the nineteenth-century Romanticism that produced it. Her autobiography breathes the wonderment of Romanticism, not the stark lines of modernism.

Notes

1. During the Edward Gordon Craig Conference held at Pomona College, March 28-30, 2013, Lori Belilove, one of the foremost interpreters of Isadora Duncan's oeuvre, gave a concert featuring several reconstructions of Isadora Duncan's works just a few hours after I had delivered my paper. I remained more than ever convinced, that not only were the "childlike" and simple movement descriptions correct, but that the aesthetic impulses of Duncan's work were rooted in the nineteenth century. It is difficult to imagine Martha Graham dancing to Brahms' "Lullaby."

2. Kessler later relents in his opinion of her artistry. "Poor Isadora! She never could rid herself of something philistine and school-marmish, however much she tried by way of free love and selection her children's fathers to break the bounds of convention and American Puritanism in her art. Yet she was a real artist, and art and tragedy constituted an ineradicable an element of her private life as did her Californian philistinism. Dancing of the caliber which today we hold in high esteem, and even the Russian Ballet, would not have been possible without her" (1971, 330).

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