

DANCE FOR LIFE: ISADORA DUNCAN AND HER CALIFORNIA DANCE

LEGACY AT THE TEMPLE OF WINGS

by Margaretta K. Mitchell

Imagine a Greek temple high on a hillside set against the golden light of the setting sun. Through the columns dancers enter, crowns of spring flowers on the younger heads, garlands of flowers in the hands of the older dancers. The line of bodies are traced by flowing scarves and tunics, their pastel colors and bright flowers blending in motion like a spring garden tossed in breezes. The dancers turn and leap and fill the court with strands of dance woven in an intricate pattern. Hanging their garlands, their offering, on the columns, they greet the audience, arms raised. The Spring Festival has begun.

The Temple ritual is a sequence of dances: a frieze of sedate maidens as fragile as figures on a piece of Wedgewood china, a tribe of young Amazons with clenched fists defying their enemy, Furies emerging from the underworld, a solitary mother singing to her baby.

Our ears are full of Chopin and Schubert waltzes. Our eyes are lost outside time at a point between imagination and reality. Before us now, the fluted columns rise in a semicircle to meet the sliver of of new moon. Music and light are now captured in the Temple interior where figures of dancing children, like swallows crisscrossing at twilight, dart in and out of the columns. In this temple is a living connection to the past, to the turn of the century, to the great dancer Isadora Duncan, and through her vision, to ancient Greece. Here is the iconography of that ancient culture moving through our own children. Here is that long-repressed spirit of grace and power we find in the Greek goddess, Artemis, whose image personifies an unfettered spirit--Earth's wilderness. By springs in dense forest, she led the young in dance, in song. At one with nature, she danced her own dance.

Now the youngest sprites skip with joy, drop flowers in the basket held by a smiling silver-haired woman wearing a golden toga, and respond to her call to leap over the moon.

For twenty years I have borne witness to this scene. Since I first met Sülgywnn Quitzow in her golden toga and sandals at the Temple of Wings high in the hills of Berkeley, California, I have sought its sources and acknowledged its beauty with my camera. I began to photograph with no intention beyond pure pleasure of capturing the sight of children dancing. The dancers echo the architecture, seeming to move to the energies of that more ancient time when the universe was alive with the presence of gods and goddesses, when the human body was itself thought of as a temple to house the spirit.

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contemporary memory primarily as an eccentric rebel. History, in fact, did not seem to know exactly how to categorize this thoroughly idiosyncratic young woman from far-off California who burst upon the dance world at the turn of the century with the startling announcement--that she had rediscovered the ancient dance forms of the Greeks and that the poetry of Walt Whitman and the surging rhythms of the Pacific had provided her with a new music. Over the past twenty years, however, the many levels of significance in the life and art of Isadora Duncan have been revealing themselves. Historians of the dance now look to her innovations as constituting a major premise in modern dance art. Historians of California are seeing in the young Isadora--a native daughter, nurtured in her early youth in exclusively California circumstances--a bold fulfillment of the Mediterranean metaphor that animated so much turn-of-the-century California creativity. In her search for something joyous and Greek, something healthy, natural and beautiful, the young Isadora Duncan, seeking her Grecian ideal, was seeking a Californian ideal as well, one depicted, among other instances, so luminously in the paintings of Arthur Mathews, whose golden California girls, attired in the raiment of ancient Greece, danced joyously beneath a California live oak under a warm sun as if, like the dancers on Keats' Grecian urn, they would be forever young, joyous and free. Arising out of special local American circumstances, Isadora Duncan brought a universalized California message to America first and then to Europe. In both her life and her art, Isadora Duncan sought to celebrate the female as a universalized human image, complete in itself, equal to the male form as a representation of humanity. Today, we are beginning to accept this notion, but it was revolutionary when Isadora Duncan first introduced it. Historians are only now beginning to glimpse the full implications of that freedom and self-acceptance Isadora Duncan sought in her life and expressed in her dance. The thriving survival of the Temple of Wings and its attendant dance programs for more than seven decades testifies to the continuing relevance of the Duncan dance tradition as a means of introducing young women to their womanhood, of celebrating the feminine as a full and complete premise for human existence. The children and young adults pictured in Margaretta Mitchell's photographs are recreating the environment in which Isadora Duncan found herself most happy: an atmosphere, an ethos, if you will, of youth, joy, and a loving acceptance of what it is to be a woman in body, mind and spirit.

Isadora Duncan created an original concept of body movement that

changed the course of Western dance and women's lives. Our first pioneer artist of modern dance, she claimed the California land and seascape as a primary source of her vision.

At the turn of the century, the San Francisco Bay became the focus of a new Mediterranean culture. Here at the edge of the continent was born a new vision, a renewed promise of Utopia. The early Californian, affected by the power of the untamed wilderness, strove to live in harmony with nature and identified with an ideal vision which rejected artificiality and convention and romanticized the power of nature. The untrammelled wilderness became a symbolic image of the American experience: freedom of body, freedom of spirit.

Isadora Duncan personified this new American vision, breaking the Victorian mold of confinement and convention in her dance, her clothes, and her life.

Set against the tradition of ballet, her style was one of natural, flowing gesture reminiscent of nature's rhythms and evocative of forms of ancient sculpture. She paved the way by her radical example for what we call modern dance, but she also led the struggle of the women of the twentieth century to live their own lives.

She believed that "the dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of the soul will become the movement of the body. The dancer will not belong to a nation but to all humanity. She will dance, not in the form of a nymph or fairy, or coquette, but in the form of woman in its greatest and purest expression She shall dance the freedom of woman."

In the study of Greek statues, Isadora found the points of natural balance in the body, declaring that "Greek positions are only earth positions." She studied herself; she trusted her own nature. Her dance echoed the rhythms in nature. Her art was abstract, a pure expression of the body in space, an embodiment of music, not dependent on stories and character. That natural spirit, united with a demand for personal freedom, was, in her eyes, truly American.

As a young woman in California, Duncan already felt a call to discover "a new dance that will express America." Her childhood friend, Florence Treadwell Boynton, shared the same vision of freedom, of a vital life lived in harmony with nature.

The early years and visions of Florence and Isadora were closely tied. They were born within six months of each other and grew up together in Oakland.

When Isadora and Florence were infants in 1877, Oakland was becoming a center of trade for the San Francisco Bay, proud of its new stature as the western end of the transcontinental railroad.

Isadora's memories are of the hard times caused by her father

At the center of this experience was a view of beauty that exists outside time and place, unable to be owned by a certain period. Gradually I learned that the inspiration for this dance expression and its setting was the great dance pioneer Isadora Duncan. Indeed, her childhood friend and first American follower, Florence Treadwell Boynton, built the Temple as a living memorial to the great dancer. Possibly it could be the one place where the Duncan legacy has been most continuously developed over the longest time.

This place also gave me the sense of history that I left in the eastern landscape of my childhood. I had grown up with a past I could touch daily: four generations in adjacent towns, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, a victorian house, porched front and back. Here in the dancing interchange between youth and age I felt again a sense of lineage. The living philosophy of Sùlgwynn Quitzow rooted in her mother's generation had kept the Duncan dance legacy alive at the Temple of Wings for four generations.

Sùlgwynn dedicated her life to the natural, unforced physical development of children. The dance expression moves out from the heart (or the "magic eye" as she told the children) through the arms reaching to the sky, creating the arc of a crescent moon: an open embrace to the world. From her teaching, children acquired an unselfconscious freedom of movement, flowing with an energy reminiscent of nature, of water, wind, clouds.

Indeed, nature provided the continuity I missed at first in California. I was captivated by the dynamic clash of sky and earth, the edge of land and sea, bright light washing over a constantly shifting landscape of hills, canyons, water, fog. Then, at the Temple, I found the connection between the inner expression of nature and the natural movement of bodies.

My commitment to this project was always renewed each year at the close of the festival when the dancers, led by Sùlgwynn, faced the Golden Gate. There was silence. She raised her arms to the west. The dancers followed, silhouetted against the lowering light. I can only imagine that her gesture was to Isadora who had directly inspired her life, to her mother, to the whole of nature. I know that we all were participants in that moment. Beguiling, enchanting, unique. If out of curiosity you came to the festival, you might laugh at first in embarrassment, gradually become captivated by delight, and then end amazed that such an experience exists. Its beauty seems to fragile in our nerve-jangled, hard-edged world, and so necessary.

I knew I was committed when I asked Sùlgwynn how she differed from other dance teachers, and she answered: "They teach dance for the theater--I teach dance for life!"

Kevin Starr has contributed the following statement:

There was a time when Isadora Duncan survived in

Joseph's disappearance with \$10,000 in deposits from his own bank. Her mother, in dire straits, gave piano lessons and took in sewing. All four children worked as soon as they could, and eventually, with help of friends like the Treadwells, they found a settled life.

Florence's memories are more tranquil. "Oakland," she writes, "was once a great meadow with generously distributed groups of magnificent old oak trees." She remembers orchards, dairy farms, cool, shady canyons and homes with palm trees and windmills.

Brochures of the time called Oakland the "Athens of the Pacific" it was there that Isadora spent the first sixteen years of her life. Both Florence and Isadora shared lessons at Cole School and singing, gymnastics and dramatics at Germania Hall. Florence joined the music and dancing at the Duncan home where as a child Isadora taught children in the neighborhood to dance. Elizabeth, her older sister, joined in. "Our fame as teachers increased," Isadora writes. "We called it a new system of dancing, but in reality it was no system. I used to recite a poem and teach the children to follow its meaning in gesture and movement. In the evenings my mother played to us while I composed dances." Not only were the dance classes a success but her brother Augustin's barn theater in their home at 8th and Poplar Streets "became quite celebrated in the neighborhood," according to Isadora. Florence, dreaming of becoming an actress, knew all the female roles and greatly admired Isadora's brother Augustin who had decided to be an actor.

Romance blossomed between Florence and Augustin but was discouraged by Papa Treadwell. He didn't want his only child to marry an actor. It is said that he helped the young "Gus" to leave California and join Isadora in New York. The young Isadora had left California in 1895 and with her family made her way eventually to Europe and a great international career as a dancer.

The successive triumphs of Isadora, in New York and throughout Europe, were dutifully and lavishly recorded in the San Francisco papers of the period, often referring to Miss Duncan as "a California Girl," making much of her dancing barefoot and in scant costumes.

If the natural exuberance of her style has the California landscape as its spiritual source and the sculptural art of ancient Greece as its form, Isadora's aspiration was actually futuristic--toward a liberation of the spirit and a reconciliation with that which is natural and free in each of us. For all her disguise in Grecian tunics or her studied references to ancient sculpture, Isadora's message in Europe was essentially an American call to individual freedom. Even Isadora's dress became a freedom banner. Her flowing tunics declared a physical freedom that told women, "You have a right to wear what is natural to your body."

Back in California, Florence maintained communication with the Duncan family. Married to young Charles Boynton, she pursued her own dream at home. As early as 1909, she declared herself an exponent of Duncan's philosophy of dance and dress as well as an advocate of healthy

living in the out-of-doors. Her mission was to improve the task of motherhood by demonstrating higher ideals and greater imagination.

In Berkeley at the Hillside Club she gave a program called an "Isadora Duncan afternoon." She prefaced her dances with the reading of several letters from Isadora Duncan. The newspaper accounts report that "Mrs. Charles C. Boynton of Alameda yesterday appeared before the Mother's Club of Berkeley at the Hillside Club and, clad only in a Grecian robe, presented the dances of her world-famous girlhood friend, Isadora Duncan." Mrs. Boynton said that "It is a great age of every nation when the nation recognizes its women; but when a nation recognizes its children, also, that is a greater age, and this recognition is the spirit of our age." Each dance was a game for mothers and children to play as a way to "develop the child physically and to enlarge its imagination." Besides the study of dance, there were also circles to study the new ideals in food, in home architecture and the home garden.

Inspired by photographs of Isadora Duncan's dancing children, Florence went Greek and dressed her children (and at times even her husband Charles) in loose, simple clothing and sandals, shedding the corsets and stiff collars, the fussy ruffles, stays and other Victorian refinements. She worked for open-air schools so that children would not be confined indoors all day. She thought their growing bodies needed fewer clothes and more fresh air and freedom of movement.

During summer holidays, the family went barefoot, which women didn't do in those days. It was considered almost immoral. One of the daughters recalls her father asking her mother, "Do you mean that you are going to let the boys see your feet?" She raised eyebrows again when she gave birth to a child outdoors under a grape arbor. Her daughter recalls, "She was in and out of the newspapers all the time because of her original ideas. She was always ahead of other people."

Ever dreaming of an ideal home to express her ideals, Florence discovered a perfect site on the side of the then bare hills of Berkeley, facing the Pacific and the setting sun. The roads wound into the hills, following the old cowpaths between fields of lupine and poppies. The land was part of the newly organized community where members were attempting to create a utopia of simple homes designed in harmony with nature. This domestic utopia was a flowering of social idealism peculiar to Berkeley at a time when its young university perpetrated a particular self-image of a Pacific Athens. The dramatic scenery, blended with a pastoral longing for a simple life close to the earth, called for a corresponding naturalism in architecture and living. A friend and fellow idealist, Bernard Maybeck, sold the Boyntons the land next to his and was their choice for architect.

Florence imagined the temple as a clearing in the forest with trees holding up tent canopies; Maybeck began plans in high enthusiasm.

Eventually disagreements caused him to leave the project. Nevertheless, his design is basic to the scheme. With the final renderings drawn up by Randolph Monro, Florence realized her rustic palace.

The Temple of Wings is clearly related to Greek ideals, but in form it is a free-wheeling adaptation of a temple. Although some saw it as a grandiose whim of an eccentric, it actually did provide the Boynton family with their needs: heat, light and a roof over their heads. But more than this, it functioned as a symbol for life as a sacred art.

While to our contemporary eyes the Temple may seem bizarre (or at the least impractical), it was a natural choice for the Boyntons. Indeed, the form of the Greek temple stood for simplicity and purity of proportion to those who were turning from the machine arts of the late Victorian world.

It is logical that Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts, created for the Panama Pacific Exposition of 1915, incorporates similar ideas. The same Italian sculptor worked on both, casting in concrete the 34 Corinthian capitals for the 18-foot-high fluted columns at the Temple of Wings. Florence herself researched many of the architectural details to better carry out her vision. She had the floor built on hollow tile so that the hot air from the furnace would keep the floors warm for dancing.

The columns supported a ceiling painted sky blue with drifting clouds, a hint of sunset at one end and the hues of sunrise at the other, with a large circular skylight as the center of each wing. There were heavy canvas awnings hung against the columns for protection from wind, rain and cold weather. A narrow central section held two floors of family rooms for bathing and dressing, with curtains across a front balcony. In the two open-air studios, the family lived and danced, weaving a complete fabric of Art, Dance and Life.

The Temple drew considerable attention from the journalists of the day. Mrs. Boynton expressed herself with confidence in an interview for Sunset magazine in 1918: "My profession is motherhood. The inspiration came to me to build an outdoor home where the family could live free from domestic drudgery and convention in dress. We have named our open-air home of two circular porches 'The Temple of Wings' and we have dedicated it to the democracy and freedom of women."

Mr. Boynton, a successful San Francisco lawyer, wore his proper three-piece suit to the office, but joined the family in his toga once in the privacy of the Temple. He was a true believer himself, a devotee of their domestic simplicity, their dancing, and particularly of the simplified diet. He is also quoted in the Sunset interview: "This 'simple diet' life is no dream of a faddist. We have actually lived it out for four years. . . . We have solved the problem of living for these times of high cost. . . . Our menu consists of California fruits and nuts, raisins, dried figs, prunes, almonds, English walnuts, peanuts, and fresh fruit in season. Besides these, it includes cheese, honey, milk and galleta, an Italian hardtack. We cook but one article of food: we roast peanuts, a fifteen minutes' task

daily. Our fuel bill does not exceed \$1.50 a month, and of course, we do not employ a cook."

While Isadora danced the newly-felt spirit of freedom on the stage and lived it flamboyantly in international circles, Florence housed that spirit on home ground in this highly individual style. Over the years the friendship between Florence and Isadora was kept alive by frequent correspondence and by encounters in New York, Boston and Philadelphia in 1908, and in San Francisco in 1917 when the Boyntons attended all of her San Francisco Performances. In the words of one of the Boynton daughters, "We saw her dance from box seats especially saved for us and then we went backstage. On stage she was a priestess of dance, pure and spiritual. Backstage she was charming, witty and a worldly woman. We knew from our mother that Isadora didn't just want to create schools of dance; she wanted to change the lives of people through dance. We lived that ourselves."

The Temple, as an open-air pavilion, was entirely destroyed by the Berkeley fire of 1923, and stood in stark ruin.

With her insistence on beauty, even the architectural ruin was an inspiration to Mrs. Boynton, who staged the wedding of her daughter Sùlgwynn to Charles Quitzow in the burnt-out heart of the cleared and decorated colonnade. It took place by the light of the full moon. The bride wore a white Grecian gown and a garland of gold leaves in her hair. Bridesmaids, like priestesses in their flowing tunics, entered bearing lighted torches. Sùlgwynn fondly remembered the ceremony, "a most splended pageant, one of the best ones mother gave." In the end it fell naturally to her to carry on the dance studio in the rebuilt Temple as her parents grew older. She and her husband Charles moved in permanently in 1946 and carried on a partnership of music and dance that lasted until Sùlgwynn's death in 1983.

In the Duncan philosophy, art is part of life. In all her teaching, the focus was on children and their simple, natural movement. Her goal and that of her followers, Boynton and Quitzow, was not to create dancers who perform to entertain, but rather to inspire in all people an understanding of dance as an expression of life and of life as dance.

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