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The Isadora

Isadora Duncan lived from 1878 to 1927 and spent much of her time performing in Europe and Russia, with occasional trips to New York. She was the first of the modern barefoot dancers and a believer in free love. While she was alive, her romances and her art made her one of the most controversial figures of her time. Many people are still so fascinated with her that we have orthodox and revisionist Duncan historians, all of whom care about her and passionately defend her against any of her eight biographies.

Given Duncan's considerable and opinionated following, it's not surprising that when Kres Mersky, a Los Angeles actress, came to San Francisco, Isadora's home town, on Oct. 9 to offer her own Duncan impersonation, she received no support from the Isadora Duncan Heritage Society. The Heritage Society is responsible for putting up a plaque at Duncan's birthplace on Taylor and Geary. The Society consists of Mignon Garland, the only person teaching Duncan dancing on a regular basis, and her students.

According to Garland, Mersky or her promoters put some pressure on the Heritage Society to give support. Garland told me the best response was to "ignore them, just like Isadora always ignored her imitators, and let them sink on their own." Garland feels that Isadora Duncan's often flamboyant lifestyle has been exploited while her dancing has gone unrecognized. As founder of the Heritage Society, Garland feels responsible for the memory of the person she thinks of as the true Isadora: Isadora the dancer. Many of the anecdotes told about Duncan are myths, Garland says, and claims that most of Duncan's biographers were men who were her lovers but didn't understand her dancing or what life was like for a woman like her. Garland hopes the Society's efforts won't be compared with those of Mersky.

Isadora Duncan was a woman who devoted her life to her art. She danced alone much of the time, but sometimes she was joined by a troupe of little girls whom she trained in her technique and philosophy, who later became the "Isadorables." Four of them are still living, and *they* don't agree about who she was.

People at the time found her private life scandalous. She had two children by different fathers, set designer Gordon Craig and millionaire Paris Singer, and was proud she didn't marry either of them. She did marry Russian poet Sergei Esenin, causing an anticommunist furor when she brought him to Boston with her. Duncan was not an avowed communist herself, but she did spend some of her last years in the USSR, running a dancing school at the invitation of the state.

their heads from side to side and making flower-strewing gestures with their arms. The apparent naivete of the movement belies the coordination required to keep from jamming one's toes into the floor on the dainty-looking backswing of the foot. In one exercise, two students hold a chiffon scarf while the others run at it one by one, head down, and leap over it, throwing the head and arms back, landing with a crash that makes Mignon Garland wince.

They look like girls playing horses, but you can also see how the exercise forces them to change their dynamics in midair, giving the leap at the same time a look of lightness and an explosive force. All these exercises, many reminiscent of folk dance, show how Isadora thought ordinary.



Isadora Duncan herself, looking not at all like Vanessa Redgrave.

"natural" movements best carried the emotional weight she invested them with, and expressed the music she loved. There are some wonderful skippers and polka artists in the group, but they told me that after three years of study, they've got a long way to go. They're dead serious about the emotional (and, they say, spiritual) content of their dancing.

As Mignon Garland tells me about Isadora's dancing, she raises her arms with such tenderness and delicacy that you almost begin to see 19-year-old Garland in 1927 when she ran away to Moscow to join the Russian Duncan Dancers. At that time the Duncan Dancers were directed by

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These days, all that seems less objectionable than interesting—she's such a legend her fans wonder what the fuss was really about. Some think she was an inspired dancer, as her influence on the styles of dancers Charles Wiedman, Doris Humphrey and even Russian ballet master Michel Fokine would suggest. Others think she just had a powerful hold on her audiences' emotions, to which her technique was secondary. It's hard to analyze her appeal, since she wouldn't allow movies to be taken of her (cameras were too primitive then, and she thought they'd distort the dance). What we know of her technique comes from Irma Duncan's book, *The Technique of Isadora Duncan*, and Garland's classes.

It's a tribute to Duncan that she's causing so much controversy in her home town after all these years. To her fans as well as her critics, she's still a charming but mysterious figure.

ISADORA DUNCAN HERITAGE SOCIETY, 50 Oak, SF, 863-7365

The 17 young women in Mignon Garland's advanced and intermediate class in Duncan dancing must feel very close to Isadora Duncan. Dressed in tunics they made themselves, they walk slowly around in a circle to Chopin's Requiem March, concentrating mightily. After a while the effect is mesmerizing. Arms and legs swing rhythmically out from the tunics giving them the look of Greek figures going around a vase. "It took me three years to learn the subtleties of that," one student told me later, "I could walk for years."

They go on from walking to running, swaying

at the time the Duncan Dancers were directed by Irma Duncan, one of the six "Isadorables" who had been taught by Isadora and her sister Elizabeth. After Isadora's death in 1927, Sol Hurok brought the Russian troupe to New York.

Garland, who had studied with yet another Isadorable, Anna Duncan (Isadora had legally adopted them all, though they were more disciples than daughters), went to see them. The dances they did were all new to her, created late in Isadora's life, after the death of her two children, in 1913, by drowning in a freak automobile accident.

When the troupe returned to Russia, Mignon followed them back to Moscow, became a member of Irma Duncan's troupe and performed with the young women who had been the last of Isadora's students. During the long Russian nights, they told her stories about Isadora (which she now tells her students). The troupe came to New York again in 1930, but for some reason the Russians were all called back to the USSR, leaving Irma and Mignon to pull a troupe together and fulfill their engagements.

After this, she gave a few classes and performed, as did the disbanded Isadorables. But the mainstream of modern dance was by then dominated by Martha Graham. The Isadorables, divided by old rivalries and still, it seems, jealous of each other's memories of Isadora, had ceased to perform seriously.

Since Isadora wouldn't allow any movies to be taken of her, her dance might have disappeared completely had it not been for Mignon Garland's joining the women's movement in the early

Duncan perplex

Seventies. She told her group about Isadora's ideas on women and art, and they became interested. She began giving classes in her living room and then performed at National Organization for Women benefits.

After that, her living room couldn't hold everybody, so one student petitioned Neighborhood Arts in San Francisco. Garland got a grant to teach, which was extended for four sessions. This was followed by a series of changes of venue, from San Francisco to the East Bay, through which most of her students stuck by her.

In fact, it's mostly their fascination with the dancing, and with Isadora ("Everything I tell them about her, they just eat up"), that kept her going. She teaches three levels, four afternoons a week.



Kres Mersky, Duncan imitator: an upstart upbraided.

She is amused and flattered by their enthusiasm. "They do the most hair-raising things. They work night shifts. Everyone has some crummy job they hate so they can make it to my classes."

Where does the attraction come from? It is, admittedly, an archaic dance style they are learning. They don't seem to care. The former ballet dancers patiently unlearn all their lower-back-centered carriage, and they all look forward to the times when some of them perform.

Some of the women came to performances and classes through a fascination with Isadora. One woman just saw a picture of her and was drawn to her. Another came from Oregon and saw a recital. "I had a sensation of trees and nature," she said. "It was an emotional, spiritually charged experience."

These reactions are interesting compared to the way Isadora herself was received. In Germany she was called the "Wise Goddess," but later in her career she was referred to as a "hussy" and a "bolshevik" in the Boston press. Part of her effect was her extraordinary stage presence. She was always able to communicate great waves of emotion to her audiences. After the death of her children, Victor Seroff reports in *The Real Isadora*, she went through her "monumental" phase, during which she would come onstage to Beethoven's Pathetique and slowly raise her arms. This moved audiences to tears.

But the women in Mignon's classes never saw Isadora dance. Nor did Mignon, for that matter. One woman claims to have had a "spiritually-charged experience" watching Mignon and her troupe, none of whom pretends to be another Duncan. I saw them dance in 1973, and it was quite puzzling. They were doing things you see in folk dance, and the movement was so symmetrical and frolicsome you looked at it like something in a museum. Mignon, though, had a very strong effect. She wasn't as shy as the students, looking the audience in the face with an almost shocking intimacy. Especially if one is used to the faceless precision of ballet and the general seriousness of modern dance, it's a great surprise to see a woman in a tunic tilt her head and give you a look over her shoulder as she turns, then toss her head around and practically wink at you as she comes to face you again. Has she no shame, I wondered.

Duncan dancing is at once gentle and direct. All the gestures emanate from the solar plexus. "Closer to the heart than the centers of other dance," one student pointed out. The physical metaphor works out in this case. This also explains Isadora's attraction, even in pictures. She is often shown reaching out and up, the gentle line of her arms coming from her heart, like some Celestial Mother figure.

Garland finds it perfectly natural that dancers would leave ballet training for her classes. "This is a group of girls that have been bored to death by their other dance classes. They said to themselves, 'There must be something else!'" Like Isadora, Mignon wants to see masses of dancers performing the group dances. "I want to take away the preciousness," she said. She doesn't know if there will ever be a strong soloist from the company. "There are only so many Isadoras," she says. She's not as concerned with creating a star as with keeping the Duncan style going.

"Isadora's centenary is in three years," one woman told me. "All over the world, they'll be celebrating it. In London and Paris there'll be ceremonies. Mignon says we'll be the only ones dancing. We've just got to be ready."

ISADORA DUNCAN: A UNIQUE RECITAL, by Kres Mersky at the Open Theater, 441 Clement, SF, 668-8518, Thurs. at 8:30 pm, Fri. and Sat. at 8:30 and 10:30 pm. All tickets \$4.