

I HAVE A WILL OF MY OWN: ADDRESS TO THE BERLIN PRESS CLUB

People sometimes reproach me with having neither genius nor talent, nor deep feeling, but I have a will of my own, and my will is to free the art of dancing from the unnatural contortions which are the product of the modern ballet, and to lead it back to natural movements.

How beautiful these movements are that we see in animals, plants, waves and winds. All things in nature have forms of motion corresponding to their innermost being. Primitive man still has such movements and, starting from that point, we must try to create beautiful movements significant of cultured man—a movement which, without spurning the laws of gravitation, sets itself in harmony with the motion of the universe.

The Greek dances were spontaneous and natural. We must seek to revive them. Not mere national dances, but *human* dances.

Just as the nude is the highest in all art must it be the highest in the dance, for dancing is the ritual of the religion of physical beauty. The dancer of the future will have to suit the dance to the symmetry of the body. She must have a perfect body, which will again be recognized as beautiful, pure and holy. And in this body a free, great spirit must find harmonious utterance in the excitement of the dance. Only in this way can dancing be raised to its place among the fine arts.

THE SECRET BEAUTY OF HER MOVEMENT: LETTER TO THE *BERLIN MORGEN POST*

While reading your esteemed paper I was embarrassed to find that you had asked so many admirable masters of the dance to expend such profound thought on so insignificant a subject as my humble self. I feel that much literature has been wasted on so unworthy a theme. And I suggest that instead of asking them "Can Miss Duncan Dance?" you should have called their attention to a far more celebrated dancer—one who has been dancing in Berlin for years, long before Miss Duncan appeared: a natural dancer whose style (which Miss Duncan tries to follow) is also in direct opposition to today's school of ballet.

The dancer to whom I refer is the statue of the dancing Maenad in the Berlin Museum. Now will you kindly write again to the admirable masters and mistresses of the ballet and ask them, "Can the dancing Maenad dance?"

For the dancer of whom I speak has never tried to walk on the end of her toes. Neither has she spent time practicing leaps in the air to see how many times she could clap her heels together before coming down again. She wears neither corset nor tights, and her bare feet rest freely in her sandals.

I believe a prize has been offered to the sculptor who could replace the statue's broken arms in their original position. I suggest that it might be even more useful, for art today, to offer a prize to whoever could reproduce in life the heavenly poise of her body and the secret beauty of her movement. I suggest that your excellent paper might offer such a prize, and that the excellent ballet masters and mistresses could compete for it.

Perhaps, after years of trying, they will have learned something of human anatomy, something of the beauty, the purity, the intelligence of the movements of the human body. Breathlessly awaiting their learned reply, I remain

Sincerely yours,

Isadora Duncan

[1903]



Drawing of Isadora by Gordon Craig, 1905

MY IDEA OF DANCING

My idea of dancing is to leave my body free to the sunshine, to feel my sandaled feet on the earth, to be near and to love the olive trees of Greece. These are my present ideas of dancing. Two thousand years ago a people lived here who had perfect sympathy and comprehension of the beautiful in Nature, and this knowledge and sympathy were perfectly expressed in their own forms and movement.

Of all the thousands of figures of Greek sculpture, bas-reliefs and vases, there is not one but is in exquisite bodily proportion and harmony of movement.

This could not be possible unless the artists of that time were accustomed to see always about them beautiful moving human forms. I came to Greece to study these forms of ancient art, but above all I came to live in the land which produced these wonders, and when I say "to live" I mean to dance.

Coming at last to this adored place, I find that the glory and the greatness are more even than my dreams. I am still dazzled. My dance at present is to lift my hands to the sky, to feel the glorious sunshine and to thank the gods that I am here.

What I have danced before was only a prayer to this arriving. What shall I dance in the future? It is not good to have too many theories as to that.

[Statement on arrival in Greece, 1903]

THE DANCE AND ITS INSPIRATION: Written in the Form of an Old Greek Dialogue

"We should learn that the body of woman has through all the ages itself been the symbol of highest beauty." A silence fell upon us. I was looking toward some light clouds which had gathered in the east, and then it seemed to me in their midst I saw a young goatherd sitting surrounded by his goats and sheep of fleecy whiteness—and before him, rose-tipped of the sun, stood the Goddess of Cyprus, and she smiled as she reached her hand for the prize which she knew was hers. That exquisitely poised head, those shoulders gently sloping, those breasts firm and round, the ample waist with its free lines, curving to the hips, those limbs and knees and feet all one perfect whole, one instant and the vision was radiant in its loveliness and then vanished.

"To learn," I repeated, "that through all the ages woman's body has been the symbol of highest beauty."

"Will you explain to me what you mean?" you asked.

"Why," I replied, "is it not true that the first conception of beauty arose from the consciousness of proportion, line, the symmetry of the human form, for surely without this consciousness we could have had no understanding of the beauty surrounding us. First, knowledge of the line of sky- and earth-forms, and from this the conception of line and form of architecture, painting and sculpture. All art, does it not come originally from the first human consciousness of the nobility in the lines of the human body?"

"I feel this to be true," you replied, "for when we study a noble human body we can feel how from this form as first



idea all noble forms may follow as natural sequence."

Then I explained, "Would it not seem to you that when one's idea of the human form is a noble one, so one's conception of all the lines and forms would be ennobled thereby, and that, on the other hand, a weak or false conception of human form would lead to a weak and false conception of all line and form?"

"Well then," I continued, "have we not come about in a circle to my reason for saying that to gain a true conception of the highest beauty woman must first gain the knowledge of the true line and form of her own body?"

"But," you asked, "how is woman to learn the correct form of her body?"

"Think of all you have learned in your life," I replied, "and tell me which are the things you have learned best—those which you have read in books or those which you have lived, experienced?"

"Surely," you answer, "those which I have myself experienced.

"Shall a woman find this knowledge in the gymnasium, exercising her muscles, or in the museums regarding the perfection of sculptured form, or do you mean by the continual contemplation of beautiful objects and the reflection of them in her mind?"

"These are all ways," I replied, "but the chief thing is, she must use this beauty and her own body must become the living exponent of it—not by the thought or contemplation of beauty only, but by the living of it—and as form and movement are inseparable as all life is movement, I might say by that movement which is in accordance with the beautiful form will she learn, for in their gradual evolution form and movement are one."

"And how would you name that movement which is in accord with the most beautiful human form?"

"There is a name, the name of one of the oldest of the arts—honored as one of the nine Muses—but it is a name that has fallen in such disrepute in our day that it has come in our country to mean just the opposite of this definition. I would name it The Dance."

"Oh," you cried sympathetically, "so woman is to learn beauty of form and movement through the art of the dance?"

"Yes, and I believe here is a wonderful undiscovered inheritance for coming womanhood, the old dance which is to become the new. She shall be sculptor not in clay or marble but in her body, which she shall endeavor to bring to the highest state of plastic beauty; she shall be painter, but as part of a great picture she shall mingle in many groups of new changing light and color. In the movement of her body she shall find the secret of right proportion of line and curve and—the art of the dance she will hold as a great well-spring of new life for sculpture, painting and architecture."

"Then before woman can reach high things in the art of the dance, dancing must exist as an art for her to practice, which at the present day in our country it certainly does not—that is, according to your definition—for you were speaking of woman's form in its highest beauty, and of a movement which would be appropriate to that form, and you called the practicing of that movement as an art, the dance. But I suppose all art must have some fountainhead from which to draw. And the great fountainhead of movement, where are we to look for it?"

"You ask this," I replied, "as if woman were a thing apart

and separate from all other life, organic and inorganic, but she really is just a link in the chain and her movement must be one with the great movement which runs through the universe and, therefore, the fountainhead, as you express it, for the art of the dance will be the study of the movements of Nature."

A soft breeze came to us from over the sea, the sails slowly filled and took the wind and with the strengthening of the breeze the waters formed in long undulations; for some time our eyes followed them and rejoiced in their movements. Why is it that of all movement which gives us delight and satisfies the soul's sense of movement that of the waves and of the sea seem to me the greatest?

"When the breeze came some moments ago did we both not watch with joy the subsequent movement of the waters and did we not say the greatest movement is the wave movement? The answer would seem to be that this great wave movement runs through all Nature, for when we look over the waters to the long line of hills on the shore they seem also to have the great undulating wave movement of the sea, and all movements in nature seem to me to have as their ground plan the law of wave movement."

The ground, dry baked, heat cracked, the atmosphere of a peculiar hard brightness—overhead the changeless blue sky—through the branches one of the hills—the distance. We are walking together in the pleasant shade of the olive trees, pacing slowly, each filled with our own thoughts. In our walk we reached a gnarled old trunk that had long lain in its present position.

"Do you remember yesterday we were speaking of the movement in Nature and you said that the wave was the great foundation movement of Nature? This idea continually presents itself to me and I see waves rising through all

things. Sitting here and looking through the trees they seem also to be a pattern conforming to lines of waves. We might think of them from another standpoint, which is that all energy expresses itself through this wave movement, for does not sound travel in waves, and light also, and when we come to the movements of organic nature it would seem that all free natural movements conform to the law of wave movement. The flight of birds, for instance, or the bounding of animals. It is the alternate attraction and resistance of the law of gravity that creates this wave movement. Do you remember yesterday we were speaking of the dance and when I asked you where you would look for the source of this art, you answered Nature? Since then the idea will not leave me, and I see dance motifs in all things about me. Was this your idea for instance that there is a dance in all Nature?"

"Yes," I replied. "All true dance movements possible to the human body exist primarily in Nature."

"Do you use the phrase 'true dance' in opposition to what you would name the false dance? Is there such a thing as a false dance? And how do you explain this? If the true dance is appropriate to the most beautiful human form, then the false dance is the opposite of this definition: that is, a movement which conforms to a deformed human body. How can this be possible?"

"It sounds impossible," I replied, "but take your pencil and see if we can prove what I have said. First draw me the form of woman as it is in nature. And then draw me the form of woman in the modern corset and satin slippers used by our dancers. And now do you not see the movement that would conform to one figure would be perfectly impossible for the other? To the first, all the rhythmic

movements that run through water would be possible. They would find this form their natural medium for movement. To the second figure these movements would be impossible on account of the rhythm being broken in the latter and stopped at the extremities. We cannot for the second figure take movements from nature, but must, on the contrary, go according to set geometric figures based on straight lines, and that is exactly what the school of dance of our day has done. They have invented a movement which conforms admirably to the human figure of the second illustration, but which would be impossible to the figure as drawn in our first sketch. Therefore, it is only those movements which would be natural to the first figure that I would call the true dance."

"But what you call 'deformed' is by many people held to be an evolution in form, and the dance which would be appropriate to woman's natural form would be held by these people as primitive and uncultivated. Whereas the dance which is appropriate to the form much improved by corsets and shoes they would name as the dance appropriate to the culture of the present day. These people would be in no way of your opinion in your definition of what you name the true dance. How would you answer these people?"

"Man's culture is making use of nature's forces in channels harmonious to those forces and never going directly against nature. And all art must be intimately connected with nature at its roots—the painter, the poet, the sculptor, and dramatist, but holding it for us through their work according to their ability to observe in Nature. Nature always has been and must be the great source of all art."

TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF HUMANITY

It would be wrong to call my art Greek. People have supposed I copied the postures and gestures of Greek statues and Etruscan urns. But it seems to me my art is more universal. If I am Greek, it is the Hellenism of Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn." Where Greek art is national in a narrow sense, it is not mine. I aim to speak the language of humanity, not the dialect of a folk. For that reason, all kinds of artistically awakened people, irrespective of nationality, have found a kindred spirit in me. There was Ethelbert Nevin*, for instance. When he heard I was dancing to his music, he came to expostulate with me. "But see her dance first!" pleaded my mother. So I danced for him. It was an ancient Greek story. When I had finished, he rushed up to me and threw his arms round me. "My dear child," he exclaimed, "what you do in the dance is what I dreamed of when I wrote that music!"

It is here [*placing her hand on her breast*] that the center of inspiration lies, and [*placing her hand on her brow*] it is here. All kinds and conditions of people have imitated my work. But they seem to think it consists in certain stereotyped gestures. In reality, it has its virtue in certain soul-states which are, in a sense, incommunicable. The eurythmics of Jaques-Dalcroze** are an illustration of the error that is born of imitation unsupported by original thought. They are good up to a certain point, but they are not creative.

[San Francisco *Examiner*, 26 November 1917]

* Ethelbert Nevin (1862-1926). American composer.

** Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950). Swiss composer and teacher of "eurythmics," a once popular system of exercise largely derived from Isadora's dance.

It should arouse not horror, but reverence. That is a difference between vulgarity and art, for the artist places his whole being, body and soul and mind, on the throne of art.

When I dance, I use my body as a musician uses his instrument, as a painter uses his palette and brush, and as a poet uses the images of his mind. It has never dawned on me to swathe myself in hampering garments or to bind my limbs and drape my throat, for am I not striving to fuse soul and body in one unified image of beauty?

Many dancers on the stage today are vulgar because they conceal and do not reveal. They would be much less suggestive if they were nude. Yet they are allowed to perform, because they satisfy the Puritan instinct for concealed lust.

That is the disease that infects Boston Puritans. They want to satisfy their baseness without admitting it. They are afraid of truth. A nude body repels them. A suggestively clothed body delights them. They are afraid to call their moral infirmity by its right name.

I don't know why this Puritan vulgarity should be confined to Boston, but it seems to be. Other cities are not afflicted with a horror of beauty and a smirking taste for burlesque semi-exposures.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

This list includes only English-language books, pamphlets and special issues of journals. Titles marked with an asterisk (*) include letters written by Isadora.

BOOKS BY ISADORA DUNCAN

My Life. New York: Liveright, 1927. Reissued in many editions by other publishers.

The Art of the Dance. Edited with an introduction by Sheldon Cheney. New York: Theatre Arts, 1928, and 1977. Includes essays on Isadora by Margherita Duncan, Raymond Duncan, Max Eastman, Robert Edmond Jones, Eva LeGallienne, Shaemas O'Sheel and Mary Fanton Roberts.

BIOGRAPHIES AND STUDIES

Ballet Review 6, No. 4 (1977-1978). New York. Articles by Jill Silverman, André Levinson, Elizabeth Kendall, Debra Goldman, Julia Levien, Annabelle Gamson and Don Daniels.

Desti, Mary. *The Untold Story: The Life of Isadora Duncan, 1921-1927*. New York: Liveright, 1929.

Duncan, Irma. *Duncan Dancer: An Autobiography*. Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1966. (*)

_____. *The Technique of Isadora Duncan*. New York: Kamin, 1937; and New York: Dance Horizons, 1970.

_____ and Macdougall, Allan Ross. *Isadora Duncan's Russian Days, and Her Last Days in France*. New York: Covici-Friede, 1929. (*)

Dumesnil, Maurice. *An Amazing Journey: Isadora Duncan in South America*. New York: Ives Washburn, 1932.

Genthe, Arnold. *Isadora Duncan: Twenty-Four Studies*. Foreword by Max Eastman. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1929. An album of photographs.

- Hartley, Russell, and Solomon, Judith. *Isadora Duncan*. San Francisco: Archives for the Performing Arts, 1977. Brochure for a Centennial Exhibition.
- Macdonald, Nesta. "Isadora Reexamined: Lesser-Known Aspects of the Great Dancer's Life." Six-part series in *Dance Magazine* (July through December 1977). New York.
- Macdougall, Allan Ross. *Isadora: A Revolutionary in Art and Love*. New York: Thomas Nelson, 1960. (*)
- Magriel, Paul, ed. *Isadora Duncan*. New York: Holt, 1947; also in *Nijinsky, Pavlova, Duncan: Three Lives in Dance*. New York: DaCapo, 1977. Texts by Gordon Craig, Allan Ross Macdougall, John Martin and Carl Van Vechten.
- McVay, Gordon. *Isadora and Esenin*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980.
- Rather, Lois. *Lovely Isadora*. Oakland: The Rather Press, 1976.
- Roslavleva, Natalia. "The Isadora Duncan School in Moscow," *Dance Perspectives* 64 (Winter 1975). New York.
- Savinio, Alberto. *Isadora Duncan*. New York: Rizzoli, 1979.
- Schneider, Ilya Ilyich. *Isadora Duncan: The Russian Years*. New York: Harcourt, 1968.
- Seroff, Victor. *The Real Isadora*. New York: Dial Press, 1971. (*)
- Steegmuller, Francis, ed. *Your Isadora: The Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig Told Through Letters and Diaries*. New York: Random House, 1974. (*)
- Stokes, Sewell. *Isadora Duncan: An Intimate Portrait*. New York: Brentano's, 1928.
- Terry, Walter. "The Legacy of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis." *Dance Perspectives* 5 (Winter 1960). New York.
- _____. *Isadora Duncan: Her Life, Her Art, Her Legacy*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1968.
- Walkowitz, Abraham. *Isadora Duncan in Her Dances*. Girard, Haldeman-Julius, 1950. An album of drawings and watercolors, with texts by Maria-Theresa, Carl Van Vechten, Mary Fanton Roberts, Shaemas O'Sheel and Arnold Genthe.