

# Isadora Is Everywhere

BY ALICE BLOCH



I'm a Duncan dancer. Like so many young dancers, I fell in love with Isadora—the passionate, impulsive genius. But I accepted as gospel the belief that she had no technique or serious choreography that could be passed on to future generations.

Then, in the late '70s, at the height of postmodernism, I saw Annabelle Ganson perform Isadora's *Brahms Waltzes* and found myself weeping with delight. When I got the chance, I studied Duncan dance with Linda Tarnay and the late Ellen Foreman, and sought out Lori Belilove to teach me Duncan choreography for a play I was writing about Isadora. Recently, I have had the privilege of being coached by third-generation Duncan dancers Gemze de Lappe and the late Julia Levien. But not until I began writing my doctoral dissertation and teaching dance history did I discover that Duncan is present in more than just spirit. When I look at dance today, I see Isadora everywhere.

I had learned Isadora's *Chopin Prelude*, but when I finally saw Michel Fokine's version in *Les Sylphides* I was amazed. The first variation of his *Prelude* is nearly identical to Duncan's. The dancers travel the same spatial paths; both face upstage center and lift their arms heavenward. Bronislava Nijinska, in her *Early Memoirs*, wrote that Fokine had been "greatly impressed by the exhilarating freedom" of Duncan's dancing. Fokine choreographed *Chopiniana* (1907, a precursor to *Les Sylphides*) and *The Dying Swan*

soon after seeing Duncan. Isadora inspired Fokine to use technique expressively, and ballet was never the same.

Even Balanchine, who had seen Duncan in her later years and detested her, absorbed some of her movement style. He created his first great dances on the Fokine-trained Diaghilev dancers, who could move through space with Duncanesque abandon. In his *Serenade*, observe the attitude skips and the languid shape the ballerina takes when she drops to the ground, and you will see Duncan.

Duncan movement breaks through the balanced positions of classicism, sweeping through space with unbounded delight. It's obvious in the film *Ballets Russes* that the way those dancers travel is absolutely Duncan. Frederick Ashton saw Duncan dance and was trained by the Ballets Russes' Marie Rambert, who had been inspired by Duncan. His staging of *Les Sylphides* had more of a sense of freedom than those mounted by Vaganova-trained dancers.

What about modern dance? Teaching at a midwestern college in the 1990s, I found 1920s photos of tunic-clad coeds dancing on the lawn, the solar plexus lifted and arms outspread in quintessential Duncan gestures. Margaret H'Doubler, who started the dance program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1926, illustrated her first book with dancers in Duncan-style tunics. Ruth St. Denis saw Duncan dance. You can see Duncan's wave forms in her *Soaring*, choreographed with Doris Humphrey, and in the movements of the young Humphrey as she danced at Denishawn. Humphrey later based her technique on fall and recovery, the curving path of the fall, seen clearly in *Water Study*, echoing the arc of Duncan's wave. The Humphrey-Limón gesture of wrapping your arms around your torso and lifting them as if taking off a shirt follows the same path as Duncan's "Universe" gesture. Look at Duncan's *Furies* or *Revolutionary*—and you will see the

earthy ferocity and resistance of Graham technique.

In the 1930s and '40s Isadora disciple Irma Duncan's troupe was performing throughout the U.S. Anyone who loved dance saw them, including Agnes de Mille, who was a close friend of Martha Graham. Gemze de Lappe, one of de Mille's lead dancers, performed with Irma Duncan and Fokine. She also created roles for Robbins, and gave Duncan classes to Jack Cole's dancers when they needed to loosen up. Isadora on Broadway!

But what is there for today's dancers to connect to in Isadora Duncan's dance? Every dancer who, alone in a studio, seeks expressive and original movement in her own body is traveling Isadora's path. When I do Duncan's movement, it seems to rise from the earth. As her movement travels through the body, it awakens kinesthetic consciousness, yielding gestures that come from the heart. Isadora was one of the great divas, but her dancing was not self-expression. "When I have danced I have tried always to be the Chorus," she wrote. "I have never once danced a solo." Inseparable from her technique, Isadora's dance connects us to something larger than ourselves.

So why study Duncan dance? When we dance Isadora, we dance with the whole world. Our battered planet needs that.

*Alice Bloch teaches, researches, and performs Isadora Duncan dance in St. Louis.*



Lori Belilove