

ON ANGELIKA-IS/A/D'O/RA DUNCAN

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Crítica de Danza

Introduction

The Problem

Since I started to get to know more about the phenomenon Duncan, I realized that the different aspects of the subject have been dealt with in a wealth of writings: these include severe criticism for her dance, highly commendable reference to it, analyses of her theoretical view points, narratives about her death, detailed descriptions of her travels, gossip about her relationships with the men she had her two children with, that is Gordon Craig, theatre theoretician and Paris Singer, the millionaire heir. The existing material also covers dramatic recollections of her gradual «decline», the chronicle of her marriage to the poet Sergei Essenin who took his own life (or was he murdered by the Stalin militia?), and finally the step by step reconstruction of Duncan's course to her own sudden end, when her scarf got caught in the wheels of the fatal Bugatti in Nice, France in September 1927. Duncan's autobiography, written in a poetic style and riddled with inaccuracies, offers another source of information on the subject, difficult to penetrate. Most of the available information is mostly written with reverence and devotion. It maintains and preserves her personal myth, which was sealed by a death similar to that of her children who *drowned* in Paris (in Greek «pnigmós» stands for both «strangulation» and «drowning»).

Isadora Duncan's life was a cause of scandals in her time, intensified by her relentless promotion of her «new dance» (a product of specific ideological positioning), which she fervently supported in public with lectures, interviews and explanations, occasionally from the stage in the beginning of her career, a practice which also gained her fame and made her known to a much wider public. A famous artist and

a public person, Isadora further enhanced her myth, while the mystery around her was strengthened by the lack of filmography, her eccentric behaviour and intentional cultivation of the icon of the «goddess» of dance (benefiting from the hellenocentric strand of the retrospectivist movement and neo-pagan spirit of the beginning of the 20th century) and the personification in herself of an expert in anything to do with it. She managed her position through an ideology which took its basic premise from a variety of sources and assimilated a «discourse» which included such elementary notions as *Natural, Beautiful, Free*. Whatever though one's view-point is on Isadora Duncan, it seems impossible to regard her without feeling.

I personally felt that I was being «sacrilegious» each time I was looking her work, her acts, her theories with anything less than unconditional adoration. Everything about her «shrouds» the researcher in a maze of ambivalence with mixed emotions of admiration, respect, rejection and doubt. I put it to you that ambivalence stems from Isadora Duncan's image as a «Mother», that is «her who gave birth» to the subsequent changes in dance, who not withstanding a real and direct influence on those developments, pre-existed. The «maternal image» was also cultivated by the adoption of the five faithful «Isadorables» (a witty word play stemming from her name: Is-ador(e)a. Or should it be read as: Is-a-d' OR-a? «or» for «gold» in French) –female disciples– the schools Duncan launched in various countries, and her obstinate attachment to them and the education of children despite the frequent failure of her efforts. Following her own children's tragic demise in the Seine, in 1913, Duncan appropriated as her own the image of the mourning mother –Niove, yet another loan from the Greek mythology– who never recovered from her immeasurable loss.

Rapprochement-Strategies

In my effort to approach my subject and to overcome the omnipotence of the myth so that I could study it, I wondered –at first– who would Isadora be in our time (transcription of the Duncan phenomenon in to another era), where there are care centers for unmarried mothers, and also centers of support, and where the permissive attitudes of the show-biz would certainly find a way to positively promote her anticomformism. Take for instance, the case of the Pope whose infallibility was unable to protect him from the Irish singer Sinnead O' Connor, a few years ago,

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WITH HER CHILDREN, GEORGETTE AND PATRICK



WITH HER STUDENTS IN GARDEN, 1891



WITH HER STUDENTS, 1895

with a penchant for inflammatory speeches. Duncan's comments on life and Art would have been minutely examined and the responses to her might have been caustic and impolite. Her appropriation of «national symbols» such as chitons et.c. would certainly give rise to demonstrations and accusations of greed and gain –financial or otherwise– like the case of Kevin Kostner embroiled in rows with American Indians and of Sting, who showed interest in the natives of the Amazon. The precedent of the Benetton advertisements with the bold message presentation might lead advertising executives to use her benign eccentricity in a new campaign. (Diesel with its neo-kitsch pretenses appears though, to be the most suitable). However, Isadora lived, travelled and created in Europe and America at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. We must therefore take into account the «discourse» (meant as conditions and ideologies of an era) of another epoch, literal and metaphorical, the terms of which we have to discern and acknowledge in both art and society. This is a difficult endeavour because there have been immense advances/changes in knowledge, economy, politics, welfare state and habits, thus creating a totality of a different experience.

Transition

The United States at the time of Isadora's birth, have just come out of the Civil War and were changing socially and economically, and the words Democracy, Equality and Liberty once more were called upon to support patriotism. Isadora, was the «Daughter» of this quickly industrialized and changed country; she was almost a product of tough regimes of adjustment to a different reality, which she appeared to have denied, up to a point. This was a reality which destroyed her father financially. She found it «comfortable» to keep only the imaginary representation of a self-relying and autonomous nation and identify with it. (Here it seems that we have at work the mythology of: an immigrant finding an appropriate position in the vast, free, social solidarity enhancing, recently abominating slavery, «America». An immigrant being successfully assimilated in a *land* which relies on the strength of the welcome «newcomers», enabling them to establish a continuum of exchanged identities, lending their own to the country, and borrowing from «Americanism»). A nation which was strong (the myth turned into propaganda), due to its people who created the new era not only with much effort, but also with much enjoyment.

And who did she appeal to? Particularly selective in her choices, Isadora never turned her back to the «upper class», despite her on and off criticisms. She became very disillusioned when they refused –like a second lost father– to assist her in her

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ambition to launch her school of dance. It should be noticed that her dance, was only hosted in Opera Houses and venues such as the Carnegie Hall.



Biographical details

Angelika-Isadora Duncan was the daughter of Mary-Dora Gray and Joseph Duncan. She was born in San Francisco, in May 1877, and was of Irish descent. Her father became a banker, following a series of professions. Due to the national fiscal insecurity he lost his property and assets and was accused of embezzlement in October of the same year. The Duncans were finally divorced and the allegations against Joseph Duncan were withdrawn in 1882.

Whilst studying the phenomenon Duncan, one is faced with a significant «contradiction» which would go unrecognized if it didn't run through the whole of Isadora's oeuvre. Her name, Angelica-Isadora meant Angelica/ «Angel like» and Isadora/« Gift of Isis», a mixture of the Christian and the Pagan (synthesis of the «divine» in both traditions), of western rationalization and mysticism. Of the two names she chose the second, which in its abbreviated form resembled her mother's: «Dora». Both her names referred to the Beautiful and the Sublime, notions of the utmost importance for Isadora's life and art in the years to follow. Furthermore, «Duncan», her surname is also the name of the murdered king in the Shakesperean play «Macbeth». In this play, the tyrant is ultimately disposed and justice is done, though Duncan himself is *absent* (murdered). His children will disperse, like Isadora, but will return triumphant and avenging his fame. Isadora was also careful to cultivate the rumour of her noble (at least spiritually) ancestry, placing the beginning of her inspiration and acculturation in her father's home, where, according to her narrations, there were found many reproductions of ancient works of art as well as a reproduction of the «Primavera» by Sandro Boticelli.

At this point we must introduce another concept, a metaphor, which will lead to the next section. It is the term «fallen», which I will use to characterize two things: a) Isadora's social position following her father's financial ruin and b) the art, that is dance, which occupied her in her mature years, in the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. (Apart from ballet there was no other form of theatrical dance such as today's «contemporary dance». Ballet in Russia had ended in stalemate and in Europe, at the Opéra, they staged insignificant spectacles performed mostly by women who danced *en travesti* male roles too, because the dancer's profession had lost its luster. In America, it was an unfamiliar form of art, performed only by traveling European dance troupes). Isadora's «history» may be also described as a personal journey of ennoblement. Her quest was one of regaining her own, her art's and her family's respect. The easiest way was to start from the art, *her* art, that is dance. A «fallen» from grace art, for/from a «fallen» from grace family, and a «fallen» from grace medium, the body. Her choice of and almost «identification» (as Goddess of the Dance) with a «fallen» art form, was a happy co-incidence, as dan-

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ce at that epoch, just like Isadora herself, was in need of a «Renaissance». The association of her mother with the movement for bodily reform and the ideas of Genevieve Stebbins, provided her with a background which eased questioning of standard practices and definitions of the elements of what could be perceived as «dance» (ballet). At this point, the term «Hellenism» should also be introduced, meaning the fashion for Hellenic representations in art. (In Greece, in the late twenties and thirties «Hellenism» took on a different meaning, signaling the quest for «Hellenic identity», a movement which influenced art at that time and was re-inforced by nationalism). Nonetheless, which is the «Hellenism» Isadora refers to? She repeatedly stated that she does not want to set up again the ancient Greek dance, this would be impossible. What she seeks is the «legalisation» of her positions through an imaginary abstraction of the Renaissance ideals on life, art and the body. Sandro Boticelli's «Primavera», according to Isadora Duncan, is the source of her initial inspiration. What she finds in Quattrocento is the aspects (points of view) and the practice of a society which nurtured incomparable works of art and great artists at the peak of creativity. Isadora possibly aims, consciously or not, at becoming herself the «Primavera», the regenerative force behind the ascension of dance as an art form to «glory», that is to becoming «a must» for the taste and eyes of a refined audience. The Renaissance, as a metaphor, expressed better than anything else Isadora's ambition. As for those who later on carried-out Isadora's first «Hellenic» period à la lettre, her attachment to the Renaissance ideals could have given, if only more carefully examined, her positioning as an artist/subject in the aftermath of an orientalist, *philhellenic* era. A current, which provided her with the find necessary to set out *her* quest in the first years of balletic «deconstruction». Many fell for her «trompe-l'oeil Hellenism», especially her American «successors» in Greece (i.e. Eva Palmer), who made avid use of Isadora's theories of the early years –later abandoned by her– creating a tradition in the field of the dance, which condemned dance in Greece to either serve the performances of ancient drama, or the music hall.

La Primavera

What did Isadora see in this allegoric painting of Boticelli? She probably saw the synthesis of both her «two sides», like the ancient old representation of the hermaphrodite: of the «pagan» (free, tolerant, spiritual and yet sensual, the imaginary attributes of the New World and the Old World) and the «Christian» (restrained, rational, repenting, ascetic, the Catholic tradition of her Irish origins). The Dionysiac and the Apollonian, two terms which she borrowed from Nietzsche. In her life she chose the first, in her art she appeared to have sought the second. (Was the sen-



sual, suggestive «interference» of the wind in the right side of «the Primavera» isolated in her work? Was the idea of an unrestrained youth, of a female body ready to feel desire, as the metaphor of the Spring and the whole of Botticelli's composition suggests, banned from her art? Or was her loose chiton slightly at times uncovering her breasts was exactly a sign that her liberal manners in her life style were in harmony with the so much spoken for «spirituality» of her art? Did she try to downplay the meaning of the work in an almost puritan way, by choosing to depict «Flora» on stage, instead of «Virgin Mary/Venus», which sacrilegiously and provocatively brought forward a centuries old stereotype judging female behaviour? Isadora kept her choreography titled «Primavera» as part of her standard repertory, until 1909, a fact which shows the amount of importance it held for her; (she used to interpret this work, wearing the costume of «Flora»).

We have already referred to the practices Isadora Duncan followed in order to refute the family story and to also change her and her art's position in society. By and at large her efforts could be summed up to be falling into the following fields:

- she tried to ascribe an image of refinement and education to her father, contrary to the idea one tends to have for someone who has been accused of embezzlement and gone to prison (especially in terms of that era)

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- she tried to affiliate herself to the socially and economically upper class, have them act as «sponsors» (Maecenas)
- she was very careful not to become the «entertainer» of that class, but a source of style and inspiration, a sort of spiritual leader or to act as a formative force of their aesthetic criteria
- she cultivated the myth of the «goddess of the dance» through the atmosphere of her portraits, life, self-presentation, photographs, taking advantage of her concept on the present and future of the dance, her ideas on education et.c.

Her dance was an expression of this strength, and of this line of argument and mythologisation of «American culture», (a process which did not escape the attention of other modern dance pioneers such as Martha Graham), an American New Dance. In spite of her invocation to Terpsichore and the chitons she did not want to revive the ancient greek dance, as it is already mentioned. With rare intelligence and with the assistance of experience, she was very soon able to realize the impossibility (futility) of such visions, (*see*: «My Life», the incident with the Chorus boys taken from Athens to Central Europe to sing the choric parts of the tragedies, and the financial disaster which followed).

What about Greece then? Her first trip to this country, took place in the Autumn of 1903. It was during that first trip that a young and impulsive Isadora decided to start the building of a home –«similar to Agamemnon's palace»– to the then dry and remote hill of Kopanas, in Athens. Probably she and her brother Raymond (who got married to the sister of the Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos, the one who set out to revive the «Delphic Idea», his efforts culminating in two big feasts in 1927 and 1930 and ending up in bancrupsy) were aware of the findings of the German archaeologist Schliemann in Troy and Mycenae, which showed a glorious and rich past in the Hellenic region. (What she probably ignored, was that the curse of the Atreides family, would have forbidden any Greek from naming neither a house, nor a person after the members of the family used to set a cultural example and impose legal rules and celebrate them through theatrical practice: «never kill a blood relative», «never marry a blood relative». As a foreign traveler of that era, seeking the glorious past and the exotic, she could only find inspiration on the mythologisation of both the myth and of the then (in-)existing culture.»).

Isadora left Greece in less than a year, in Spring 1904. The Duncan family was unprepared to meet Greece of the beginning of the 20th century, which was not only geographically very different, but furthermore it was plagued by the accumulation of severe problems: poverty, immigration, clans of robbers, financial and administrative shortcomings. Obligatory education was only sanctioned in 1895, while the first Olympics in 1896 had only favoured the taking of temporary measures, which in long

term proved insufficient in facing the many problems of the –fairly– new state. Bancruptcy was declared in the early 1890s, which brought forward the imposing of the International Control of Finance, after the defeat in the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, which led to the deterioration of the already problematic economy.



Duncan did not stay for long during her first visit to Greece in 1903, although she returned for short periods of time three more times. At least she did not stay longer than she would usually stay in the different places she would visit, and this is quite impressive taken into account her emotional and ideological relationship to Greece, especially during those early years. Did she believe that the spiritual kinship she was seeking, inspired by her impulse and imagination relationship to Greece, would be immediately acknowledged in this country? Or that she would maybe find the remnants of a golden, happy era capable of surviving the adversities imposed by reality? Was Greece the lost «Paradise» of her family's early jaunty days? If yes, the primary disappointment imposed by reality on Isadora Duncan, must have been unbearable. Greece could –and did– only remain the metaphor of another place (locus), where the feet of the nymphs beat rhythmically the ground (as in «La Primavera»), a metaphor inextricably woven with both art and life, in the unique manner of Isadora Duncan.

Resumen

Isadora cultivó su propio mito; lo que dificulta en gran manera el estudio de su personalidad y de su obra. Es muy difícil ser imparcial, cuando se trata de Isadora. La única solución, propuesta por la autora de este artículo, es saltar sobre la omnipotencia del mito. Para ello, a través de atractivas ideas, en el texto se desentrañan una serie de metáforas que pueden ayudar a mejor entender a la madre (la maternidad es una de ellas) de la danza moderna: su propio nombre (Angélica=como un ángel, Isadora=el regalo de Isis) como síntesis de lo cristiano y lo pagano; su helenismo *trompe-l'oeil*, ligado a su peculiar idea de Grecia como paraíso perdido (totalmente apartada de la realidad de su tiempo), su lectura de la *Primavera* de Botticelli, etc.

Summary

Isadora cultivated her own myth; which makes rather hard to approach her personality and works. It is very difficult to be impartial when Isadora is concerned. The only solution, proposed in this article, is to jump over the omnipotence of that myth. For this purpose, through several attractive ideas, *a series of metaphors are puzzled out in the text to better understand the Modern Dance mother (maternity is one of them): her own name (Angelica=as an angel, Isadora=the Isis' gift) as a synthesis of Christian and Pagan elements; her trompe-l'oeil Hellenic, linked to her peculiar idea of Greece as a lost paradise (totally away from the reality of her time), her interpretation of Botticelli's Primavera, and so on.*