



When She Danced

by MARTIN SHERMAN
directed by NICK BOWLING

STUDY GUIDE

prepared by
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— STUDY GUIDE —

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The playwright: Martin Sherman

Martin Sherman is a playwright and screenwriter. The only child of Jewish Russian immigrant parents, he was raised in Camden, N.J. He was brought up steeped in the arts, and began acting when he was 12. His plays include *Absolutely! (Perhaps)* (an adaptation of Pirandello), *Aristo, Rose* (which debuted with Olympia Dukakis in the title role), *A Madhouse in Goa, Blackout, The Chain Play, Cracks, Fat Tuesday, Passing By, Rio Grande, Soaps, A Solitary Thing, Some Sunny Day* and *Things Went Badly in Westphalia* (an adaptation of *A Passage to India*). He also wrote the book for *The Boy from Oz*. He regularly has been nominated for the Olivier Award, Britain's version of the Tony Award. His landmark play *Bent*, depicts the Nazi persecution of homosexuals and earned him a Tony nomination in 1980; it later was adapted into a film. Sherman's film scripts include *The Summer House, Indian Summer, Callas Forever, The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* and, most recently, *Mrs. Henderson Presents*. Sherman has lived in London, England, since 1980.

Production History

When She Danced was first performed in 1990 at Playwright's Horizon in New York City with Elizabeth Ashley as Isadora. In 1991, it was produced at The Globe Theatre in London with Vanessa Redgrave as Isadora.

Isadora Duncan: Iconoclast

"How can we write the truth about ourselves? Do we even know it? There is the vision our friends have of us; the vision we have of ourselves, and the vision our lover has of us. Also the vision our enemies have us—and all these visions are different. ... So, if at each point of view others see in us a different person how are we to find in ourselves yet another personality of whom to write this book? Is it to be the Chaste Madonna, or the Messalina, or the Magdalen or the Blue Stocking? Where can I find the woman of all these adventures?"

— Isadora Duncan

Isadora Duncan began her autobiography, *My Life*, with an introduction bemoaning the hopelessness of writing about one's life, and the autobiography is only a partial picture of her life. She is not always the most accurate recorder of her life and has, as might be expected, a flair for the dramatic in how she describes that life. A biography of Duncan by her friend Mary Desti considered notoriously unreliable by historians. Her Russian friend and biographer, Schneider, had a vested interest in how Duncan's years in Russia were portrayed. Even press stories about Duncan during her life were wildly divergent in their praise and criticism of her life and work.

In part, deciphering Duncan's life is a study in contrasts. She was an iconoclast, breaking with tradition in dance and her personal life. She could praise certain ballet dancers, but hated the ballet; she supported revolutions and workers' rights, but praised the quality of British servants; she lectured others on her theories of dance while still a teenager; she made money and lost it just as quickly; and she experienced great fame and deep sorrow.

Angela Isadora Duncan was born May 26, 1877, in San Francisco, the last of four children of John Charles and Mary Dora Duncan. Her father left the family before Duncan was born, and her mother divorced him shortly after her birth. The "Clan Duncan," as Isadora would call her family, was very poor: Her mother taught piano lessons to earn a living for Isadora, her two brothers and sister. While still a child, Duncan gave dance lessons to neighborhood children and was a surprising success.

The family led a peripatetic life. In 1896, Duncan and her mother traveled to Chicago, hoping to improve Isadora's career options. A year later they were joined by her siblings after moving to New York City. In New York, Duncan appeared in some pantomimes of impresario Augustin Daly but spoke contemptuously of the roles and movement style. She had some success performing her style of dance at society parties, but had mixed feelings about these performances. In 1899, "Clan Duncan" left for London, traveling by cattle boat to save money. Duncan, after spending her days at the British Museum looking at Greek sculpture, danced for society gatherings in the evenings. Although she danced one of the fairy parts in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she did not attain the success she hoped for. In 1900, the family moved on to Paris, where Duncan soon met artists, literary figures and sculptors, including Pierre Auguste Rodin.

In 1902, she received her first solo engagement and went to dance in Budapest, Hungary, where she met her first lover, an actor named Oscar Beregi. Duncan did not want to quit dancing and the relationship ended, and she left to tour Germany. Buoyed by her success, Duncan and her family traveled to Italy and Greece, where they planned to build a temple. They purchased a piece of property before discovering there was no water on the land. Despite the often ill-conceived plans that seemed to deplete her bank account, Duncan was well-received in Europe and her fame was growing. In 1904, Richard Wagner's widow and son asked Duncan to perform, and she established a school of dance in Grunewald, Germany.

Also in 1904 Duncan met Edward Gordon Craig, a former actor who was now a set designer. She would have her first child with Craig: Deirdre, born Sept. 24, 1905.

Throughout her life, Duncan would struggle to reconcile her artistic career with her passionate love affairs. She and Craig had similar artistic goals: Much as she was trying to find the essential form of dance, he wanted to design simple stages, doing away with overwrought sets. However, their competing careers ultimately would drive them apart.

In 1909, Duncan perhaps found the most security with Paris Singer, whom she called Lohengrin, after the hero of the eponymous Wagner opera. Heir to the Singer sewing-machine fortune, he could provide financial support for her and her school. They had a son, Patrick, born May 1, 1910. Duncan's happiness was short-lived, though. On April 19, 1913, Deirdre, Patrick and their nurse, Annie Sim, drowned when the driver of their car failed to set the brake and the car rolled into the Seine River. Duncan's generosity was on display during her mourning. She refused to have the chauffeur, Morverand prosecuted for "culpable homicide," writing: "I wish to assure you that I do not bear him ill will. ... He is a father, and I need to know that he has been released to his family before I can regain some measure of calm." Duncan's grief was overwhelming and contributed to the unraveling of her relationship with Singer.

As usual, Duncan focused on her work to bring her through her difficulties. But she also claimed she had an affair with an Italian sculptor, Romano Romanelli, and they had a son, who died shortly after birth.

Duncan was an iconoclast in her personal life as well as in dance. In her autobiography, she noted she was profoundly influenced by inequality in the treatment of women: "I was deeply impressed by the injustice of this state of things for women. ... I decided, then and there, that I would live to fight against marriage and for the emancipation of women and for the right for every woman to have a child or children as it pleased her, and uphold her right and her virtue."

By her account, Duncan had children with three men and liaisons with numerous others. She did not marry until May 2, 1922, when she and the Russian poet Sergei Esenin planned her tour of Europe and the United States.

In addition to her numerous liaisons with men, Duncan also knew many lesbians and is reported to have had affairs with some of them. Two were American poet and playwright Mercedes De Acosta, whom she called her Archangel and Italian actress Eleanora Duse, who took her in after the death of her children.

Isadora Duncan and Sergei Esenin

"Yes, I am a revolutionist. All true artists are revolutionists; but that does not necessarily mean I am a Bolshevist. I am not, neither is my husband." —Isadora Duncan, in the Feb. 4, 1923, *New York Tribune*

In 1921, Isadora Duncan accepted an invitation to start a school of dance in Moscow, Russia. It was there she met Sergei Esenin, the so-called "peasant poet." Esenin, who was at the height of his fame in Russia, was 25. Duncan, now known world-wide for her dancing, was 42. The accounts they give of their meeting are highly dramatized. Duncan claimed to have met Esenin in a dream so that when they met in person they already were in love. Ilya Ilyich Schneider, who would become the director of Duncan's Russian school, recounted that they met at a party

at the home of artist Georgi Yakulov: Esenin entered, shouting, "Where is this Duncan?" and then spent the evening lying down with his head in Duncan's lap. Esenin accompanied her home that night, and shortly thereafter they began living together. In spite of the fact that Duncan knew little Russian and Esenin knew no French or English, they communicated by gestures and shared a sort of revolutionary idealism and artistic sympathy. While she did not understand his poems, Duncan called them musical and repeatedly proclaimed him a genius.

Duncan planned what would become an ill-fated tour of Europe and America in 1922-1923 to raise funds for her Russian school. The couple married so Esenin could get visas more easily. However, fears they might be Bolsheviks would lead to visa problems numerous times during their travels.

By the time they reached the United States, the relationship was in trouble. Duncan was jealous if Esenin showed interest in other women; he was envious of her greater fame. Both were drinking heavily. Tellingly, Esenin's Russian friends blamed Duncan for his drinking, while Duncan's friends blamed Esenin for her increased alcohol consumption. They were detained at Ellis Island because of growing national fears about the spread of Bolshevism.

Duncan's first performances in New York were successful, but the pair did not allay any U.S. fears about their politics with their behavior. They arrived dressed in traditional Russian clothes and Duncan often danced in a red tunic and lectured from the stage about the need for friendship between Russia and America. In Boston, she caused a scandal when she either accidentally or deliberately bared her breast in one of her dances; her sheer tunics already had set morally conservative Americans on edge. Prohibition was in force, but they regularly drank bootlegged liquor.

In addition, an increasingly unhappy Esenin took to making public scenes and destroying hotel rooms. Cities cancelled performances, and the press became vicious. The press and Duncan's manager, Sol Hurok, also claimed Esenin beat Duncan, a claim she vigorously refuted in letters to the newspapers.

Esenin and Duncan left America Feb. 3, 1923, on the aptly named ocean liner George Washington, vowing they never would return. When they arrived in France Feb. 14, Duncan unleashed a torrent of anger to the French press about the narrow mindedness of Americans and blamed Esenin's declining health and poor behavior on bootlegged alcohol. In response, the U.S. government claimed Duncan had revoked her citizenship when she married Esenin and would have to appeal to enter the country again.

In France, though, Esenin's drinking and erratic behavior continued. He destroyed the furniture in their room at the Hôtel de Crillon and was arrested. Duncan obtained his release from the police with the promise that her maid, Jeanne, would escort him to Berlin and he would not return to France. The couple's breach seemed final, with

Esenin telling the Berlin press about his happiness in being free of Duncan. But by April the pair had reconciled and traveled in France and Germany, leaving behind a string of bills and angry hotels, as Esenin continued to destroy furniture.

They returned to Moscow in August. Esenin continued to drink and also would disappear for days at a time. Duncan took to her bed with an unspecified illness. With the help of Irma Duncan, a former pupil who had taken Duncan's last name, she left Moscow for a spa in Kislovodsk to recuperate. Esenin began living with Galina Benislavskaya, who would commit suicide on his grave, and, at the same time, began seeing and writing poems to actress Augusta Miklashevskaya. The hurtful information was imparted to Duncan by letters and telegrams that may have been from Esenin using Benislavskaya's name. They may have met a few more times but the relationship was over, though they never formally divorced.

Isadora Duncan's remaining years and death

In September 1924, Isadora Duncan left Russia to dance in Berlin, but she was plagued by continued rumors about her Bolshevism and alcohol problems.

When she learned of Sergei Esenin's suicide on Dec. 27, 1925, she wrote letters to Mary Desti and Irma Duncan that she was shocked by his death but that she already had cried so many tears over him she had none left. Yet she wrote publicly of her sorrow and privately suggested she would follow him by walking into the sea.

In 1925, she was finally able to obtain a visa and return to France; she divided her time between Paris and Nice. As usual, she had very little money and had to rely on friends. In letters to Irma she blamed her lack of success on political prejudice because of her time in Russia. In the hope of reviving her bank account, she started writing her memoir. Though she talked of starting another school in Paris, it never became a reality.

Duncan had one more love affair, with the young Russian pianist, Victor "Vida" Seroff. After a fight, she attempted to walk into the ocean, but it is unclear if this was a serious suicide attempt. A number of accounts report that Duncan was drinking and still deeply affected by the deaths of her children.

The stories surrounding Duncan's death have been widely misrepresented and mythologized. While in Nice, Duncan became enamored of a young driver and airplane pilot, Benoît Falchetto. She began calling him "Bugatti" after his car, which many believe was actually an Amilcar Grand Sport. On Sept. 14, 1927, Falchetto came to fetch Duncan for a drive. She wore a red batik shawl of crêpe de chine, which had been designed for her by Desti. It was two yards long and five feet wide with eighteen-inch fringe. As they drove off, she wrapped the shawl around her neck but didn't notice that it was hanging over the side of the car. Its fringe got caught in the car's rear left open-spoked wheel, breaking her neck almost instantly. Though her death was likely immediate, the force of the scarf in the wheel pulled

Duncan's body from the car and dragged it the street. The horrified Falchetto cried that he had killed the Madonna. Desti, in her biography, reported that Duncan's last words as she got in the car were, "Adieu, mes amis, je vais à la gloire," or "Goodbye, my friends, I go to glory." Later, though, Desti claimed she had made it up to make Duncan look better, and what she really said was, "Adieu, mes amis, je vais à l'amour," or "Goodbye, my friends, I go to love." For Duncan, either quotation would be appropriate.

Sergei Esenin: Angel, devil

"Of course, Esenin was partly in love with Isadora and partly with her fame, but he was as much in love with her as he was generally capable of loving." —Sergei Gorodetsky, Russian poet and a friend of Esenin

"Esenin treated his own life like a fairytale. He was Ivan the Prince who flew over the ocean on a gray wolf to catch the Firebird, Isadora Duncan, by the tail. His verse too he wrote with the help of fairy tale magic, sometimes arranging words like cards in a game of patience and sometimes writing them out with his heart's blood."

— Boris Pasternak, Russian author

Sergei "Seryozha" Alexandrovich Esenin was born on October 3, 1895, in Konstantinovo, in the province of Ryazan in rural central Russia. Esenin was raised by his maternal grandparents in rural central Russia, where he had a reputation as a mischievous boy who was always ready for a fight and also developed a strong love for nature. His longing for the disappearing agrarian life of his childhood — which he would abandon in favor of living in cities — would figure strongly in his future poetry.

In July 1912, rather than enter a teacher-training program, he moved to Moscow. In 1915, at age 19, he moved to Petersburg where presented himself to prominent poets. He read his poems in the cabarets with other poets, including Blok, Gorodetsky Ivenev and, especially, Nikolai Klyuev (who was also called a "peasant poet" because of his background). Esenin's reputation grew — both for his poetic talent and his youth, good looks and curly golden hair. He first exploited his rural upbringing as the "peasant poet," but soon abandoned peasant dress for fine suits. In 1919, Esenin and some of his fellow poets wrote a manifesto and called themselves the Imaginists or Imagists. They stressed the primacy of image, and their poetry often relied on coarse or offensive imagery to shock the public. Esenin would ultimately break from the group, which included Ryurik Ivnev, Anatoly Mariengof and Vadim Shershenevich. After being the "peasant poet," he became the "hooligan" poet — [in Russia](#), "hooliganism" refers to any revolt against authority — and was known for crass public stunts like painting on the side of a convent.

Esenin was not particularly kind to the women in his life. In 1913, he abandoned, the woman with whom he was living, Anna Izryadnova and their son. In 1917, he married and had two children (Tatyana and Konstantin) with actress Zinaida Raikh (who later married the noted director Vsevolod Meyerhold), but his fears about her infidelity led to a divorce in 1921. In addition to affairs before and after his marriage to Isadora Duncan in 1922, he would marry a third time — without divorcing Duncan. In 1925, he married Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya, a granddaughter of writer Leo Tolstoy.

Esenin was also admired by some of the homosexual poets of his group. Though his attitudes to homosexuality were conflicted, he seems to have enjoyed the attention. Because of his later penchant for fine clothes, cologne and face powder, some recent critics have raised questions about his sexual preferences, although there seems to be no definitive evidence of any homosexual relationships.

Sergei Esenin's death

Alcohol abuse contributed to Sergei Esenin's depression and suicidal tendencies. On Dec. 27, 1925, Esenin cut himself and, using the Etruscan vase Duncan gave him at their wedding as an inkwell, wrote a suicide poem in his blood. He then tied a rope around a central heating pipe in his hotel room and hanged himself. He was 30 years old. Several accounts of his death said he also wrote a will in blood, in which he allegedly — and with a flair for the dramatic and the macabre — gave his heart to his first wife Zinaida, his blood to Duncan and his brain to his third wife Sofia.

Sergei Esenin's suicide poem

*Goodbye, my dear, goodbye,
Goodbye. You are in my heart.
We'll meet again, I promise,
Though now we have to part.*

*Goodbye, my dear, don't say a word.
Don't cry. And don't be blue.
In this life, death is nothing new,
But living's nothing newer.*

(Translation by Paul Schmidt)

Esenin's suicide took place amid a wave of suicides amongst his fellow poets, many of who were depressed and disappointed in the policies of the government established by the 1917 Revolution. Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote a poem about Esenin's death and soon wrote his own suicide poem. Marina Tsvetaeva addressed a poem to the dead Esenin and Mayakovsky. Tsvetaeva's suicide later would be memorialized by Bella Akmadulina in yet another poem.

Sergei Esenin's "The Song About a Dog"

*Once in a corn-lined cowshed,
Where the bast-mats gleam like gold,
A bitch bore a litter of puppies,
Seven ginger-haired pups all told.*

*Till evening came she caressed them,
Smoothing their coats with her tongue,
And the snow beneath her stomach
All melted because she was warm.*

*But when the hens that evening
Were roosting above the track,
Out strode her lowering master,
And bundled all seven in a sack.*

*Close behind him she ran through snowdrifts,
Only just with the strength to run. . .
And she saw how the unfrozen water
Lightly trembled so long, ah so long.*

*She was plodding heavily homewards,
Licking the sweat from her sides,
When the moon rose over the hut-tops,
And it seemed like a pup to her eyes.*

*Up at the blue heavens
She stared, and whimpered loud,
But softly the moon glided
And vanished behind the clouds.*

*And sad, as when people mock her,
And throw her not food, but a stone,
In the still of the night the dog's eyes
Fell as bright as golden stars in the snow.*

(1919; translation by Gordon McVay)

Isadora Duncan: Dance icon and iconoclast

“Toe walking deforms the feet; corsets deform the body; nothing is left to be deformed but the brain and there is not much of this in the women who dance modern dances.” — Isadora Duncan

“For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus. ... I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born, the mirror of vision for the creations of the dance — it was from this discovery that was born the theory on which I founded my school.”

— Isadora Duncan

Our concept of dance has been so influenced by Isadora Duncan that it can be difficult to trace how revolutionary her influence on dance was. Yet, about the same time, other artists also were beginning to practice new movement forms. Before Duncan, there was Francois Delsarte, and, among her contemporaries, there were Ruth St. Denis, who was interested in “orientalism,” Ted Shawn, and Loie Fuller and the Fuller Girls, with whom Duncan briefly danced. Duncan, though, embodied the zeitgeist of the changing dance forms and eclipsed her contemporaries with the force of her originality and presence.

In addition, Duncan rejected the elaborate costumes, tights and constrictive pointe shoes of ballet in favor of loose tunics and sandals or bare feet. Her costumes were somewhat scandalous at the time: They revealed her bare legs and her body often could be seen through the filmy layers of her tunics.

Duncan also worked to derive a more natural form of movement. Some claimed she was attempting to recreate classical Greek dance, though she refuted it. Instead, she felt she was on the cusp of creating a new type of dance, one that would spring naturally from the dancer.

Through movement, Duncan interpreted music that had not necessarily been composed for dance. Many early critics considered this an offense to the composers; but for all of her detractors, she had many supporters. Her willingness to break perceived rules thus freed the dancers who followed her.

Many dancers who saw Duncan were influenced by her work and brought her concepts into their dance forms. Michel Fokine, the Russian ballet dancer and choreographer, began choreographing to music not originally written for dance; these works were emotional and expressive. Peter Lieven, a Russian prince and dance patron, insisted that the changes in ballet wrought by Sergei Diaghilev in his Ballet Russes were due to Duncan’s influence.

Isadora Duncan's schools and legacy

"I had three great masters, the three great precursors of dance in our century — Beethoven, Nietzsche and Wagner." — Isadora Duncan

The tension between Isadora Duncan's desire to create a unique, deeply personal form of dance with her various attempts at schools of dance are intriguing. They represent the economic imperative of having dance schools, her desire to leave something behind her (especially after the deaths of her children), and, in some ways, the difficulty of systematizing her type of dance because it was so personal.

Duncan had an uneasy relationship with school. In her autobiography, she reports arguing with a teacher over the existence of Santa Claus: She had announced to the class that there was no Santa Claus. She credited her upbringing, relatively free from the strictures of school, for keeping her mind open enough to discover her new dance form. Later, she told a famous ballet instructor that walking on her toes was "ugly and against nature" and she did not return after the third class.

Duncan started her first dance school when she was still a child: She collected neighborhood children and began teaching them to wave their arms. By the time she was 15, she and her sister, Elizabeth, were listed as dance instructors in the Oakland, Calif., city directory. The sisters taught popular dances to girls in California out of economic necessity, to help support the family. After moving to New York City, Duncan and her sister again would teach popular dance classes to make ends meet.

When Duncan had perfected her type of movement, she sought to start a school to teach children her style of dance. In 1904, she established a school of dance in Grunewald, Germany; the students were from poor families and she paid all the costs of their education. She would close the Grunewald school in 1908. Her senior pupils from the Grunewald school, Anna, Theresa, Irma, Lisa, Gretel and Erika, would take her last name and tour as the "Isadorables."

In 1912, after the deaths of her children, a dance school took on a new importance for Duncan. Paris Singer gave her the Hôtel Paillard, a mansion originally built for Madame de Pompadour he had purchased in Paris' Bellevue area, as a new home and school for her students on a much grander scale than anything she had done at her Neuilly studio. She had the Thirtieth Psalm inscribed on the school programs in honor of her children: "Thou has turned for me my mourning into dancing." Duncan insisted that none of the students be younger than six years old, so she would not be reminded of her children. The Isadorables taught at the Bellevue school.

Duncan assumed all financial costs for her pupils and their upkeep at the Grunewald and Bellevue schools. These were not schools of financial necessity, as was the case with the schools she and her sister ran, but a reflection of her idealistic belief in the transformative power of dance in education and her desire to help the

less fortunate. Duncan's miscarriage of her third child and the start of World War I would mean an end to her school: She gave it to the Dames de France, which worked as an arm of the Red Cross for a military hospital and the German-born Isadorables and Bellevue students were sent to the United States.

In 1921, at the invitation of A.V. Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, Duncan traveled to Russia to begin a dance school for children in Moscow. Starting the school was fraught with struggle. It took time for the government to find a suitable building to house it, and then Duncan had to select the students. Again, they had to come from poor families and were to be housed and fed at the school. However, because of the financial constraints, they could not afford to keep all the students at the school and Duncan was forced to choose which to send home. The hope of providing more funds for the school led to Duncan's ill-fated U.S. tour in 1922. Ilya Ilyich Schneider, who became the school's director, insisted the deprivations endured by the students were never as bad as rumored in accounts by Mary Desti and others.

Irma Duncan, an Isadorable and one of Duncan's most loyal followers, led the dance education in the Moscow school and would continue there after Duncan returned to France.

Today, second-, third- and fourth-generation Duncan students are dedicated to keeping her choreography and philosophy of dance alive.

Kindred spirits: Isadora Duncan and other artists

"When the intermission came, I, a newly baptized disciple of the great artist, ran to the footlights to applaud." — Constantin Stanislavsky

"Isadora Duncan is the greatest woman I have ever known. ... Sometimes I think she is the greatest woman the world has ever known. Elle est Suprême!" — Pierre Auguste Rodin

Isadora Duncan hoped to restore dance to its rightful place in the pantheon of arts. Her relationship with numerous musicians, artists, sculptors and designers was only natural to her because of her shared understanding of their roles as artists. Each time she had a love relationship she called it a "cerebrale," using the French to describe the intellectual or artistic sympathy she felt with her lovers. Her known and possible lovers included actor Oscar Beregi; avant-garde set designer Edward Gordon Craig, with whom she shared a passion to simplify and return to core artistic principals; Italian actress Eleanora Duse; and poet and playwright Mercedes de Acosta. She also had friends in the theater: She remained friendly with British actress Ellen Terry, Gordon Craig's mother, and was in awe on the single occasion she met Sarah Bernhardt. Duncan also had a passionate friendship with

theater innovator Constantin Stanislavsky, who wanted to do for theater what Duncan had done for dance. Duncan also was also a friend of writer and theater experimenter Jean Cocteau, who traveled with her from time to time.

“I have taken as a guide the rhythms of the great Masters; not because I thought I could express the beauty of their works, but because in surrendering my body unresistingly to their rhythms I have hoped to recover the natural cadences of human movements which have been lost for centuries.”— Isadora Duncan

It is only natural that Duncan would have a deep bond with musicians. She had affairs with pianists Walter Rummel and Victor Seroff. Composer Ethelbert Nevin was angered when he heard Duncan was dancing to his music, but when he saw her dance he suggested they perform a concert together. Cosima Wagner, widow of the composer Richard Wagner, was so impressed with Duncan she asked her to dance in her husband’s opera *Tannhauser*.

Duncan also was the subject of numerous visual artists. Her dancing was captured by Pierre Auguste Rodin, José Clará, Abraham Walkowitz, André Donoyer de Segonzac, Jules Grandjouan, Mikhail Dobrov, Léon Bakst and Fritz August Von Kaulbach. Arnold Genthe and Edward Steichen photographed her. Additionally, she was immortalized in the Théâtre des Champs Élysées. Painter Maurice Denis used her image in murals and sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle used her in his design of the theater’s exterior bas-relief. It is through these representations we learn so much about Duncan’s art.

Duncan once said: “The relation of the new school of dance to sculpture is a very close one.” In return, the French sculptor Rodin said of her dance: “She has achieved in sculpture feeling without effort.” Bourdelle said: “To me it seemed that there, through her, was animated an ineffable frieze wherein divine frescoes slowly became human realities.”

Isadora Duncan and notables from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Lost Generation

Isadora Duncan spanned an eventful time period in history and art, and she served as a bridge. When she arrived in London she was just in time to become the darling of the remaining Pre-Raphaelites. Through the artist Charles Hallé she met Alma-Tadema, George F. Watts and William Holman Hunt. She had her growing love of art and nature and her romantic themes in common with the Pre-Raphaelites, who were shocked by the new Impressionist movement coming out of France. She also would perform for writers Henry James and Andrew Lang and for Queen Victoria’s grandnieces. In some way, with her reverence for antiquity and nature, Duncan always would have more in common with this older generation of artists.

Yet, though Duncan was born earlier than some of her fellow expatriates, she would travel in the same circles as many American artists, writers and celebrities. In fact, Gertrude Stein, who coined the phrase, “the Lost Generation” to describe the Americans who fled to Europe in the wake of World War I, was a neighbor of the Duncans in San Francisco and would see them throughout her time in France.

Because of Duncan’s inability to find approbation for her work or understanding for her unconventional lifestyle, she would find Europe more accepting, as did many of her fellow American artists. At this point Duncan was in her 40s, although she liked to be surrounded by youth. While her lifestyle found her in the society of some of the Lost Generation, artistically she did not embrace jazz music or the more overt stage sexuality of a younger dancer, Josephine Baker, who was the toast of Paris in the late 1920s.

Writer Edith Wharton, who saw Duncan dance in Paris, called the performance the dance she “had always dreamed of, a flowing of movement into movement, an endless interweaving of motion and music, satisfying every sense as a flower does, or a phrase of Mozart’s.”

Dorothy Parker praised Duncan even while criticizing her writing style in her review of *My Life*: “Here was a great woman; a magnificent, generous, gallant, reckless, fated fool of a woman. There was never a place for her in the ranks of the terrible, slow army of the cautious. She ran ahead, where there were no paths. She was no writer, God knows. Her book is badly written, abominably written.” (*New Yorker Book Review*, Jan. 26, 1928)

When F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald saw her in Nice, F. Scott knelt at the feet of the 46-year-old Duncan. She called him her “centurion.” His flirting with Duncan and her apparent invitation to her hotel room piqued Zelda, who threw herself down a stairwell in protest of his behavior, cutting short his conversation with Duncan.

Other players: Historical and dramatized

Martin Sherman’s play is based on real people and certain incidents in the life of Isadora Duncan, but he also created certain characters that function as composites of various people in her life:

Mary Desti was a real friend of Duncan. Desti would gain notoriety from her marriage to British occultist Aleister Crowley. Her son by an earlier marriage was filmmaker Preston Sturges.

Jeanne was the name of Duncan’s longtime French maid. She is mentioned in several biographies as accompanying Duncan everywhere. In addition, she often looked after Sergei Esenin when he was drunk.

Belzer is likely based on the recollections of Lola Kinel, a 23-year old Polish woman who was hired as an interpreter for Duncan and Esenin. She remained in their employ only about two months: Esenin grew mistrustful of her after she refused to send telegrams to Russia that he wrote while drunk.

Alexandros may have been based on a number of pianists with whom Duncan had an artistic affinity, such as Russian pianist Victor “Vida” Seroff, her lover after Esenin. She also had an affair with pianist Walter Rummel. She was fond of her fellow artists and beautiful young men, which is reflected in Alexandros’ character.

The characters of Luciano and Christine also seem to be fictionalizations, though Duncan did seek help in starting schools in many countries and she did have students and imitators, some of whom assumed her surname.

When Isadora danced: Praise and criticism

Live performance, by definition, is ephemeral, an unrepeatable moment shared by an audience and the performer. Because of the era in which Isadora Duncan lived, there are written accounts, photographs and illustrations, but no detailed films of her dancing. One must piece together what her work meant through the images and accounts of others. It is inevitable that such a groundbreaking performer should attract praise and criticism for the same performance, sometimes within the same newspaper.

“Poetry to her is not merely the printed page. She dances it.”

— Anonymous critic in *Director*, 1898

“Miss Duncan is undoubtedly graceful and her dancing has become quite a fad, but I must confess that to see her once is enough. ... I cannot see how the dances ‘interpret’ as is claimed the exquisite quatrains of Fitzgerald’s translation of the Rubaiyat.”

— Critic in *Town Topics*, September 15, 1898

“The famous American barefoot dancer, Isadora Duncan performed last night ... and was a success with her dance idylls in which she transforms music into plastic art and at the same time makes alive the figures from old paintings. ... This ‘dancer of the future’ ... is nude or almost nude under a light robe.”

— Notice in the Danish paper *Politiken*, April 24, 1906

“Miss Duncan’s dancing is really art. Fine, graceful, strong in character and really original art. She had a right to declare war on the wide ballet skirts and colored tights.”

— Reviewer C.K. in *Politiken*, April 24, 1906

“...her costume was tucked up to the knees. All the seats were creaking from the effort everyone made not to miss any detail. In this way, Isadora Duncan conquered the many. ... But the enthusiasm was not total until she was waltzing to the tune of An den schönen blauen Donau, and wearing a short red blouse which exposed her leg from a little above the knee. ... If, later she had worn the same costume for the Offenbach dance, she might have been cheered.”

— A critic signed Moustache in *Politiken*, April 24, 1906

“Actually, she didn’t do one step that was difficult or complicated. Anyone of any age could duplicate what she did but not how she did it. When she raised her arms, it was an incredible experience. She could also stand still — and often did — but it was an alive stillness and it was dancing.” — British choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton

“I saw her in Russia in 1920 or ’21. I thought she was awful. I don’t understand it when people say she was a great dancer. To me it was absolutely unbelievable — a drunken fat woman who for hours was rolling around like a pig. ... I don’t believe she ever danced well. She was probably a nice juicy girl when she was young.”

— Russian-born choreographer George Balanchine in *Horizon*, 1961

Revolutionaries: A timeline of Isadora Duncan, Sergei Esenin and the turn of the century

May 26, 1877

Angela Isadora Duncan is born in San Francisco, the fourth child of John Charles and Mary Dora Duncan.

October 3, 1895

Sergei Alexandrovich Esenin is born in the village of Konstantinovo, Russia.

1896

Duncan and her mother travel from San Francisco to Chicago to improve her career prospects.

1897

The family travels to New York City to further Duncan’s dance career. She performs in pantomimes and for society gatherings.

1899

The “Clan Duncan” sails to London on a cattle boat.

February 22, 1900

Duncan appears as a fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Lyceum Theatre in London.

1900

The "Clan Duncan" leaves London for Paris.

April 1902

Duncan performs in Budapest at the Urania Theater, where she meets Oscar Beregi. The Hungarian actor is portraying Romeo, and Duncan calls him "Romeo." He becomes her first lover. When Beregi wants Duncan to quit the stage, she refuses and the liaison ends.

1904

Duncan establishes a school of dance in Grunewald, Germany.

1904

Duncan visits Russia for the first time.

December 1904

In Berlin, Duncan meets former actor and set designer Edward Gordon Craig, who becomes her lover and the father of her first child. She misses scheduled performances while she and Gordon Craig hide for two weeks in his apartment, avoiding her manager and family.

September 24, 1905

Duncan gives birth to a daughter by Gordon Craig and names her Deirdre.

Spring 1906

Duncan performs in Copenhagen, Denmark.

December 1907 - February 1908

Duncan performs throughout Russia.

1908

Duncan's school in Grunewald closes, and she moves some of her pupils to Paris.

1909

Duncan meets Paris Singer, heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune. She calls him Lohengrin, after the hero of the eponymous Wagner opera, and they become lovers.

May 1, 1910

Patrick, Duncan's son by Singer, is born. Although Singer is divorcing his wife, Duncan refuses to marry him.

1913

The Théâtre des Champs Élysées in Paris is completed, with bas-relief murals by sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle and murals by painter Maurice Denis that are based on Duncan.

April 19, 1913

Duncan's children Deirdre and Patrick and their nurse, Annie Sim, drown when the driver of their car fails to set the brake and it rolls into the Seine River. All three drown.

April 23, 1913

Deirdre and Patrick are cremated and interred at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

1914

Duncan gives birth to a boy, who dies a few hours after his birth. She claims he is the child of an Italian sculptor, Romano Romanelli, whom she begged to impregnate her in her grief after the deaths of Deirdre and Patrick the previous year.

1914

With Singer's support, Duncan opens a new school in Bellevue, a Paris suburb. When World War I breaks out, she turns the 62-room school over to the Dames de France for a hospital and sends her students the United States.

June 28, 1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria is assassinated; the murder is one of the causes of World War I.

1915

Duncan performs throughout the U.S., lecturing audiences from the stage and chastising them for failing to give her sufficient funds to start a school of dance in the United States.

March 16, 1917

Czar Nicholas II abdicates the throne after the February Revolution in Russia.

October 1917

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin is appointed Commissar after the October Revolution, which replaces the provisional government of the February Revolution with a Bolshevik, or Communist, leadership.

November 11, 1918

The Armistice is signed between the Allies and Germany, ending World War I.

January 16, 1919

The Eighteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution is ratified, leading to the prohibition of alcohol.

1921

At the invitation of the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, A.V. Lunacharsky, Duncan travels to Russia to begin a school of dance for children in Moscow.

1921

Duncan meets the Russian poet Sergei Esenin, and they begin living together. Duncan is 42 and Esenin is 25—though when they travel to the United States the next year, Duncan gives their ages as 38 and 27.

April 12, 1922

Duncan's mother dies in Paris.

May 2, 1922

Duncan and Esenin are married in Moscow.

1922

Duncan, needing funds for her Russian school, embarks with Esenin on an ill-fated tour of Europe and the United States.

February 3, 1923

Duncan and Esenin, accompanied by her maid, Jeanne, depart the U.S. on the U.S. ocean liner George Washington, swearing they will never return.

Autumn 1923

Duncan and Esenin return to Russia, but soon separate.

1924

After Lenin's death on January 21, Duncan creates funeral marches in his honor.

September 1924

Duncan leaves Russia to dance in Berlin, where she is plagued by continued rumors about her Bolshevism.

December 27, 1925

Esenin hangs himself after writing a suicide poem in his own blood.

July 8, 1927

Duncan gives her last public dance performance at the Théâtre Mogador in Paris.

September 14, 1927

Duncan dies in Nice, France. The long fringe of the large red shawl around her neck gets caught in one of the open-spoked wheels of the sports car in which she was riding, breaking her neck and dragging her in the street.

September 19, 1927

Duncan's body is cremated and her ashes placed in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris with those of her children.

Discussion questions

About the history

- Most of us know more about Isadora Duncan from her famous death. What revelations did the play provide you about her life?
- In what ways is Duncan ahead of her time? In what ways does she seem part of her own time?
- What role do the political changes that occurred in the world during that time — World War I and the Russian Revolution — seem to have played in the art and life of Duncan?

About the play

- Playwright Martin Sherman has several characters speak about what it means to see Isadora Duncan dance. How do those monologues function in the play?
- How difficult is it to describe a work of art? Is it different to describe a dance than a play, a poem, a painting?
- At one moment in the play, Sergei Esenin makes a claim to Duncan about which of them will be remembered for their art. How do we understand the work of artists for whom we may have very few visual records, early dance or theatrical productions? How do we understand their influence on other artists?

About the production

- There are a few moments of dance in the play, but they may not be what you are expecting. How do they function in the play? What do they reveal about Isadora Duncan's dancing?
- The set is a vibrant blue color. In life, Duncan actually rehearsed in studios hung with red or blue drapes. What does the set tell you about Duncan as an artist? How do the actors appear against the set?
- The character Alexandros plays the piano during the play, and the actor playing Alexandros learned the piano for this play. What difference does it make to have an actor on stage really playing the piano? Does it change how you view Duncan's rehearsal in that scene?

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