

Turning Points: 50 works that shaped the century

Number 18: Isadora Duncan's London debut



Photo Hulton

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THE 20th century has been one of record, above all. Filmed, taped, photographed, printed, preserved - most of this century's art is presented to us to reassess, judge, revise, to find our fresh questions, thanks to that precious, contaminating gift of hindsight. Never again, thanks to technology, will we have to depend upon someone else's description.

But that is just what we have to do with the extraordinary, unique dancer Isadora Duncan. She shunned film cameras, and there is nothing left of her art that can help us either to agree with the smitten sculptor Auguste Rodin that "this was the greatest woman the world has ever known" or to dismiss her as a self-indulgent hippie.

All we are left with in the record is the outrageous life - the picture of a wanton egoist, whose children were drowned when a car's brakes failed, and who herself died in a car, grotesquely, when her scarf throttled her, catching in the wheel of the Bugatti of her latest toyboy.

What's more difficult to accept is the declarations of the phenomenal impact that Duncan had on her time. It was not just the sight and sensation of her - her uncorseted, fleshy body seeming to be both substantial and yet remarkably weightless. It was her way of thinking, her approach to life as well as to art - that to be natural, to pursue the truth of nature rather than art, to be boldly self-expressive, was the highest possible aim.

"I am an enemy to ballet, which I consider a false and preposterous art," said Isadora. "Under the tricots are dancing-deformed muscles; under the muscles are deformed bones."

Photographs show what a beautiful girl she was at 22 on her London debut in March 1900, the spring of the new century. Raised unconventionally in California, a child of the outdoors, bathed in romantic music, poetry and humanist philosophies, she had been through a rather twee stage trying to develop her individual voice in America. She danced recitals of short solos, in clothing based on Botticelli's *La Primavera*, with rosebuds, ringlets and ingenuously bared legs. In New York the whaleboned audiences tittered, apprehensive that her flimsy tunic would fall off completely.

Always in dire financial straits, she sailed for England after all her family's possessions were lost in a hotel fire. In London Isadora found her voice.

IN those first weeks, before her three concerts, Duncan spent hours every day in London's galleries and the British Museum. There she studied the statues and paintings of antique nymphs, solid and yet weightless, naturally formed yet wholly feminine - there she forged her art.

Although later performances would be more influential on certain key individuals in dance history, although she was to become a clearer, stronger artist, Duncan's first London performance, on March 17, was an eye-opening event. European viewers appreciated her daring. Here was a very young woman, barefoot and underdressed, performing alone and without scenery - not some romantic fairy-tale of virtuous suffering, but a disconcertingly direct and spontaneous expression of her feelings about the music she was dancing to.

She used concert music, Chopin piano preludes and Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, and declamations of classical verse. Her movements were extremely simple, improvisatory, and often hugged the floor heedless of where the chiffon fell open. When she jumped, her voluptuous limbs did not fly out and upwards, as in ballet - they furled and settled sensually around her body like drapery. It must have looked unbelievably erotic.

And yet it was more than just that. Young as she was, Duncan had a formidable idea behind her farouche behaviour, and formidable artists, writers and composers recognized it at once. "I suppose she was the first to interpret music - others just dance it," said Frederick Ashton, Britain's great ballet choreographer.

Duncan had an unexpectedly catalytic effect on the "preposterous" ballet. Michel Fokine, the Russian choreographer, watched her in St Petersburg shortly after the London debut, and was hypnotized,

particularly by her Chopin interpretations. He rapidly made three ballets, culminating in his 1908 masterpiece, *Les Sylphides*.

The young Marie Rambert, a teenager in Poland when she saw Duncan in 1905, became obsessed by her musical vision and charisma. Ballet Rambert, once she launched it in England, was a legatee of Duncan. So was Ashton, Rambert's protégé.

HE SAW Duncan on her second London visit in 1921. He was 17 and expected to be horribly embarrassed by a fat woman in her forties "galumphing about" in chiffon. "But I was completely captivated," he said. He remembered "the extraordinarily beautiful tilt of the head", her grace and plasticity, her "immensely strong personality". Fifty years later Ashton tried to recreate that impression in a ballet of his own, *Five Brahms Waltzes in the manner of Isadora Duncan*, which may stand as the only permanent work of art that is true in spirit to the woman who inspired it.

Duncan's influence on modern dance was stronger in Europe, where she based herself, than in her native land. Her technique was deceptively hard to teach, and did not endure. The expressionist German strand that leads today to Pina Bausch owes more to Duncan than the anti-music, physically driven Cunningham trend in America, although the Sixties child Mark Morris is a notable exception.

Today, much modern dance is as strict as ballet was when Duncan rebelled against it. It is honed, athletic, a body-distorting skill, and we prefer it that way. We have seen too often some cumbersome, heavy-bottomed dancer emoting portentously and with minimal skill to a sad old ballad. Hindsight can sometimes be a hindrance to understanding rather than a help, and Isadora Duncan's effect is best understood by accepting her through the eyes of those who saw her perform. They believed she was the woman who turned dance from a 19th-century entertainment into a 20th-century art.

Further reading: 'Where She Danced' by Elizabeth Kendall (Knopf, 1979); 'Isadora' by Fredrika Blair (Equation, 1986); 'My Life' by Isadora Duncan (Boni and Liveright 1927); 'Secret Muses' by Julie Kavanagh (Faber, 1996). Source: Dance Books (0171 846 2314, www.dancebooks.co.uk)