



Duncan, Isadora (1878-1927)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Free thinking, free spirited, free moving Isadora Duncan brought her bohemian feminist consciousness to the dance stage and changed the art of dance forever. Although some critics ridiculed her flowing, expressive movements and her leftist politics, Duncan brought flexibility and self-expression to the hidebound world of classical dance.



Two photographs of Isadora Duncan.

Duncan is known as the "mother of modern dance," but even ballet was influenced by the radical élan of her ideas. In many ways her life was tragic, but she left behind, not a sense of despair and loss, but the dynamic imagination of a true original.

Duncan was the child of the radically transformative era at the end of the nineteenth century. Born to freethinking parents in San Francisco on May 26, 1877, she was mostly raised by her mother, a lover of music, literature, and the arts. Her mother earned money teaching piano lessons, and it was not long before Isadora, who learned to dance following the movements of the waves on the beaches near her home, was earning extra cash too, teaching dance to younger children in the neighborhood.

Duncan's influences were the movements she found in nature and the passion of classical Greek drama. She hated the rigid structures of ballet. She determined to create not only a new form of dance, but also a new outlook on dance, where expressive movement would be an integral part of every child's education, along with the usual academic subjects.

When Duncan was a teenager, she and her mother traveled to Chicago and New York, where she performed in theaters and vaudeville houses to less than enthusiastic audiences. It was not until 1900 when she went to Europe that she began to be taken seriously as a dancer. Although she began by performing at private parties, soon she was touring the major stages of Europe, galvanizing audiences with her "modern" dance.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, ballet had become a voyeuristic art, appealing largely to men who attended to watch women performing in skimpy (for the day) tutus. Isadora Duncan introduced the solo performance to dance audiences. Decrying restrictive women's clothing, she shed her corset and petticoats and danced barefoot in simple, flowing, Grecian-style tunics adorned with long, colorful scarves. Her dances concerned such subjects as motherhood, love, and grief, and her audiences were filled with women.

Almost as titillating as her radical approach to dance was Duncan's bohemian personal life. She was an outspoken socialist and advocate of women's rights who constantly challenged society's rules. Claiming she did not believe in marriage or monogamy, she had two children with two of her many male lovers. (Both children were drowned in an accident in 1913.)

She also attended Natalie Barney's Paris salons and had female lovers, among them writer Mercedes de Acosta, about whom she wrote, "My kisses like a swarm of bees / Would find their way between thy knees /

And suck the honey from thy lips / Embracing thy too slender hips."

Duncan achieved her dream of creating a new, well-rounded form of education. She established schools of the Duncan method in Berlin, Paris, London, and Moscow. But her life was tragically cut short, when, at the age of 49, one of her flamboyant long scarves caught in the wheel of the sports car she was driving and strangled her.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.