

Perceptions of Isadora Duncan's art in Russian criticism

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Abstract

American dancer and dance reformer Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) became an important part of Russian culture from the moment of her first performance which took place in December 1904 in St. Petersburg. Her subsequent Russian tours were in 1905, 1907-1908, 1909, and 1913. In 1921 she was invited to Soviet Russia by its new Bolshevik government and founded the School of Duncan in Moscow. All of her visits were widely covered by the Russian Media. The coverage varied according to the artistic and social contexts of certain periods of time as well as to the dancer's ideas and techniques across different periods of her life. While the theater criticism of the Silver Age (1900s) saw in her work an embodiment of the idea of 'the unspoken' (the highest and symbolic reality, something beyond expression) and a basis for a new Gesamtkunstwerk, the Soviet newspapers and magazines of the 1920s found in her art 'the roar of the revolution's trumpet' and a possibility to educate new Russian people using a new revolutionary approach to education.

Introduction

Discussions on Duncan were always stormy. Journals such as *Vesy (Scales)*, *Theater and Art*, *Apollon*, *Zolotoe Runo (Golden Fleece)*, *Masks*, *Studio*, along with the newspapers *Russia*, *Theater*, *Stock Exchange Bulletin*, *Russian Word*, and later – *Izvestiya*, *Art's Life*, *Ogonyok* and others published numerous reviews—some enthusiastic, some critical, and some outright insulting. This paper summarizes some topics of discussions which characterize not only Duncan's dance but also the Russian art of certain periods of time.

First reviews

First publications on Isadora Duncan appeared in Russian periodicals several months prior to her visit in December, 1904. Poet and artist Maximilian Voloshin who saw Duncan in Paris, introduced her to the Russian public in May, 1904. The dance of Duncan, in his opinion, wonderfully expressed the essence of music and dancer's attitude towards the world, the human soul, and the Cosmos. Duncan's dance came from remote antiquity, but was directed towards the future and would remain throughout the centuries as a model of beauty and freedom. 'Nothing can shake the soul as much as dance... Dance is the highest of the arts, because it reaches sources of rhythm contained in the pulsation of human hearts'¹. Being a poet, Voloshin succeeded in depicting an inspired woman in a semi-transparent tunic whose smooth movements were far from ballet technique.

Summarizing the discussions which took place after her first tours in 1904 and

1905 in St. Petersburg and Moscow, we can discover several directions: critics wrote about Duncan's 'nudity', antiquity, new freedom of women, philosophical approach to dance, about possibility of using the classical music for that kind of dance, and creating a total art work on a basis of dance. Of course critics compared her movements to classical ballet's pas and tried to define the difference between them (simplicity, freedom, expressive hands and arms, absence of acrobatics and of steel toes).

Despite the fact that Duncan never performed naked, her semi-transparent tunic looked quite shocking at that time. Critics wrote that her 'nudity' didn't provoke vicious thoughts and didn't challenge the sense of morality. 'Her dress covers her body like a light cloud'². But some writers marked imperfections of her body and were insulted by the absence of traditional parts of her costume.

Although there were very poetic descriptions, especially written by the critics from the Symbolists' circle, connecting Duncan's dance with Greek figures on vases and Greek mythology, opinions about the nature of this 'antiquity' differed: Valerian Svetlov called Duncan 'Schliemann of antique choreography'³, but Nikolai Shebuev found in her dance images from Semiradsky's paintings (representative of modern academism)⁴.

Alexander Benois started a discussion on a synthesis of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk* – total art work) which was supposed to stem from the dance. He stressed that thanks to Duncan there would be a dance reform in Russia, which was extremely necessary for the Russian ballet.

Symbolists' magazine *Vesy* in Moscow devoted an article to Duncan almost in every issue in 1905: by Lydmila Vil'kina⁵, Ellis (Kobylynsky)⁶, Sergey Solovyov, Andrey Bely⁷ and others. *Vesy* also published translations of short reviews from European magazines, as well as a very strange article entitled 'Heinrich Heine on Isadora Duncan'⁸ although the poet had died long time ago.

Vil'kina saw in Duncan's performances the 'sacred symphonies'⁹, 'sunny and moon-light mysteries of passion and melancholy'¹⁰. The poetess drew images of: awakening nature, a flutist from an Etruscan vase, a refined face of Botticelli's Venus, a female body from the Golden ladder of Burn-Jones, Aphrodite turning into furious Maenad and then – to praying Artemis... She depicted a moon ecstasy in which the dancer was becoming more and more lucid and raised almost to the sky...¹¹. Mikhail Sizov in the magazine *Art* asserted that Duncan brought to the world a new meaning of corporeality and broadened the traditional understanding of a human body and its mission. 'Duncan's art represents the Body in its self-worth, beauty and a free love to the Spirit... In her art there are many vibrating threads which have to connect Western and Eastern cultures... She is a comet, glittering with a remote light'¹².

'I realized that her dance was about the unspoken ... She... flied to the heights of immortality'¹³, poet Andrey Bely wrote in *Vesy*. Bely asserted that Duncan reached in her art the highest spirituality and embodied something beyond words which had an enormous philosophical and esoteric value. Sergey Solovyev found the creation of 'spiritual corporeality' in Isadora's work. 'In her dance the form finally overcomes the stagnation of material, and each movement of her body is an embodiment of spiritual acts'¹⁴.

Maximilian Voloshin concluded that Duncan danced everything which other people spoke, sang, wrote, played, and drew¹⁵. Rafalovich wrote that Duncan led the art of dance from a dead alley to the true road¹⁶.

But Duncan's opponents refused to see any depth in her dance. Their judgments matched the commoner's opinion. On January, 23, 1905, the newspaper *Russia* published an open letter by well-known conductor and musical critic Alexander Ziloti to the violinist Leopold Auer, who conducted the orchestra during Isadora's second tour in Russia. In this letter Ziloti chastised Auer for participating in Isadora's program, asserting that it was unacceptable for a musician of his level to accompany such a 'primitive' dance. 'Despite all my efforts, I could not find any connection between the music and the movements of Ms. Duncan. She first raised her hands upwards; suddenly she went down as if searching for paper lost on the floor... Then she began to dance a kind of cancan, then to jump like a goat'¹⁷. The next day Auer published an open reply, making excuse to his decision by explaining that he had never seen these dances before and during the performance looked only at his musical score in order not 'to shudder with horror,' which occurred at the first moment he was acquainted with the style of the dance¹⁸. 'To many people it was strange to see Duncan, her bare feet, her rabid leaps, her baby goat jumping, her whirling which illustrated the miraculous sounds of Chopin... This was tiresome, boring, very monotonous and very bold'¹⁹, wrote critic Alexander Plescheev in the newspaper *Petersburg Diary of Theater-Fan* in December, 1904. He assumed that the admiration of Isadora was provoked only by the European press.

All reviewers involuntarily competed in elevated style of writing, in richness of imagination, in breadth of historical associations, made attempts to understand the essence of Duncan's art and find the origins of her creativity. This gave Russian criticism a new impulse. But while delighted writers attempted to define the essence of her art, formulate her basic postulates, and explore its unique characteristics, Duncan's opponents refused to see any depth or philosophy expressed in her dance.

Coverage of Duncan's tours in 1907-13

While the first tours provoked poetic, impressionistic reviews, during the following tours critics wrote more analytical articles, although still very emotional. In 1907 the translation of Duncan's essay *Dance of the Future* was published in Russia and after that critics could use her theoretical statements in their descriptions of her dance. In the preface to the essay Nikolay Suslov stressed that Duncan had spiritualized the dance, 'transformed it into a story of an emotional depth'²⁰. Another achievement of Duncan is an individualization of the dance and a rehabilitation of a human body²¹.

Influenced by Duncan, magazines started discussions on dance which led to serious research on dance history. The most interesting debates on dance, pantomime and different kinds of stage movements took place in *Apollon* magazine in 1909-1914²².

We can find tracks of these discussions in the books on dance history by famous ballet and art critics of that time, which have been forgotten until the 21st century. Valerian Svetlov, Nikolay Vashkevich, Sergey Khudekov, Andrey Levinson and later – Alexey Sidorov in their volumes reflected the common interest to Duncan's work as well as tried to understand how her art would influence the dance of the future. All these authors acknowledged that choreography in Russia received a strong impulse, although their personal opinions about Duncan's dance were very different²³.

Practitioners of the Russian ballet, who seemed to be far from the free dance, were enraptured by her performances and found new ideas for themselves. Among them were

young choreographers of the Mariinsky and Bolshoi theaters Mikhail Fokin and Alexander Gorsky, ballerinas Anna Pavlova and Vera Karalli. Alexander Benois, being an exacting ballet critic, acknowledged that Duncan's art became vital for modernization of the Russian ballet theater²⁴.

During these Russian tours, critics continued a discussion on a *Gesamtkunswerk*. Alexander Roslavlev in the journal *Theater and Art*, № 5, 1908, asserted: 'In Duncan's dances there are distinct allusions to the possibility of arts merging on their common basis'²⁵. But later, in 1913, Alexander Kugel neglected this idea. 'Only the fantasy of the critics erases the boundaries of contiguous arts, but not Duncan herself'²⁶.

Akim Volynskiy published a conversation with Nikolai Molostvov in 1908, in which the two discussed optical images—internal and external, the new moral truth, the new integrity of mind and heart²⁷, based on Duncan's art.

Philosopher Vasily Rozanov in 1909 wrote: 'In her dance the entire human being is reflected, the entire civilization lives—its plasticity, its music, its lines, its soul, its everything!'²⁸. The views of Vasily Rozanov are relevant to his philosophical-aesthetic concepts. He was looking for answers to questions about the relationships of physiology and beauty, natural harmony and perfect ballet technique, which had been polished for centuries. He described her dances as 'the primary dances, early like the morning, primary as food and drink, 'not invented,' also as drink and food, and begun from the physiology and feeling of the human being!'²⁹. He affirmed that the dance of Duncan was ancient and consisted of naïve, pure, and natural jumps and leaps. Comparing the dance of Duncan to ballet in which the legs were extremely developed, Rozanov welcomed the revival of the movements of upper torso, arms, neck, head and chest and absence of ballet *pas*. Rozanov concluded: 'The primeval nature does dance itself'³⁰. And he predicted that 'Isadora Duncan's personality, her school will play a large role in the battle of ideas of the new civilization'³¹.

In 1913, the tours of Duncan in Russia caused a flow of reviews again. This time the critics were no longer in a state of shock; their reviews were less enthusiastic and more analytical as they attempted to figure out what led the public to concerts of the barefoot dancer beyond novelty. "She gives simple visual forms, but under them there is a rich spiritual content. Plastic beauty is the real cult of 'Duncanism'. 'Since there is less beauty in our gray average life, thirst for beauty becomes increasingly greater'³², explained Valerian Svetlov, commenting on sold-out concerts of Isadora.

Some serious critics specifically accented the spiritual content and the embodiment of "genuine" beauty, despite some imperfections of the body and certain limitedness of the lexicon of the dancer. Among them there were Fyodor Sologub, Edward Stark (published in *Theater and Art*), Fyodor Komissarzhevsky (in *Masks*) and others. 'I don't know any other plastic actor of our time who could express in the movements of the body the motion of his/her soul with a larger power and the naturalness than Duncan'³³, wrote theater director Komissarzhevsky.

In 1914 *Severnnye zapiski* magazine published Duncan's article *What I think about dance*,³⁴ which consisted of several chapters: *Wave movements in nature, Choir, Gymnastics and dance, School of dance*. This publication demonstrated that Duncan was recognized in Russia as a thinker.

Coverage of Duncan's work in Soviet Russia/USSR

The new wave of reviews appeared in 1921, when the dancer, desperate in her attempts to find a support for her school in Europe, unexpectedly received an invitation from Soviet Russia. It was made in London by the Russian trade representative Leonid Krasin, who was impressed by her concert in the British capital; and then the official invitation came from Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment³⁵.

Lunacharsky in August, 1921, published in the newspaper *Izvestiya* an article, entitled 'Our guest', full of revolutionary rhetoric, where he justified the necessity of this strange school in almost ruined after the Revolution and the Civil War country, which didn't have money even for essentials: 'She, like a true artist, rebels against the atmosphere of impudent, ruined, full of hatred and disappointment bourgeois Europe'³⁶. Thus, the idea to use a world-famous artiste took place from the very beginning. Lunacharsky's fellow critic and official Pavel Kogan found some points of intersection between Duncan's work and the new proletarian culture. 'She has always tried to escape from the bonds with which European Philistinism chained any impulse for freedom of a human being. Her creative aspirations are consonant with the unlimited ideas of the Revolution'³⁷. He was the one who found the 'roar of the revolution's trumpet' in Isadora's art.

The director of Duncan's Moscow school Ilya Schneider saw in *Slav March*, performed at her first concert in November 1921, how the dancer transformed herself into a bow-backed workman who could be considered as a symbol of oppressed Russia, and who succeeded to tear his fetters and become free³⁸.

In the 1920s descriptions of Duncan's dances were very poetic as well, but it was a new poetry. New proletarian critics saw in her art a protest against Western bourgeoisie, her freedom from old culture, evaluated her pedagogy as very revolutionary and proper for children of the new State.

They also stressed her proletarian origin (although that wasn't true), her sympathy towards poor and oppressed people, her greatness in her fight against traditions. They liked labor movements in her dance, her expressiveness in dramatic pantomimes. Quite soon critics got impressed by Duncan's students – young and beautiful, harmonically developed. They wished all Russian children could study at the Duncan's school.

But some of authors were disappointed by Duncan's body (not that young now), by her sentimental pieces which were far from a harsh reality, and later - by her marriage with Esenin. They discussed also Duncan's new technique which was closer to pantomime or mimed drama at this period of her life³⁹.

Among the opponents of Isadora was a famous ballet critic Akim Volynsky who wrote that 'Isadora Duncan haven't saved and won't save the Humanity... Her declared beauty has nothing to do with antique beauty... Maybe her dances reproduce some vulgar dances in ancient Greek small restaurants, which are depicted on vases. But they don't even touch the soul of the dance in Dionysus's orchestra'⁴⁰. He stressed that 'this soft and loose... plastique... without a metal skeleton inside... can weaken a young generation's mentality... and paralyze their activity'... although at the moment 'a glorification of human psyche'⁴¹ is more appropriate for education.

Duncan was very enthusiastic about Russia. She choreographed several new compositions inspired by Soviet reality and communist ideas and published a lot of

ecstatic statements in Russian and foreign media, although she had stayed in Russia only for three years⁴².

Criticism of the Soviet time, devoted to Duncan and her school, reflected all stages of art development in the new state: from revolutionary romanticism to ideological service. NEP (new economic policy), which was established in 1922, also influenced the school – during that time a kind of capitalism was formed, and education wasn't free any longer. School of Duncan fought for existence from the first days, since its opening in December 1921. It was deprived of the state support although at the beginning Duncan was provided with a beautiful mansion in the city center (Prechistenka street, 20) and staff. Then Isadora received ARA's (American Relief Association) support for a while, and then - had to open additional paid groups (although this idea was against her principles).

The year of 1923 became an important milestone in a formation of the cultural policy of the USSR. On the one hand, XII Convention of the Bolsheviks' Party resolved that the theater had to be used for systematic mass propaganda of the communist ideas⁴³. On the other hand, in Moscow the Choreological Laboratory of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences under the leadership of Alexei Sidorov and Alexei Larionov conducted serious research of the human motion and became a refuge for different plastique studios which soon had to shift to illegal way of life⁴⁴.

There were more and more skeptical articles on Duncan in magazines and newspapers. 'Duncan still shows us the harmonic human being's emotion... But there is no such an environment for creation of the new Hellenes'⁴⁵, - writes V. Arlov.

Nevertheless, in August 1923, after Duncan's return from America, the Media happily wrote about a deep connection of Isadora's thoughts with the Soviet ideology – mostly because of her involuntary propaganda of the Bolsheviks which she had conducted in the USA (and was deprived of her American citizenship after that). 'Duncan returned to Russia to which she considered herself spiritually connected. Her ideas about the free and harmonic education of a spirit and a body in beauty, in her opinion, could take root only in Russia'⁴⁶, - wrote *Ogonyok*. The educational program of Duncan was considered to be very useful again. 'To take a poor proletarian child and to make a healthy and joyful creature from him – this is a big accomplishment'⁴⁷ – wrote ballet critic Viktor Iving in the newspaper *Pravda* after the performance of the school in Moscow in November.

1924 could hardly be successful for the school because this year, after Lenin's death, big changes in cultural policy took place. On August 26, the Decree of the Moscow Council about the plastique studios was released, which ordered to close more than 10 famous studios and to include a communist to the management of the Duncan's school⁴⁸.

But thanks to the Commissar of Sport Nikolay Podvoysky in summer of 1924 the school got a right to live; he helped organize a training for six hundred⁴⁹ proletarian children at the Red Stadium. Irma Duncan taught children to dance revolutionary dances choreographed by Isadora earlier⁵⁰. After the training all children in red tunics went to Prechistenka street, singing the *International*, and Isadora danced and sang at the balcony of the school building⁵¹.

Departure of Duncan to the West was inevitable. There was no state support, Russian tours of the dancer were financially disastrous. And in September 1924 there

were farewell performances of the School at the Chamber and Bolshoy theaters, where Isadora had very sad introductions, saying that the students didn't have anything to eat and funds to pay for utilities⁵² The Media after the performances were ecstatic. *Izvestiya* stressed that 'the whole program manifests a revolutionary spirit', that the main trend of it is 'the realism of feelings'⁵³ *Rabochy zritel* insisted that 'the Duncan pedagogical system should be used more widely, and for ALL proletarian children...'⁵⁴

But that was unrealistic, and after departure of Irma Duncan to the USA in 1928 the school became almost illegal: it didn't fit in the new culture of socialist realism and mass sports, and survived only because the former students had long tour in Siberia at the beginning of 1930s and staged anti-fascism pieces during the war time in 1940s. But in 1949 the school was closed and hadn't been mentioned anywhere until the end of the 1970s.

In 1927, after the tragic death of Isadora Duncan, Russian criticism summed up her creative work. Alexander Gidoni in the journal *Contemporary Theater*, № 4, 1927, wrote: 'Isadora Duncan has been pulverized in the contemporary art of dance. But this dispersion is very fruitful for artistic culture of our days'⁵⁵. Aleksey Gvozdev, who considered Duncan's art as bourgeois, asserted in *Red Newspaper* that Duncanism eliminated itself, 'without having created monumental form capable of expressing the heroic mood of the epoch. But it did open the first breach and cleared the way for new achievements, which must be reached for by a new generation of dance reformers under the influence of the social revolution'⁵⁶.

Conclusions

Summarizing discussions of Isadora Duncan in Russian criticism, we can note that the perception of her dance changes according to a situation in Russian and Soviet art. Duncan was always welcomed by the Russian Media with a huge enthusiasm, but the nature of this enthusiasm varied. The Symbolists had seen an elevated spiritual meaning in her work, the early Soviet newspapers and magazines employed propagandistic rhetoric to justify the invitation of the world-famous artiste at a moment when the country was suffering the devastation of war and revolution and to convince the world opinion regarding the greatness of the new political system by proclaiming Isadora's passionate love for revolution.

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Notes

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