

# Isadora Duncan's Dance in Russia: First Impressions and Discussions. 1904–1909

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes the ways in which Isadora Duncan's dance oeuvre was perceived in Russia by different sections of the literati and the intelligentsia. Although Duncan's tours took place in 1904, 1905, 1907–1908, 1909, 1913, and again in 1921–1924 when she lived and worked in the Soviet Union, I argue that during the 1904–1909 period, Duncan's performances were very influential for the development of Russian ballet, theater, literature, and dance criticism.*

In December 1904, Isadora Duncan's first performance took place in St. Petersburg, at the famed Hall of the Nobles. Her Russian tours followed in 1905, 1907–1908, 1909, and 1913, and all of them were widely reported in Russian newspapers and magazines. The coverage varied according to the artistic and social contexts of certain periods, as well as to the evolution of the dancer's ideas and techniques across different stages of her life. Duncan's performances and activities of her Moscow school in 1921–1924 also produced significant resonance in Soviet criticism, especially as this represented a major shift in her artistic sensibilities. But for the purposes of this essay, I will analyze her performances from the 1904–1909 period, as they were extremely influential for the development of Russian ballet, theater, literature and dance criticism.

This essay represents a major historiographical departure within the history of Russian-American relations that has been for the most part concerned with diplomatic, economic and political relations, and less so with the important field of culture.<sup>1</sup> While we have important accounts of the reception of Silver Age Russian

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Lasch, *American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962); David Charles Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Malia Martin, *Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Norman Saul, *Concord and Conflict: The United States and Russia, 1867–1914* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996); Norman Saul and Richard McKinzie, eds., *Russian-American Dialogue on Cultural Relations, 1776–1914* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997); Robert Williams, *Russian Art and American Money, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); William Appleman Williams, *American Russian Relations, 1781–1947* (New York: Rinehart, 1952). For Russian perspectives see,

art, literature and theater in the West, the English-language accounts of Duncan's experiences in Russia and the Soviet Union are quite insufficient although several biographies, memoirs, articles and book chapters have been published.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, this article analyzes the Russian reception of Duncan's performances by not only theater and dance critics, but also considers the reactions, both positive and negative, of major Russian intellectuals, poets, and choreographers to Duncan's dance oeuvre. Finally, I also analyze the significant ways that the philosophical implications of Duncan's artistry connected with the central concerns of Russia's Silver Age.

The American dancer came to Russia when the culture there entered a very fruitful period, "a moment of unprecedented flowering,"<sup>3</sup> later called the Silver Age. Since the 1890s poetry, literature, and fine art, as well as dramatic theater went through significant modernization. Numerous developments in literature (Symbolism, and later Acmeism and Futurism), fine art (Art Nouveau, then Constructivism), music, theater, philosophy, and in the sciences made this period of Russian history unique and incredibly innovative. However, classical ballet in Russia at that time was in a state of stagnation, even though in the 1890s it had reached considerable heights of achievement in the works of the great choreographer Marius Petipa (1818–1910). By 1896, the Russian ballet had received recognition

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*Etkind Aleksandr, Tolkovanie puteshestvii: Rossiia i Amerika v travelogakh i intertekstakh* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003); A. V. Golubev et al., eds., *Rossiia i zapad: Formirovanie vneshnepoliticheskikh stereotipov v soznanii rossiiskogo obshchestva pervoi poloviny XX veka* (Moscow: RAN, 1998); V. I. Fokin, *Mezhdunarodnyi kul'turnyi obmen i SSSR v 20-30 gody* (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo St. Peterburgskogo universiteta, 1999); Aleksandr Nikolaevich Nikolukin, *Literaturnye sviazii Rossii i SShA: Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoevsky i Amerika* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981); O. E. Tuganova et al., eds., *Vzaimodeistvie kul'tur SSSR i SSHA, xviii-xxv* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987); Ivan Kurilla, *Zakliatye družia. Istoriya mnenii, fantazii, kontaktov, vzaimo(ne)ponimaniia Rossii i SSHA* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> E. Souritz, *Isadora Duncan's Influence on Dance in Russia*// *Dance Chronicle*.—1995.—Vol. 18.—No.2.—P. 281-291; E. Souritz, *Isadora Duncan and Prewar Russian Dancemakers/ The Ballets Russes and Its World*. New Haven and London, 1999; Roslavleva, Natalia Petrovna. "Prechistenka 20: The Isadora Duncan School in Moscow." *Dance Perspectives*. Vol. 16, Winter, New York: M. Dekker, 1975; 38; Duncan, Isadora, Edward Gordon Craig, and Francis Steegmuller. "Your Isadora": *The Love Story of Isadora Duncan & Gordon Craig* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Duncan, Isadora, and Rosemont, Franklin. *Isadora Speaks: Uncollected Writings & Speeches of Isadora Duncan* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1981). Shneider, Ilia Ilich. *Isadora Duncan, the Russian Years* (London: Macdonald, 1968); Duncan, Irma, and Macdougall, Allan Ross. *Isadora Duncan's Russian Days & Her Last Years in France* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1929); Dikovskaya Lily, with Gerard M-F Hill. *In Isadora's Steps. The story of Isadora Duncan's school in Moscow, told by her favorite pupil*. (Book Guild Publishing, Great Britain.2008); McVay, Gordon. *Isadora and Esenin: The Story of Isadora Duncan and Sergei Esenin*. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1980). See also biographies of Duncan by Victor Seroff, Fredrica Blair, and Peter Kurth.

<sup>3</sup> John Bowlt, *Russia's Silver Age: Moscow and St. Petersburg, 1900–1920*. (Thames & Hudson. 2010), 9

abroad and even surpassed its French and Italian counterparts, which were technically the 'parents' of Russian professional dance in the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> A special ballet school in St. Petersburg prepared about 150 professional dancers for the stage during the period of 1779–1896. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the twentieth century, certain ballet traditions were becoming obsolete. The young choreographer Mikhail (Michel) Fokine, was deeply unsatisfied with them, and in 1904 suggested that Russian ballet be reformed.<sup>5</sup> Belonging to a narrow circle of the audience—the court and aristocratic elite, “the ballet had fallen behind the increasingly rapid pace of Russian cultural life,”<sup>6</sup> and suffered on account of its reputation of being “an aristocratic bauble.”<sup>7</sup> Criticism of the dance form existed, but there were as yet no specialized magazines and journals that concentrated on dance as an art form. Instead, critics published their reviews in the sections devoted to the ballet that were contained in theater and literary journals.

### **The setting for Duncan's first tours—the Silver Age of Russian culture**

The multilayered socio-cultural phenomenon, called the Silver Age, has been the subject of vast academic research and most scholars consider the era between the mid-1890s and 1917 as the age of Russian modernism.<sup>8</sup> Remarkable innovations in architecture, poetry, philosophy, literature, and drama showed a propensity to break with established traditions, as artists searched for different ideas and new means of expression. The Russian cultural elite protested against the supremacy of critical realism and naturalism in the arts, that had for a few decades been oriented entirely towards representing social antagonisms in society. Artists refused to simply reproduce a reality of Russia with its numerous social problems, and instead, they claimed that art should express spirituality and personal experiences. In particular, the main trend of the *fin-de-siècle* period symbolism “was the product of the search for new means of artistic expressiveness, and the rejection of the overdetermined ideology and the psychologism of Russian classical realism.”<sup>9</sup> Greek antiquity became one of the most significant sources of inspiration for the Symbolists.<sup>10</sup> The ideas of European philosophers such as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and the French thinker, Henry Bergson, became very influential.<sup>11</sup> Slavic and Russian history, Sumer-Babylonian epic literature, ancient mysteries, esoteric studies from the Bhagavad Gita to the contemporary theosophy and occultism of Yelena Blavatsky, also enriched the intellectual

<sup>4</sup> Alexandr Plescheev. *Nash balet (Our ballet)*. (St. Petersburg. 1886), 10-20.

<sup>5</sup> *International Encyclopedia of Dance*. Ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen. Volume 3, (N.Y., Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1998), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Scholl. *From Petipa to Balanchine: classical revival and modernization of ballet* (N. Y.: Taylor and Francis Group. 2005), 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Bowlit, Gasparov and Rylkova. Gasparov, in Rylkova, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Dobrenko, in Cambridge Companion, XXII.

<sup>10</sup> See *Antichnost' i Kultura Serebryanogo Veka (Antiquity and Culture of the Silver Age)*. (Moscow. Nauka. 2010)

<sup>11</sup> See *Nietzsche in Russia*, ed. by B. G. Rosenthal (N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1986)

background of the 1900s. Organic forms of *Art-Nouveau* architecture decorated Moscow and St. Petersburg streets, and magazines attracted readers' attention by publishing images of home grown and authentic Russian design.

Spiritual aspirations penetrated all kinds of arts. The magazine, *Mir Iskusstva* (*World of Art*), published in St. Petersburg in 1899–1903 represented a new approach to analyzing painting, architecture, and theater, paving the way for a new kind of art criticism. This art criticism was based on a canon of refined aesthetics and it acknowledged the importance of spiritual content in art, and allowed for discussions about the human soul. “*Mir iskusstva* was committed to exploring the category of beauty, and this credo, along with its alignment with European modernist art, made it anathema to Russia's more utilitarian-minded critics.<sup>12</sup> New aesthetics penetrated into theater as well. Even in the realistic works of Moscow Art Theater led by Konstantin Stanislavsky, a spiritual atmosphere prevailed during the performances of Vsevolod Meyerhold in Vera Komissarzhevskaya's plays.

Theater tried to create a hypnotic influence on the public, using mystical sets, unusual declamation and mysterious music. “The Symbolists urged the theater to turn away from external reality towards the inner life of the human soul, dwelling on philosophical content.”<sup>13</sup> Russian poet Vyacheslav Ivanov argued for the merging of actors and the audience during theater performances, following the precedents laid down in ancient theater).<sup>14</sup> In general, the cultural paradigm was changing rapidly from positivist thinking to a more idealistic one. “New art, being tired of realism's flatness, searched for broader tasks and chose more elevated aims. Universal and abstract problems, the idea of God and fate once again imbued art, which dreamt of an ancient theater, the origins of which were from a religious cult, as Nietzsche announced with feeling,”—recalls a participant of the cultural life of the Silver Age who later immigrated to Europe, dramatist and art historian, Evgeny Znosko-Borovsky.<sup>15</sup>

Considering this background, the first tours of the American dancer Isadora Duncan in Russia were timely. She was infatuated with antiquity and the philosophy of Nietzsche, and like the Russian Symbolist poets and writers. She also turned to nature and the past in search for new meanings of expression like the painters from the *Mir Iskusstva* group. Duncan also used traits of the popular *Art Nouveau* style with its organic, flowing forms and lines. The American dancer wanted to make a theater performance more than just a social event: she wanted her performance to

<sup>12</sup> Lynn Garafola. *Dyagilev's Ballets Russes* (Boston, MA. Da Capo Press. 1998), IX.

<sup>13</sup> Birgit Beumers. Drama and theater, in *Cambridge Companion*, 215-234.

<sup>14</sup> See Ivanov Vyach. *Predchuvstviya i predvestiyua* (*Presentiments and premonitions*) —.in Vyacheslav Ivanov. Collections of works. Ed. D.V. Ivanov and O. Deshart (Brussels, 1974 Volume 2), 94-95, see [http://www.v-ivanov.it/brussels/vol2/01text/01papers/2\\_005.htm](http://www.v-ivanov.it/brussels/vol2/01text/01papers/2_005.htm). In 1910, Ivanov implemented his ideas into practice and tried to create that kind of theater at home based on dramaturgy by the Spanish playwright Calderón. *Devotion to the Cross* (1637). Vs. Meyerhold was a director of that performance, see Elena Yushkova. *Plastika preodoleniya*, (*Plastique of the Overcoming*), (Yaroslavl: YGPU, 2009), 135-138.

<sup>15</sup> Evgeny Znosko-Borovsky. *Russky teatr nachala XX veka* (*Russian theater of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*) (Praga: Plamya. 1925), 231-232.

be a spiritual act involving the public emotionally and intellectually like Russian theater directors of that time (Stanislavsky, Meyerhold). Isadora Duncan easily and successfully broke many traditions of the dance form, while proclaiming a new role of dance in a human life. She also broke artistic stereotypes like Russian symbolist poets and philosophers did, claiming that dance would be a new religion of the twentieth century. Duncan charmed the Russian cultural elite with her devotion to the high art. They were ready to accept her manifesto in which Duncan declared her intention to overcome the Cartesian duality between body and mind through dance.<sup>16</sup> “Indeed, the first serious discussion on Duncan in Russia came from poets, painters, and thinkers, as well as art and ballet critics who viewed dance within a broad cultural and artistic framework.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Russian critics meet Duncan: first impressions**

The first tours of Isadora Duncan took place in St. Petersburg on December 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of 1904.<sup>18</sup> She presented a program that was dominated by dance pieces by Chopin, as well as the *Dance Idylls* composed by Rameau, Picchi, and Couperin. In the beginning of 1905 Duncan came to Russia again, and visited not only the capital of St. Petersburg, but Moscow and Kiev as well. Publications on Isadora Duncan appeared in Russian periodicals before her first tour: two short newspaper articles in 1903,<sup>19</sup> and then in May 1904 famed poet and artist Maximilian Voloshin, who had seen Duncan perform in Paris, introduced her to the Russian public. Duncan's dance oeuvre, in Voloshin's opinion, expressed the essence of music and the dancer's attitude towards the world, the human soul, and the cosmos. Duncan's dance was rooted in remote antiquity, but was directed towards the future and as such would remain throughout the centuries as a model of beauty and freedom. According to Voloshin, “dance is the highest of the arts because it reaches the most primary of rhythm, the one enclosed in the pulsation of a human heart.”<sup>20</sup> Being a poet, Voloshin was able to create an unforgettable image of an inspired woman in a semi-transparent tunic whose flowing movements were far removed from the precision of ballet technique. He concluded that Duncan “dances everything that other people speak, sing, write, play, and draw.”<sup>21</sup> A month prior to her tour, *Sankt-Peterburgsky Dnevnik Teatrala (St. Petersburg Diary of Theater Lover)* published an interview with Duncan, which she gave to

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<sup>16</sup> See Isadora Duncan and Sheldon Cheney. *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1928), Isadora Duncan, and Franklin Rosemont. *Isadora Speaks: Uncollected Writings & Speeches of Isadora Duncan* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> See Elizabeth Suritz. *Isadora Duncan and Prewar Russian Dancemakers*, in *The Ballet Russes and Its World*, ed. by Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Steegmuller. *Your Isadora*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> See Elizabeth Suritz. *Isadora Duncan and Prewar Russian Dancemakers*, 98, 359.

<sup>20</sup> Maximilian Voloshin. *Isadora Duncan*, in—*Aisedora. Gastroli v Rossii. (Isadora. Tours of Russia)*. Collection of reviews, ed. T. Kasatkina. Preface by E. Souritz. (M.: ART, 1992), 32.

<sup>21</sup> Voloshin—in *Aisedora*, 30.

Maurice Girschman, the Berlin correspondent of the newspaper.<sup>22</sup> She explained to the Russian public that her main tasks were to revive the beauty of the ancient dance, to illustrate the thoughts of composers such as Beethoven in dance, and to make art publics believe that dance was an elevated art form.<sup>23</sup> Most of the first reviews published in St. Petersburg were gathered in the advertising brochure for Duncan's Moscow tour in January 1905, and supplemented with two articles by German critics. The aim of this brochure was to convince the audience that "Isadora Duncan is a serious, thoughtful *artiste* who strives to purely artistic ideals, and her art is as lofty and noble as drama, music and sculpture." The editors, used the authority of German art critics to elevate Duncan's dance form as true art!<sup>24</sup>

The discussions, which took place after her first tours in 1904 and 1905 in St. Petersburg and Moscow, split into several directions. Critics wrote about topics as diverse as Duncan's bare feet and legs, nudity, women in antiquity and the emancipation of women. Isadora's philosophical approach to dance and her claims about using classical music to create a total artwork on the basis of dance were also widely discussed.

### *Bare legs*

After Duncan's first tours, we can find descriptions of her bare feet and legs in every review. "The fact that "barefoot" is one of the interviewer's [Girschman's] opening words underlines the great novelty, indeed the sensationalism, of Isadora's stage appearance: in those days her bare feet, bare legs, and scanty garment produced a shock"<sup>25</sup> states contemporary American scholar Francis Steegmuller. In the criticism of this period, we see many attempts to describe Duncan's feet and legs. Writers' perceptions of these parts of the body depends on their personal taste, their ideal of woman's beauty, and their understanding of theater aesthetics. Sometimes the descriptions are very controversial. "Ordinary woman's legs, strong and graceful, but devoid of any alluring perfections,"<sup>26</sup>—this is the opinion by theater and ballet critic Valerian Svetlov. "Thin, pale feet, not at all beautiful,"—stresses writer Nikolai Shebuev in *Peterburskaya Gazeta*<sup>27</sup>. He also describes numerous foyer talks in which the famous one-line poem by the leading poet-Symbolist Bryusov, "O, cover thy pale legs!"<sup>28</sup> devoted originally to Jesus Christ but interpreted by the public mostly in an erotic way. Journalist and playwright, Yury Belyayev confesses that he really admires the view of the legs, because they are "strong, with well-developed muscles in the knees and trim,

<sup>22</sup> Girschman—in Steegmuller, 39-40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Tikhomirov. V.D. *Programs of performances, collected by V.D. Tikhomirov. 1891–1952* RGALI (Russian State Archive for Literature and Arts), fund. 2729, opis'.1, #. 134, 38-48.

<sup>25</sup> Steegmuller, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Svetlov V. *Duncan*, in Steegmuller, 44.

<sup>27</sup> Shebuev G. *Duncan*, in Steegmuller, 44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

with perfectly formed feet; they flew across the stage like two pink wings.”<sup>29</sup> However, Belyayev peppers his review with irony: “Old Strauss was [shown] without pants,”<sup>30</sup> meaning that bare legs in a combination with music by a famous composer look quite unusual and provocative.

“Her feet are too thick”<sup>31</sup>—Maximilian Voloshin cites the talk of commoners heard at the foyer. He avoids his own opinion on the legs, only mentioning that they are long.<sup>32</sup> His poetic description transforms physiological details into a poem in prose. “The least beautiful body flashes with inspiration in the ecstasy of the dance,”<sup>33</sup>—writes Voloshin introducing two new topics—natural body in motion and dance as ecstasy which were not present in classical ballet criticism prior to Duncan’s arrival in Russia. “Duncan’s bare legs are like those of a rustic vagabond”<sup>34</sup>—states Shebuev in a poetic vein. He persuades the readers that the legs are a harmonic part of Duncan’s show, in which “everything dances: waist, arms, neck, head—and legs.” Critic confirms, “the legs play the least important role in these dances”<sup>35</sup> attracting reader’s attention to the art of Isadora, and sums up that “being bare, [the legs] touch the ground lightly, soundlessly.”<sup>36</sup> Alexander Filippov, writer for the newspaper *Rus’*, almost repeats Shebuev when he writes, “When the accompanist started to play Chopin’s Mazurka, Isadora began to sing and speak with her legs, arms, eyes, and lips. No one had ever danced the Mazurka this way. There was no dance, no *pas*... But there was a rhythm of life and a music of fragrant feeling.”<sup>37</sup> “The barefoot girl shocked nobody, and her nudity was pure and perceptible. Indeed, it would be ridiculous to force a pair of boots on Terpsichore...”<sup>38</sup>—summed up critic Y. V. The novelty of bare legs and feet was digested quite easily. Most critics saw something more significant in Duncan’s dance than the absence of traditional parts of her costume.

### ‘Nudity’

Despite the fact that Duncan had never performed naked, her semi-transparent tunic looked quite shocking at that time. “Miss Duncan dances with bare legs, without sandals, without tights, without... anything!”—exclaims Yury Belyaev obviously exaggerating the absence of the cloths.<sup>39</sup> “No one knew how to react [...]: to take it seriously or as a joke,”—adds Valerian Svetlov,<sup>40</sup> characterizing the public confusion about Duncan’s performances. Isadora’s

<sup>29</sup> Yury Belyayev. *Miss Duncan*, in *Aisedora*, 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Voloshin, in *Aisedora*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Shebuev, in Steegmuller, 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Filippov. *Chopin’s evening*, in *Aisedora*, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Y.V. in Steegmuller, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Belyayev, in *Aisedora*, 76.

<sup>40</sup> Svetlov, in *Aisedora*, 49.

jumps to him looked ‘wild,’<sup>41</sup> her ‘poses were risky.’<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, all critics agree that Duncan’s ‘nudity’ has nothing to do with pornography or entertainment. Alexander Rafalovich writes about her being a “chaste virgin,”<sup>43</sup> and most other critics thought the same way. “This is not a *nudité* that arouses sinful thoughts, but rather a kind of incorporeal nudity”<sup>44</sup> and “there is nothing here to shock the moral sense,”<sup>45</sup> add Shebuev and Svetlov. While Belyayev claims, that “except her legs and proportional body, there is nothing attractive in Miss Duncan as a woman,”<sup>46</sup> Rafalovich finds that not only her feminine attractiveness is of importance on the stage: “she is not beautiful [...] but [in dance] becomes splendid.”<sup>47</sup> She is “such a natural in the graces, the movements, the feelings and such a genuine story of the human soul”<sup>48</sup> observed Alexander Filippov.

As we can notice, the physical aspects of Duncan’s semi-naked body on the stage, shocking at the first sight, gradually are replaced by aesthetic images, which she herself created while dancing. Critic Svetlov stresses, that “only a thoroughly corrupted member of our present bourgeois society will see this nudity of the revived classical statue as a violation of the laws of decency or morality.”<sup>49</sup> Voloshin goes further: “nudity is a necessary condition for dance... The body should be like an undulating flowing stream... Dance and nudity are inseparable and immortal.”<sup>50</sup> Statements such as these were quite revolutionary for that time. Some imperfections of Duncan’s body do not disturb the critics. The dress covered the young woman as “a light cloud,”<sup>51</sup> and she impresses the reviewers with her spirituality, musicality, and poetical gestures. “This nudity is just ancient, and, as such, natural,”—summarizes Valerian Svetlov<sup>52</sup>. The discussion on “antiquity” as immanent to Duncan’s dance starts from the very beginning, because poses of Isadora evidently reminiscent of ancient Greek statues and vase paintings.

### *Antiquity*

There were many descriptions, especially written by the critics from the Symbolists’ circle connecting Duncan’s dance with Greek statues, figures on vases and with Greek mythology; but critics’ opinions about the nature of this ‘antiquity’ differed. Svetlov believes that she “reconstructs, restores and revives the ancient Greek dance,”<sup>53</sup> and also combines and spiritualizes elements taken from vases and frescoes. He even called Duncan the “Schliemann of ancient choreography”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Plescheev, in *Aisedora*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Belyayev, in *Aisedora*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> Rafalovich, in *Aisedora*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Shebuev, in Steegmuller, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Svetlov, in Steegmuller, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Belyayev, in *Aisedora*, 78.

<sup>47</sup> Rafalovich, in *Aisedora*, 59.

<sup>48</sup> Filippov, in *Aisedora*, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Svetlov, in Steegmuller, 45.

<sup>50</sup> Voloshin, in *Aisedora*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Belyayev, in *Aisedora*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Shebuev, in Steegmuller, 45.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Svetlov, in *Aisedora*, 49.



meaning that she is a real discoverer of the Greek art. Nikolai Shebuev, on the contrary, finds in her dance fake antiquity—contemporary images, which remind him paintings by the representative of the late Russian academicism Henryk Siemiradzky's (1843-1902)<sup>55</sup> therefore, he sees Greek poses and movements through the prism of the late pseudo-classical style, full of affected pathos.

Belyayev identifies Duncan with the early and late Renaissance tracing her light tunics back to Botticelli and Titian's pictures.<sup>56</sup> Alexander Benois connects Duncan's 'dance reform' with the Pre-Raphaelites' transformation of painting, which was aimed to "return to people their godly face."<sup>57</sup> Protesting against the ugliness of life in a bourgeois society, this group of artists turned to the early Renaissance epoch, where they found an ideal of woman's beauty with pure and naïve faces, but with expressions of slight sadness, melancholy, and the presentiment of death. Andre Levinson found traits of several epochs, but all of them in contemporary interpretation. He "discussed Isadora's dance, the Hellenism of 1900s Russia, and the art of the English Pre-Raphaelites as clichéd, popularized forms of classicism, designed to appeal to the public, but stopping short of a real break with conventional art."<sup>58</sup>

Valerian Svetlov recalls the famous mystification that French poet Pierre Louÿs' *Songs of Bilitis*, published in 1894, produced among the public. This popular book of erotic poetry misled even specialists on the Ancient Greek literature, as the poet copied to perfection the writing mannerisms of the Ancient Greek poetess, Sappho. "If you are familiar with the *Songs of Bilitis*, you will easily notice [images from this collection] in Miss Duncan's reconstruction"—notes Svetlov.<sup>59</sup> This comparison meant that the critic saw a clever parallel in Duncan's appropriation of images of antiquity. Voloshin finds elements of ancient Egyptian culture ("she makes visible the color of the air surrounding her body"<sup>60</sup> like an Egyptian statue) and images from the Sevres vases of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that depicted the special elegance of Greek female dancers. Voloshin was reminded of Bernini's famous baroque sculpture of Daphnae, which showed the process of the girl's transformation into a Grecian laurel. And he also mentioned Diana of Versailles and Botticelli's famous painting, *Primavera*. However, Voloshin starts his article with a poetic description of Duncan, dancing at the Greek amphitheater near the Athens Acropolis and the Parthenon. He uses many picturesque details: the ruins of the stage supported by hunched-backed dwarfs with bearded faces such as Socrates, sparse and spindly olive trees, accompanied by the deafening, dry and ringing crackle of cicadas, Doric pillars, and white and dusty roads, creating the atmosphere of a hot Greek day and an abandoned space of ancient civilization.<sup>61</sup> Rafalovich is sure that Duncan "stands on the firm

<sup>55</sup> Shebuev, in Steegmuller, 43.

<sup>56</sup> Belyayev in *Aisedora*, 77.

<sup>57</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 60.

<sup>58</sup> Tim Scholl. *From Petipa to Balanchine*, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Svetlov, in *Aisedora*, 51.

<sup>60</sup> Voloshin, in *Aisedora*, 36.

<sup>61</sup> Voloshin, in *Aisedora*, 30.

ground of historical truth,”<sup>62</sup> denying his colleagues’ doubts in the authenticity of her dances. But Andre Levinson noted ironically that “the public received her dances as antique artifacts, despite their obvious unauthenticity and the fact that Isadora preferred to discuss them as dances of the future, not the past.”<sup>63</sup> However, Russian Symbolists continued to look for different artistic epochs in Duncan’s performances.

*Duncan’s dance in Symbolists’ perception*

The Moscow magazine *Vesy—Scales* (1904–1909) welcomed Duncan ecstatically. It belonged to the group of young Moscow Symbolists, led by the famous poet Valery Bryusov, who had already declared new principles of art. Bryusov’s article of 1902 ‘Unnecessary Truth’ which appeared in St. Petersburg magazine *Mir Iskusstva* was devoted to Moscow Art Theater, an organization that he accused of using an ultra-realistic approach to performances. “I summon you from the unnecessary truth of the contemporary stage to the deliberate conventionality of the ancient theater” proclaimed Bryusov.<sup>64</sup> This call to turn theater principles to that of antiquity was a part of the restrospectivism of Russia’s *fin de siècle* culture with its interest in Greek and Roman antiquity and other historical epochs.<sup>65</sup> Probably Duncan’s channeling of antiquity was reason enough to consider her art in every issue of the journal, *Vesy*. Duncan’s many connections with European modernist art was also considered to be of importance to Russian artistic circles. The journal, launched in 1904, had a great interest in the new artistic trends in Europe, and in every issue, articles on European modernist writers such as Emile Verhaeren, Charles Baudelaire, Maurice Maeterlinck, Oscar Wilde, Rainer Maria Rilke and others names were introduced to the Russian audience.<sup>66</sup> There were foreign correspondents in France, England, and Germany which let the magazine keep pace with contemporary art in Europe. In this context the *Vesy*’s decision to publish numerous articles on the modernist dancer Isadora Duncan, who was visually connected with antiquity but belonged to modern European culture, despite her American origin, was in keeping with the cultural coordinates of the journal.

In 1905, after Duncan’s Moscow tour, *Vesy* published articles on her art almost in every issue. Andrey Bely, later a theorist of Symbolism, Sergey Solovyov, a nephew of the famous Russian philosopher, Vladimir Solovyov, and a specialist on antiquity, poetess Lyudmila Vil’kina, and others left many descriptions of of Duncan’s programs. They described the numerous historical and aesthetic associations that were present in Duncan’s dance. Lyudmila Vil’kina saw in Duncan’s performances “sacred symphonies”<sup>67</sup> “sun- and moon-lit mysteries of

<sup>62</sup> Rafalovich, in *Aisedora*, 57.

<sup>63</sup> Levinson, in Scholl, 42-43.

<sup>64</sup> Bryusov, in Scholl, 41.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>66</sup> A.V. Lavrov, D.E. Maximov, “*Vesy*”. *Russkaya literatura i zhurnalistika nachala XX veka* (*Russian literature and Journalism of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*) (M.: Nauka, 1984, 65-136), 86-87.

<sup>67</sup> Lyudmila Vil’kina. *Aisedora Duncan. Vesy*, 1905, № 1, 40.

passion and sorrow.”<sup>68</sup> She described images of an awakening nature, a flautist from an Etruscan vase, a refined face of Botticelli's Venus, a female body on the Burn-Jones' Golden ladder; Aphrodite turning into furious Maenad, and praying Artemis... She depicted a “lunar ecstasy” in which the dancer “was becoming more and more transparent and now she is lifted up toward the sky.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, the attempts to search for traits of different historical epochs in Duncan's dance and use elevated style was represented in Vil'kina's descriptions quite clearly.

The fifth issue of *Vesy* reprinted the above-mentioned article by poet, artist and critic Maximilian Voloshin, which was very poetic, sublime and close to the aesthetic program of the journal. The images in this article which he uses to describe Duncan's dance, are related to Ancient Egypt, Greek and Roman Antiquity, and Renaissance and Baroque periods. He praised “the immortal union of the dance and nudity, apotheosis of life and youth,” and referred to Duncan's abilities to “pull away from the ground and run through the air, like a little child.”<sup>70</sup> The Duncan dance, in his opinion, wonderfully expresses the essence of music and attitude of the dancer towards the world, the human soul, and the cosmos. Her dance had come from remote antiquity, but is directed at the future and will remain throughout centuries a model of beauty and freedom.

Similarly sublime is the description by Andrey Bely, who ‘realized that [her dance] was about the unspoken ... She rushed to the heights of immortality’<sup>71</sup> He asserted that Duncan reached in her art the highest spirituality and embodied something beyond words, which had an enormous philosophical and esoteric value. Sergey Solovyov found the creation of ‘spiritual corporeality’ in Isadora's work. ‘In her dance the form finally overcomes the stagnation of matter, and each movement of her body is an embodiment of spiritual acts.’<sup>72</sup> He also glorified Isadora in his collection of poems *Flowers and Incense* as a “spring smile, a Nymph of Ionia.”<sup>73</sup>

Poet-symbolist Mikhail Sizov in the magazine *Art* stressed that Duncan had brought to the world a new meaning of corporeality and broadened the traditional understanding of a human body and its mission. ‘Duncan's art affirms and represents the Body in its self-worth, its beauty and free love toward the Spirit... In her heart, there many strands are vibrating intended to unite the cultures of West and East ... She is a comet, shining with a light from afar.’<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>70</sup> Voloshin, in *Aisedora*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Andrey Bely. *Isadora Duncan*, in *Aisedora*, 89.

<sup>72</sup> S. S. *Aisedora Duncan v Moskve. Vesy*. 1905. № 2, 40.

<sup>73</sup> Solovyov S., in *Aisedora*, 382.

<sup>74</sup> M. Sizov. *Vechera Aisedory Duncan v Moskve, Iskusstvo*. 1905, volume. 1, 48-51, see 50-51. His guess about a mixture of Western and Eastern traditions in San Francisco of the Duncan's childhood time will be developed later in a PhD thesis by the American scholar Mark Frederick Wheeler *Surface to Essence: Appropriation of the Orient by Modern Dance*. (The Ohio State University, 1984).

One publication in *Vesy* looks quite strange. Most likely Bryusov himself had prepared it, since he did most of the work during the first two years.<sup>75</sup> The article was entitled ‘Heinrich Heine on Isadora Duncan,’<sup>76</sup> although the poet had died a long time before. This was not a real article and was not devoted to Duncan—the editor used a fragment from the unfinished novel of 1837 *Florentinische Nächte* (“*Florentine Nights*”) by Heine where the German representative of Romanticism described a dancer Mademoiselle Laurence who amazed him. He saw the main achievement of this girl as her ability to express her inner feelings in special and unique movements, which were far from the classical ballet technique, but close to ancient pantomime. Sometimes she reminded the writer of a furious Bacchante from antique vases, especially when she made some wild movements with her head. Describing the dance of Laurence, Heine claims that her movements are the “words of a special language.”<sup>77</sup> We can assume that Bryusov was looking for a way for dance perception in the epoch of Romanticism and using Heine’s writings, tried to substantiate his own admiration of a new choreography.

Reviewers from the Symbolists’ circle demonstrate an elevated style of writing, richness of imagination, breadth of historical associations, attempts to understand the essence of Duncan’s art, and find the origins of her creativity.

#### *Philosophical approach to dance*

A contemporary American scholar Kimerer LaMothe called Isadora Duncan a dancer philosopher,<sup>78</sup> who was able to express her thoughts through dance. The dancer and scholar of Duncan Jeanne Bresciani, who cataloged in 1975 the remains of Isadora’s library, contained numerous books by famous philosophers, historians, psychologists and scientists, confirms the same idea,<sup>79</sup> analyzing sources of Isadora’s inspiration. Some Russian critics foresaw these future insights, for instance, the above-mentioned Symbolists, while some writers ridiculed her for her ambitions to be an artist and a dancer. Alexander Benois stated, that “it is pointless to look for philosophical principles in her ideas; as a genuine artist, she is motivated not by logic, but by elemental inspiration.”<sup>80</sup> He admits the artistic talent of Duncan, but refuses to see philosophical principles in her choreography. While dismissing the philosophical basis of Duncan’s art, Benois cannot deny a great spiritual power in her activities. He calls her a “a real apostle of her own teaching,” and claims that “the small and modest art of Madame Duncan contains the origins of the eternal and global: it should put out sprouts everywhere, and

<sup>75</sup> K.N. Azadovsky, D.E. Maximov. *Bryusov i Vesy (Bryusov and Vesy)* (M.: Nauka. Literaturnoe nasledstvo.1976, 257-324), 271.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe. *Nietzsche’s Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), X.

<sup>79</sup> Jeanne Bresciani. *A Catalog of the Isadora Duncan Library in the Victor Seroff Collection*. Unpublished MA thesis. (New York University, 1982), Appendix E.

<sup>80</sup> Benois, in Steegmuller, 47.

from it should grow the reform of one of the most exhausted and abandoned forms of life: dance.”<sup>81</sup>

Retelling the speech of Duncan, which he listened to at the dinner after her second performance in St. Petersburg, Benois pays a special attention to her aesthetic ideas focusing on her thoughts about beauty: “The only thing that matters is beauty, the pursuit of beauty in order to make all life beautiful. In the presence of beauty, even suffering has no terror, even death does not frighten, beauty illumines everything, and it is mankind’s best comforter.”<sup>82</sup> He describes her thoughts on the beauty of nature in which the most beautiful creature is a human being. “Everything is good when it repeats, harmonizes, fits together, gives a lively life, when it’s not uniform, not disjointed or accidental. Beauty is in motion, in repetition, in rhythm,”<sup>83</sup> comments Benois on Duncan’s ideas about a necessity to restore a beautiful human image familiar to ancient artists.

Voloshin also believes that dance can surpass words. “Nothing can shake the soul so much as the dance... Dance is the highest of the arts because it reaches the most primary of rhythm, the one enclosed in the pulsation of a human heart,”<sup>84</sup> claims the poet. Philosopher Vasily Rozanov will soon predict that ‘Isadora Duncan’s personality, her school will play a large role in the battle of ideas of the new civilization’<sup>85</sup> recognizing her contribution to the history of ideas. However, many reviews of Duncan performances represented negative records. There were critics who refused to see any depths in her dance, which evidently challenged them.

*Poor theater of a ‘silly American miss’*

In an open letter by the famous conductor and musical critic Alexander Ziloti to the violinist Leopold Auer, who conducted the orchestra during Isadora’s second tour in Russia in January 1905, 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 a paper lost on the floor... Then she began to dance a kind of cancan, then to jump like a goat.”<sup>86</sup> The next day Auer published an open reply, excusing 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 from horror,” which occurred at the first moment he was acquainted with the style of the dance.<sup>87</sup> “To many people, it was strange to see Duncan, her bare legs, her wild leaps, her jumping like a baby goat, her whirling, illustrating the miraculous sounds of Chopin... This was wearily

<sup>81</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 60.

<sup>82</sup> Benois, in Steegmuller, 47.

<sup>83</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 69.

<sup>84</sup> Voloshin in *Aisedora*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Vasily Rozanov. *Tantsy nevinnosti (Dances of innocence)*, in *Aisedora*, 145.

<sup>86</sup> *Open letter from A.I. Ziloti to L.S Auer*, in *Aisedora*, 80.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

dull, very monotonous and very daring,”<sup>88</sup> wrote Plescheev in December 1904, representing the opinion of general public. “She does not charm, doesn’t move [the audience], she only shows original poses that are reminiscent of dancers depicted on antique vases. She embodies ancient dances and from this perspective deserves our attention. But then again to see this is pleasant only in small doses,”<sup>89</sup> assumes he, supposing that the admiration by Isadora was provoked only with a help of the European press.

Belyayev thinks that Duncan should add her dance to the collection of Russian sans-culottes’ art, meaning by that the literary works by Maxim Gorky and paintings by the *Peredvizhniki* (*Wanderers*). “Sans-culotte” Gorky represented a new generation of have-nots, who in the Russian language were called “bare-foot” people—they traveled around the country without shoes (*bosyaki*). The painters of *Peredvizhniki* group, which was created in 1874 and existed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expressed their compassion to the poorest people of Russia who were living in desperate conditions even 40 years later after the abolition of the serfdom. In Repin’s famous painting *Haulers on the Volga-river*, we can see shoeless people in the rags pulling the barge. Figuratively, the reformers took off the shoes from the old art. Belyayev states sarcastically that Russian art lives through an epoch of a great revolution and concludes sarcastically: “Long life to the free art!” having in mind Isadora’s bare feet representation (“bosyachestvo”), as it was at Gorky’s and Repin’s works.<sup>90</sup> Alexander Benois, being a passionate lover of classical ballet and considering Duncan as its “dangerous enemy,”<sup>91</sup> nevertheless, tries to protect Isadora Duncan from critics of *Slovo* newspaper whose denunciation of Duncan as a “vulgar poseur, a silly American miss” he found unfair and hostile.<sup>92</sup>

Despite a certain lack of understanding, we do not find anything offensive in these negative reviews; they just represent a view from a different perspective and a different background. Part of the audience was not ready to perceive Duncan’s innovations including her usage of classical music to accompany her dance!

#### *Classical music for dance?*

This issue was one of the most controversial for Duncan’s contemporaries from the very beginning of her career, although a decade later the music of Chopin, List, Gluck and others were commonly used in dance performances. Lyudmila Vil’kina thinks that Duncan uses motifs by Chopin, Beethoven, Rameau and Gluck because ancient music and rhythms had been lost. Chopin’s waltzes and Beethoven’s symphonies are connected with Duncan’s movements only “accidentally,”<sup>93</sup> without any logic. Moreover, the critic claims, at Duncan’s performances the audience immersed so deeply in the spectacle, does not listen to the music and is not

<sup>88</sup> Plescheev, in *Aisedora*, 46.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>90</sup> Belyayev, in *Aisedora*, 79.

<sup>91</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 61.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 61, 59.

<sup>93</sup> Vil’kina in *Vesy*, 1905, #1, 40.

interested in what is being played.<sup>94</sup> However, Shebuev in his description of the dance to Chopin's Mazurka in B-major, op.7, no 1, shows that the dance fitted in with the music completely. "She [Duncan] emerged and swam like Undine, swaying in time with the beat, waving her hands with the beat, smiling, diving with the beat... her dancing merged into a single chord with Chopin's Mazurka." Then he adds that "her body is as though bewitched by the music. It is as though you yourself were bathing in the music."<sup>95</sup> Voloshin writes about music as an embodied partner of Duncan. "You do not hear the music. The music is instilled and falls silent in her body like in a magic crystal. The music becomes radiant and flows with fluid streams from her every gesture, music begins to blossom with roses appearing in the air around her, music hugs her, kisses her, falls like a golden rain, swims as a white swan and shines with a mystic halo around her head."<sup>96</sup> However, this perception is not shared by some critics. For instance, Plescheev does not see any connection to the music. He is sure that trying to illustrate Chopin, Isadora can hardly express the mood of the composer.<sup>97</sup> The only thing she can represent is her individuality, which shows her a way of interpretation of the music.

Benois as well cannot agree with Duncan's approach to working with the music. The pieces of Chopin and Beethoven, in his opinion, could be possibly illustrated by the means of dance, but they do "require ... other mime-dramas and other facial expressions." Both composers are "too rich in content, dramatic, and tumultuous" for Duncan and exceed her plastique potential. Duncan's "depictions" are quite lame, and Beethoven "is beyond her means."<sup>98</sup> Besides, Duncan is too "sentimental" for these composers, and her facial expressions are too "monotonous and poor." The most unsuccessful interpretation is the dance to Gluck's Orpheus, in which she replaces singing by the pantomime, making it "sluggish and unnecessary" like in all her illustrations of Chopin's pieces. However, if she uses different music, like "the transparent, clear and absolutely wonderful music of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries," working with "pieces with very light dramatic content" (staging myths about Pan an Echo, Narcisse, Bacchus, and Ariadne), she makes a very charming impression.<sup>99</sup> "Rebelling against vulgar dances to vulgar music, Duncan turned toward ... the 'absolutes' of austere music, which cannot be connected with vulgarity. But in the choosing of these "absolutes," and applying them to the particularities of her own talent she made a mistake,"<sup>100</sup> - sums up Benois categorically. He also starts a discussion on *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork), which could possibly stem from Isadora's dance.

#### *Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork)?*

The ideas by the German composer Richard Wagner about the total artwork corresponded with the ideas of art practitioners of the Silver Age who also

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>95</sup> Shebuev, in Steegmuller, 42.

<sup>96</sup> Voloshin, in *Aisedora*, 36.

<sup>97</sup> Plescheev, in *Aisedora*, 46-47.

<sup>98</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 64.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 66-68.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 61.

dreamed about the synthesis of arts and turned to antiquity to find ways to restore the lost wholeness of the art. Wagner believed that artistic synthesis could be found in musical drama, while Russian thinkers switched the focus to the dance. Duncan's first tours fueled further discussions on the subject.

Benois, in his search for ways to transform the contemporary theater and make the audience experience catharsis, referred to Wagner's ideas on musical drama and to the Ancient Greece theater experience. "The more profoundly the author's idea is expressed, the more comprehensively it is perceived by the people; thus, we could come closer to the aim of art. It was meant by Wagner in his *Gesammelte Kunstwerke*, and is the same ideal the antique theater strived for in its tragedies, which were poems enriched with dances and music. Why should music not be enriched by poetry and dances? After all, a composer deals not only with sounds but with the whole world of ideas and images."<sup>101</sup> He will return to his thoughts not only in the following reviews of Duncan performances, but also in practice, creating with Sergey Diaghilev the new Russian ballet.

Critic, Rafalovich, also discusses the problem of the historically conditioned separation of different kinds of arts, syncretic in their beginning. He claims that fine art, sculpture, and poetry had renewed themselves successfully by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but dance had frozen itself in the dead forms of classical ballet. Although the critic never says that Duncan's mission is to merge separated arts and, thus, to infuse divine religious character into art, but the fact that he writes these thoughts after her concert shows that he possibly has it in mind.<sup>102</sup> Voloshin adds, "Crushed by the mirrors of our perceptions, the world achieves eternal, extra-sensual integrity in the movements of dance. Cosmic and physiological, emotional and rational, feeling and cognition merge in the united poem of dance."<sup>103</sup> He sees a new kind of wholeness in Isadora's dance.

The discussion on the total artwork continued after subsequent Duncan's tours of 1907-1908 and 1913. Alexander Rostislavov in the journal *Theater and Art*, № 5, 1908, still believed that 'In Duncan's dances there are distinct allusions to the possibility of arts merging on their common basis.'<sup>104</sup> However, later, in 1913, Alexander Kugel mocked this idea. "It is only the fantasy [of the critics] that erases the boundaries between the arts, and not Duncan herself."<sup>105</sup> By that time, the idea of a total artwork was tightly connected with the Diaghilev's productions, created for the *Ballets Russes* by the group of Russian artists, musicians, and choreographers.

#### *Duncan dance vs ballet*

The juxtaposition of classical ballet and Duncan's dance was central for discussions of that time. Of course, critics compared her movements to rigid techniques of the ballerinas and they saw in Duncan simplicity, freedom, expressive

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>102</sup> Rafalovich, in *Aisedora*, 58.

<sup>103</sup> Voloshin, in *Aisedora*, 37.

<sup>104</sup> Alexandr Rostislavov. *Duse and Duncan*. in *Aisedora*, 121.

<sup>105</sup> Alexandr Kugel. *Zametki (Notes)*, in *Aisedora*, 196.



hands and arms, an absence of acrobatics and of steel toes. Shebuev stressed that “Duncan has no ballet technique; she does not aim at *fouettes* and *cabrioles*. But there is so much sculpture in her, so much color and simplicity.”<sup>106</sup> Benois retells the conversation with Duncan, in which she says: “There is no human dignity in the ballet. The dancers are mere puppets in motion, not people,”<sup>107</sup> having in mind that “the ballet ... represents an overcoming of difficulties, an acrobaticism, some sort of complicated and excruciating mechanism ... the most horrible thing in ballet is a total disregard of rhythm in the movements, the jerkiness of the gestures.”<sup>108</sup> However, he does not admit that he shares her ideas and does not disregard the achievements of the classical dance.

Rafalovich compares classical ballet to artificial flowers and labeled as acrobatics, writing about Duncan's dance. “There is no space for creativity in the form in which the formerly lively and inspired dance has frozen.... Only a competition in technique remains.”<sup>109</sup> He also regrets that the “crowd worships the ‘steel toe’ of the ballerina”<sup>110</sup> instead of worshipping a divine revelation.

In the fragment by Heinrich Heine, mentioned above, Bryusov also gives special attention to this contradiction: in classical dance, he sees the supremacy of artificiality, the ideal, and falsehood. In the dance by Laurence (whom Bryusov evidently identifies with Duncan) the writer stresses that the soul of the woman dances with her face and body,<sup>111</sup> and danced as the nature told her, although Laurence had no idea about the classical ballet taught by Vestris.

Vil'kina notes that classical ballet had lost its creativity and become a series of exercises, a kind of refined acrobaticism, aesthetic pedantry, and idle pleasures, and Duncan revived the creative side of the dance, adding to antique movements the new joy and pride of a super-man.<sup>112</sup> Rafalovich asserts that “rejecting the dead formalism of the so-called ballet, she [Duncan] strives to create a dance not severed from nature and life, but flowing from life... Miss Duncan has taken the art of the dance, which had found itself in a blind alley, on to the true road.”<sup>113</sup> By the true road, he probably means the renovation of a dance pallet, which should fit in with a contemporary search of expression in the arts. He adds, “She doesn't return to the ancient art, but steps back only to the crossroad where it had lost its way.”<sup>114</sup> Benois also notes, that Duncan “does not despise [classical] ballet, but strives to rework it.”<sup>115</sup> He is sure that there is an opportunity to “save” the Russian ballet from “destruction,” and Duncan's dance will help to do it.<sup>116</sup> “Her movement idiom was largely self-taught and free form, a perfect Dionysian antithesis to the rigors

<sup>106</sup> Shebuev, in Steegmuller, 44.

<sup>107</sup> Benois, in Steegmuller, 47.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Rafalovich, in *Aisedora*, 57.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Heine, in *Vesy*, 1905, #4, 85.

<sup>112</sup> Vil'kina, in *Vesy*, 1905, #1, 40.

<sup>113</sup> Rafalovich, in Steegmuller, 46.

<sup>114</sup> Rafalovich, in *Aisedora*, 57.

<sup>115</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 68.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

of the nineteenth-century ballet's apollonian danse d'école,"<sup>117</sup> sums up critic and later—a historian of ballet Andre Levinson, using Nietzsche's terminology, dear to Isadora, which also can be found in Vil'kina's reviews. Thus, most writers see in Duncan's dance an overcoming of the numerous ballet clichés and new freedom of bodily expression.

By 1908, the rhetoric on Duncan dance changes and a new term flashes about in many articles. In some publications, we can find the Russian word *plyaska* instead of *tanets*.

*Plyaska, tanets and a new meaning of dance*

The word *tanets* has a more formal meaning in the Russian language than *plyaska* (or *plyas*). The first one refers to social and ballet dance, the second one, which some writers used to characterize Duncan's art relates to a folk, ancient, wild, unrefined, ecstatic and natural dance. Soon this word becomes quite widespread among those who cover concerts of Isadora.<sup>118</sup>

It is difficult to say who used this word first; probably Sergey Rafalovich<sup>119</sup> in 1904, but the definition was so apt that most of the articles written in 1908 already contain it. Writer Nikolai Molostvov organized a discussion with his famous colleague Akim Volynsky, devoted to this issue. In his brochure, Molostvov stresses the difference between *tanets* and *plyas*, contrasting the artificial and routine dance in quadrille and ballet to the dancing of Georgian lezghinka and other national dances, "where the music fuses with the gesture and rhythm of the dance, and the music is in harmony with the national temperament"<sup>120</sup>. Molostvov notes that the 'plyas' of Duncan causes a psycho-physiological impression in the audience, but yet the dancer has not found the right embodiment of the proclaimed 'dance of the future.' He also turns to the issue of compatibility between the high aesthetical goal, which Isadora propagates, and her choreographic means. Volynsky thinks that Duncan's dance gestures and sounds are both quite elemental, spontaneous and natural, that is why they can be merged harmonically, although in some cases this merger is not successful, for instance, in her work based on Botticelli's paintings. Still even this imperfect embodiment is a "poetically inspired gesture" and a "heroic deed of art", and the reincarnation of music in

<sup>117</sup> Levinson in Scholl, 42-43.

<sup>118</sup> Russian scholar Irina Sirotkina, devoting the article to the differences between *plyaska* and *tanets*, explains: "In its wide and generic meaning, *plyaska* is the opposite of dance (*tanets*) just as the free and even wild expression of feeling <...> If *tanets*, especially of the ceremonial ballroom, is a rule-bound "art" combining, in uneven proportions, "order" and "freedom", <...> in *plyaska* the latter prevails... *Plyaska* and *tanets* are also antipodes of class: the aristocracy dances at balls, ordinary people *plyashut* (dance) in taverns. *Plyaska* celebrates freedom from prohibitions imposed by the repressive authorities or the official culture". (Irina Sirotkina. Dance-plyaska in Russia of the Silver Age. *Dance Research*. Volume 28, Page 135-152, November 2010). This topic was touched upon by Elena Yushkova in her PhD dissertation (2004) and the book *Plastika preodoleniya*, 77-85.

<sup>119</sup> Rafalovich, in *Aisedora*, 57.

<sup>120</sup> Nikolai Molostvov. *Isadora Duncan*, in *Aisedora*, 103.

the viewer's impressions of the dance is necessary.<sup>121</sup> Molostvov summarizes that Duncan's *plyas* and her inspirational gesture is much more important than the perfect technique of the contemporary ballet. In Volynsky's opinion, the dancer's work becomes an appeal to a new art, to the spiritual art of Apollo, contrary to Dionysus.<sup>122</sup>

The philosopher Vasily Rozanov in 1909 wrote: "In her *plyaska* the entire human being is reflected, the entire civilization lives—its plasticity, its music, its lines, its soul, its everything!"<sup>123</sup> Rozanov 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 Duncan's *plyaska* as "primary dances, early like the morning, 'primary' as food and drink, 'not invented', just as with drink and food, and stemming from a human being's physiology and sense of self!"<sup>124</sup> He affirmed that the dance of Duncan was ancient and consisted of naïve, pure, and natural jumps and leaps. Comparing Duncan's *plyaska* to ballet, Rozanov welcomed the revival of the movements of upper torso, arms, neck, head and chest and absence of ballet pas. He concluded: "Nature dances—not fallen nature, but primordial nature."<sup>125</sup>

Famous literary critic and translator Alexander Gornfeld in his volume *Books and People*, published in St. Petersburg in 1908, also refers to this new trend: "What can I say about her *plyaska*? This is an extraordinary, inexhaustible flow of beauty, naturalness, purity, ... which is involved in its magical life... This is an absolute expression of a human being in all its natural grace, a god-like vitality in its movements, spirituality of its outer form... Isadora Duncan does not dance, she just lives... [Nevertheless], everything is a result not of a primitive naturalness... but of high art: it is a creative work of genius, and not raw nature."<sup>126</sup> Thus, he substantiates the new idea that *plyaska* could be a product of a contemporary elite culture and a result of hard work as well.

Alexander Benois was furious about Duncan's "'baroque idea' to illustrate Beethoven, Chopin and other classics with the *plyas*;" he sees in it "a profanation" and "tactlessness."<sup>127</sup> Nikolai Vashkevich in his research on choreography of 'all times and nations,' actively uses the term *plyaska* telling about the pre-ballet choreography and the art of Duncan.<sup>128</sup>

The discussion on *plyaska* continues in *Apollon* magazine in 1909-1914, where scholar Yulia Slonimskaya writes on Ancient Greek dances and pantomimes actively using this word. No doubt, Duncan was a reason for the appearance of

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 102-112.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Vasily Rozanov. *Dances of innocence*, in *Aisedora*, 144.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>126</sup> Arkady Gornfeld. *Isadora Duncan*, in *Aisedora*, 101.

<sup>127</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 61.

<sup>128</sup> See—Nikolay Vashkevich. *Istoriya khoreografii vseh vremen i narodov (History of choreography of all times and nations)*. (M. 1908, second edition—St. Petersburg. Lan'. Planeta muzyki. 2009).

that kind of discussion, which switched later to the new plastique of Diaghilev's ballets, also based on ancient rituals and very modern at the same time.<sup>129</sup>

Influenced by Duncan, Russian scholars launched a research on dance history. We can find traces of these discussions in several significant books, which were written in 1906–1918.

### Isadora and dance history: new books

Isadora's dance became a catalyst for the further development of Russian dance history. Critics Valerian Svetlov, Nikolay Vashkevich, Sergey Khudekov, Andrey Levinson and later—Alexey Sidorov in their volumes reflected this huge interest in Duncan's work and acknowledged that choreography in Russia had received a strong impulse.<sup>130</sup>

Valerian Svetlov's books, *Terpsichore* (1906) and *Modern Ballet* (1911) were devoted to discussions on the dance reforms of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the art of Duncan, and the work of choreographers-innovators such as Michel Fokine, and Alexander Gorsky. Nikolai Vashkevich wrote a history of choreography starting from prehistorical times and focusing on the dances of Ancient Greece, Rome, and... Isadora Duncan (published in Moscow in 1908), but his first brochure, published earlier in 1905, was entitled "Dionysian theater of contemporary life. "Sketch on the synthesis of art," which was evidently influenced by discussions on Isadora. He also wrote about the theater of the future, which apparently was Duncan's idea. His books had been forgotten for many decades and appeared in Russia again only in 2009. Another attempt to write a history of choreography was made by amateur scholar Sergey Khudekov whose book *The history of dances in four parts*, released in 1913-16, and 1918, represented a broader picture of dance development, and analyzed not only Ancient Greek and Roman, but also medieval dances and history of European classical ballet. He planned to add to his book a rich illustrative material, which he had collected during a long time. His book also had not been republished until 2009.

Critics and art historians such as Alexander Benois, Andre Levinson, Yakov Tugendhold, Akim Volynsky, Alexander Cherepnin, Boris Asafiev (to mention only the most prominent figures) began to take an interest in dance forms. Levinson's books *Ballet masters* (1914) and *Old and new ballet* (1918) were based on new approaches to the analysis of choreography, and the application of aesthetical terminology to ballet criticism. Later, Levinson became a propagandist

<sup>129</sup> See Yushkova. *Plastika preodoleniya*, 73-105.

<sup>130</sup> See Vashkevich, 1908, 2009; Levinson. *Mastera baleta (Masters of ballet)*. 1914, *Staryi i novyi balet (Ballet old and new)*, 1918—republished in Levinson Andrey. *Staryi i novyi balet. Mastera baleta*. (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Krasnodar: Lan'. Planeta muzyki. 2008); Svetlov Valerian. *Sovremennyi balet (Modern ballet)*. (SPB. 1911), republished Valerian Svetlov. *Sovremennyi balet (Modern ballet)*, (SPB, Moscow, Krasnodar: Lan'. Planeta muzyki., 2009); Khudekov Sergey. *Illyustrirovannaya istoriya tantsa (Illustrated dance history)*, 1913-16, 1918, republished Khudekov Sergey. *Illyustrirovannaya istoriya tantsa*. (M.: Eksmo, 2009). Sidorov Alexey. *Sovremennyi tanets (Modern dance)* (M.: Perivina, 1922).

of Russian ballet abroad. He stood for the purity of ballet and did not accept Duncan's innovations in dance in general, but probably was inspired by the discussions on the relationship between a free dance and classical ballet. Composer and critic, Cherepnin, published his works *On the ways of ballet realism* (1915-16) and *Ballet symbols* (1917), while searching for common methods of analysis between ballet and musical forms. He insisted that ballet had to be understood not through the prism of principles of dramatic theater, but only through its plastic and choreographic means.<sup>131</sup> A detailed consideration of all these books is beyond this article's limits. However, as we can see, the appearance of literature on dance history coincides with and follows the extensive tours of Isadora Duncan in Russia.

### **“Genuine beauty:” coverage of Duncan's tours in the following prerevolutionary years**

After 1905, tours of Duncan took place in 1907-08, 1909 and 1913, and reviews of that time became less impressionistic and more analytical. In 1907, the Russian translation of Duncan's essay *Dance of the future* was published<sup>132</sup> and after that, critics could use her own theoretical statements in their descriptions of her dance. In the preface to the book, writer Nikolay Suslov stressed that Duncan had spiritualized the dance, “transformed it into a story of emotional depth.”<sup>133</sup> Duncan's other achievements included the concept of the solo dance, bringing dancing to the human level and making it personal to the dancer, as well as a form of rehabilitation of the human body itself.<sup>134</sup>

In 1913, Duncan's Russian tour caused another flow of reviews. At this time, critics were no longer in a state of shock. They attempted to figure out what led the public to concerts of the barefoot dancer beside the considerations of novelty. Valerian Svetlov, commenting on Duncan's sold-out concerts, wrote, “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.”<sup>135</sup> Alexander Benois admitted that Duncan's art had become vital for the modernization of the Russian ballet theater, which he considers as an art of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. “In ten years the principles of the 18<sup>th</sup> century will be gone. Being a passionate lover of this mincing art, I feel pain thinking of it, but I believe that it doesn't make sense to galvanize the deceased anymore. The new life is needed. The new life in dance is preached by Duncan. Maybe she or her principles could revitalize our ballet.”<sup>136</sup> He was

<sup>131</sup> Elizaveta Suritz, Natalia Roslavleva, Oleg Petrov. *Baletovedenie (Ballet studies)* in *Ballet: Entsiklopedia. M. Sovetskaya entsiklopedia*. 1981, <http://dancelib.ru/baletenc/item/f00/s00/e0000231/index.shtml>, last visit—01.03.2016

<sup>132</sup> Aisidora (sic) Denkan, *Tanets buduschego, Lektsiya*. Transl. N. Fil'kov, ed. and intr. Nik. Suslov, (M. Tipo-litografiya Cherkovoi, 1907).

<sup>133</sup> Duncan Aisedora. *Tanets Buduschego (Dance of the Future)*. Lektsiya. Transl. N. Fil'kov, Ed. N. Suslov. Moskva, 1907.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, II.

<sup>135</sup> Svetlov. *Duncan*, 1911, in *Aisedora*, 164.

<sup>136</sup> Benois, in *Aisedora*, 68.

right: the practitioners of the Russian ballet were enraptured by her performances and found new ideas for their work. Among them were young choreographers of the Mariinsky and Bolshoi theaters Michel Fokine and Alexander Gorsky, and ballerinas Anna Pavlova and Vera Karalli.<sup>137</sup>

Critics again accented the spiritual content and the embodiment of “genuine” beauty, despite some imperfections of the body and the limited lexicon of the dancer. ‘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 greater power and naturalness than Duncan,’<sup>138</sup> wrote theater director Komissarzhevsky, reflecting on the recognition which the dancer received in Russia.

In 1914, *Severnye zapiski* magazine published Duncan’s article *What I think about dance*<sup>139</sup> which consisted of several chapters named, *Wave movements in nature, Choir, Gymnastics and dance, and School of dance*. This literary-political liberal-democratic monthly, published in 1913–1917 in Petrograd (St. Petersburg changed its name during the World War I) gathered the most famous authors of that time: poets Alexander Block, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam; writers Boris Zaitsev, Ivan Shmelyov, Alexei Remizov, as well as literary and art critics, as well as philosophers. This publication took place a year after the last prerevolutionary tour of Duncan, demonstrating that the interest of Russian audience to the American dancer remained and Duncan was recognized in Russia as a writer as well.

The coverage of Duncan’s last prerevolutionary tour in general was quite interesting, although we do not see a significant shift in it. Analysis of these numerous reviews is beyond the limits of this work. However, the post-revolutionary activities of Duncan and their coverage in Soviet newspapers and magazines deserve a special attention.

### **Blare of the revolution’s trumpet or Isadora Duncan in the early Soviet criticism**

A 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.<sup>140</sup>

At this time, there is a noticeable shift in critical focus in coverage of Duncan’s performances.<sup>141</sup> The focus changes constantly since early Soviet culture was

<sup>137</sup> See Elizabeth Suritz. *Isadora Duncan and Prewar Russian Dancemakers*.

<sup>138</sup> Fedor Komissarzhevsky. *Isadora Duncan*, in *Aisedora*, 198.

<sup>139</sup> Isadora Duncan. *Chto ya dumayu o tantse (What I think about dance) Severnye Zapiski*, 1914, February-March, № 2, p. 7-38, № 3, p. 24-52, № 4-5, p. 50-78.

<sup>140</sup> The invitation came from the Russian trade representative Leonid Krasin, who was impressed by her concert in London; and then, an official one, from Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, in Gordon McVay. *Moskovskaya shkola Aise-dory Duncan (Moscow school of Isadora Duncan)* Pamyatniki kultury. Novye otkrytiya. Pismennost. Iskustvo. Archeologiya. Yezhegodnik. Ed. T.B. Knyazevskaya (Moscow. Nauka. 2003, 326-475), 329.

<sup>141</sup> See Elena Yushkova. *Isadora Duncan in Soviet Criticism (1921–1927)*. *Sergey Esenin and arts*. Series Sergey Esenin in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Moscow-Ryazan’-Konstantinovo.

itself riddle with contradiction and was in extreme flux. Literary and art criticism was looking for new approaches, which could be appropriate in the new state of workers and peasants. Art criticism of this period reflected the transition from revolutionary romanticism to ideological service.

Sometimes in the 1920s, descriptions of Duncan's dances were very poetic, but it was a new poetry. 'New' proletarian critics saw in Duncan's art a protest against the Western bourgeoisie, and her freedom from old culture. They evaluated her pedagogy as revolutionary and proper for children of the new State. Lunacharsky in August 1921, published in the newspaper *Izvestiya* an article, entitled 'Our guest', full of revolutionary rhetoric: 'She [Duncan], as a rare type of genuine artist, rebels against the atmosphere in bourgeois Europe: impudent, naked, ravaged, breathing hatred and disappointment.' He justified the necessity of this strange school in a country almost ruined after the Revolution and the Civil War, which did not have money even for essentials.<sup>142</sup> 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 in a human being. Her creative aspirations are consonant with the unlimited ideas of the Revolution.'<sup>143</sup> He found the 'blare of the revolution's trumpet' in Duncan's art. Writers also stressed her proletarian origin (although that was not true), her sympathy for the poor and oppressed people, and her radical fight against old artistic traditions. Thus, the idea to use a world-famous *artiste* to legitimize the Soviet regime was instituted at the very beginning.

'Old' professionals, who saw Isadora before the Revolution, discussed her new technique, which was closer to a mime drama.<sup>144</sup> Ballet critic, Akim Volynsky, who was amazed by the novelty of her dance in 1908. In 1922, 14 years later, wrote that "Isadora Duncan hasn't saved and won't save Humanity... Her announced beauty has nothing to do with antique beauty... Maybe her dances reproduce some vulgar dances in ancient Greek small restaurants, depicted on vases. But they don't even touch the soul of the dance in Dionysus's orchestra." He stressed that "this soft and loose... plastique... without a metal frame inside... can weaken a young generation's psyche... and paralyze its activity."<sup>145</sup> However, there are also enthusiastic descriptions: some critics liked new labor movements in her dance, her expressiveness in dramatic pantomimes. Director of Duncan's Moscow school Ilya Schneider describes *March Slav*, performed at her first

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Institute of World Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences. 2015, 528-543).

<sup>142</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky. *Nasha gost'ya (Our guest)*, in *Aisedora*, 289.

<sup>143</sup> Duncan I. *Dvizhenie—zhiz'n (Motion is life)*. (M.: Izdanie shkoly Duncan, 1921), 1.

<sup>144</sup> V. *Vecher Duncan (Duncan's performance)*. *Izvestiya*. 11.11.23. State Bakhrushin Theater Museum (Moscow), Makarov V.V. *Isadora Duncan. Clips from newspapers*, file 152. list 342-352, № 252504/4291-4301 Their statements are close to the views of contemporary American scholars—see Daly, A. *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*. (Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press). 2002; 15.

<sup>145</sup> Akim Volynsky. *Shkola Aisedory Duncan (School of Isadora Duncan)*. *Zhiz'n iskusstva*, 1922, № 35, 5.09 Makarov V.V. *Clips from newspapers*, file 152. list 342-352, № 252504/4291-4301.

concert in November 1921, showing how the dancer, using only the means of pantomime, transformed herself into a bow-backed workman—a symbol of the oppressed Russia, who succeeded to tear his fetters and become free.<sup>146</sup> Some of the authors were disappointed by Duncan's body (not that young now), by some of her sentimental pieces, and later—by her marriage to Esenin. However, newspapers and magazines started to write ecstatically about Duncan's students— young and beautiful, harmonically developed. They wished all Russian children could have studied at the Duncan's school.

The year 1923 became an important milestone in the formation of the cultural policy of the Soviet Union. The Twelfth Party Congress of the Bolshevik Party resolved that the theater had to be used for systematic mass propaganda of the communist ideas.<sup>147</sup> On the other hand, in Moscow the Choreological Laboratory of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences under the leadership of art historians Alexei Sidorov and Alexei Larionov, conducted fundamental research on human motion with small groups of plastique dancers. In the process they developed new forms of 'free' dance, and which the Government tried to liquidate.<sup>148</sup> At that time, there were more and more skeptical articles on Duncan in magazines and newspapers. "Duncan still shows us the harmonious human being's emotions... But there is no appropriate environment to create new Hellenes,"<sup>149</sup>—writes theater critic and writer Victor Arlov. Nevertheless, in August 1923, after Duncan's return from the United States, the press reports on the deep connection of Isadora's thoughts with the Soviet ideology—mostly because of her involuntary propaganda on behalf of the Bolsheviks that she conducted in the United States (she was deprived of her American citizenship after that). "Duncan returned to Russia... Her ideas about the free and harmonious education of a spirit and a body in beauty, in her opinion, could take root only in Russia,"<sup>150</sup> wrote *Ogonyok* magazine. The educational program of Duncan was recognized as useful for the regime again. "To take a poor proletarian child and to make a healthy and joyful creature out of him—this is a big accomplishment,"<sup>151</sup> wrote ballet critic Viktor Iving in the newspaper *Pravda* after the performance of the school in Moscow in November 1923.

The year of 1924 could hardly be successful for the school because after Lenin's death in January 1924. Cultural policy dramatically changed for the worse, fostering the Communist Party control over all kinds of arts. On August 26, the

<sup>146</sup> Stepanida Rudneva. *Vospominaniya schatlivogo cheloveka. Stefanida Dmitrievna Rudneva i studiya muzykal'nogo dvizheniya Geptakhor v dokumentah Tsentral'nogo moskovskogo arhiva-muzeya lichnyh kollektseyi*. Ed. A. Kats. (M.: Izdatel'stvo Glavarhiva Moskvy, 2007), 664.

<sup>147</sup> V. Zhidkov. *Teatr i vremya: ot Oktyabrya do perestroiki*. (M.: STD, 1991), 105.

<sup>148</sup> N. Mislér. *Vnachale bylo telo. Ritmoplasticheskie eksperimenty nachala XX veka*. (M.: Iskusstvo—XXI vek, 2011), 109.

<sup>149</sup> Viktor Arlov. *O tantse so storony (On dance from aside)*, in *Aisedora*, 288.

<sup>150</sup> D.K. *Vozvraschenie Aisedory Duncan. Ogonyok*. 26.08.1923, State Bakhrushin Theater Museum (Moscow), Makarov, file 152, list. 342-352.

<sup>151</sup> *Pravda*, № 263, November 21, 1923, № 22. RGALI (State Archive for Literature and Arts, Moscow) Iving (Ivanov) Viktor Petrovich. file 2694, list. 2, document.18, p. 83.



Decree of the Moscow Council ordered the closure of more than ten famous studios of plastique dance, and demanded the inclusion of a communist functionary into Duncan's school staff, who could supervise its activities.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, thanks to the Commissar of Sports Nikolay Podvoysky, in the summer of 1924, the school got a right to work. He helped organize a training for six hundred<sup>153</sup> proletarian children at the huge Red Stadium in Moscow. Irma Duncan taught children to dance revolutionary dances, that she had been choreographed earlier.<sup>154</sup>

In 1924, Duncan's departure to the West was inevitable. There was no state support; Russian tours of the dancer were financially disastrous. In September, two farewell performances of the school took place at the Chamber and Bolshoy theaters, where Isadora was visibly distressed in her introduction, stressing that the students did not have food and funds to pay for utilities.<sup>155</sup> The press after the performances was ecstatic again. *Izvestiya* wrote that "the whole program manifests a revolutionary spirit", and represents "the realism of feelings."<sup>156</sup> *Rabochy zritel* insisted that "the Duncan pedagogical system should be used more widely, and for ALL proletarian children."<sup>157</sup> Of course, that was unrealistic. After the departure of Irma Duncan to the USA in 1928, the school became almost illegal: it did not fit in with the new emphasis on Socialist Realism and mass sports, and survived only because some former students had a long tour of Siberia at the beginning of the 1930s, and staged anti-fascism pieces during the wartime in 1940s. In 1949, the school was closed and was not referred to again until the end of the 1970s.

In 1927, after the tragic death of Isadora Duncan, Russian criticism summed up her main achievements. Alexander Gidoni in the journal *Contemporary theater*, № 4, 1927, wrote, "Isadora Duncan has been dispersed in the contemporary art of dance. Still, this dispersal is very fruitful for the artistic culture of our days."<sup>158</sup> Aleksey Gvozdev, who considered Duncan's art as bourgeois, asserted in *Krasnaya Gazeta (Red Newspaper)* that 'Duncanism' outlived itself, "without having created a 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 by a new generation of dance reformers under the more profound influence of the social revolution."<sup>159</sup> Very soon, the name of Duncan disappeared from Russian newspapers and magazines, along with most of the representatives of the Silver Age to be rehabilitated only after the end of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>152</sup> Mislér. *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>153</sup> McVay. *Ibid.*, p. 377; see also Roslavleva, N.P. *Prechistenka 20: The Isadora Duncan School in Moscow*. Dance Perspectives. Vol. 16, Winter, New York: M. Dekker, 1975, 26.

<sup>154</sup> McVay, 379.

<sup>155</sup> McVay, 384.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>158</sup> V. Iving. *Isadora Duncan*, in *Aisedora*, 308.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-312.

## Conclusions

Summarizing discussions of Isadora Duncan in Russian criticism, we can note that the perception of her dance changes according to situations in Russian and Soviet art. Duncan had always been welcomed by the Russian press, but the nature of this enthusiasm varied. The Symbolists saw 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.

Writing on Duncan and trying to understand her free dance, Russian critics opened new perspectives, learning how to explain non-canonic movements of the body, its musical and rhythmical potential and its ability to fit in with an invisible motion of the human spirit. They were able to form a set of new ideas on dance and classical ballet in discussions about the American dancer.

The impulse, which Russian criticism of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century received from Isadora Duncan's tours in the country, is difficult to overestimate. Most of the journals, magazines, and newspapers widely covered her performances. Moreover, trying to define and describe her dance, Russian critics came to very new themes: for instance, dance as philosophy. They also explored such topics as a possibility to create a total artwork based on dance, relationships between dance and music, and a revival or a stylization of antiquity. Moreover, inspired by Greek motifs in Isadora's dance, some critics turned to the history of European dance, to studies of authentic Greek dances through antique sources, as well as European literature on dance. Quite soon, several high-quality books on the history of dance were written. Being always thought provoking, Duncan's tours and publications of her manifestoes helped to shape and innovate dance criticism, which was making first steps in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pushing the limits of classical ballet critique. Russian classical ballet itself made great progress and acquired international fame in the 1910s using some innovations invented by Duncan.

The Soviet criticism of the 1920s, which successfully used Duncan's art for propagandistic purposes, soon was not allowed to cover free dance performances and the activities of the Duncan school in Moscow. Studies of this kind of art had been frozen until the fall of the Soviet Union when freedom of thought, self-expression and freedom of press returned to the Russian life along with interest in Duncan's personality and the history of dance.

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