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The Revolutionary: On Isadora Duncan and Edward Gordon Craig

Jennifer Buckley

An Interview with **Lori Belilove**, Artistic Director of the Isadora Duncan Dance Company

Jennifer Buckley: To what extent do you think Edward Gordon Craig understood Isadora as a dancer? One of the things I found fascinating but disappointing while reading over his “Book Topsy” manuscript—the notes he planned to turn into a book about Isadora—was how little he talked about her dancing. The language was so personal.

Lori Belilove: In Craig’s drawings [a series of six published in 1906], he is certainly astute about Isadora’s dance, specifically the physical power and playfulness. His drawings and watercolors speak volumes to his understanding and appreciation of her art. In the one titled “Beethoven” [Figure 1] he shows the specific Duncan knee lift, and the way the arms float in the air supported by the solar plexus. He also shows the way the tunic fabric moves around the dancer like the wind.



Figure 1. “Beethoven”, drawing by Edward Gordon Craig, 1906. From *Isadora Duncan: Sechs Bewegungsstudien*, Insel Verlag, 1906. Reproduced courtesy of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

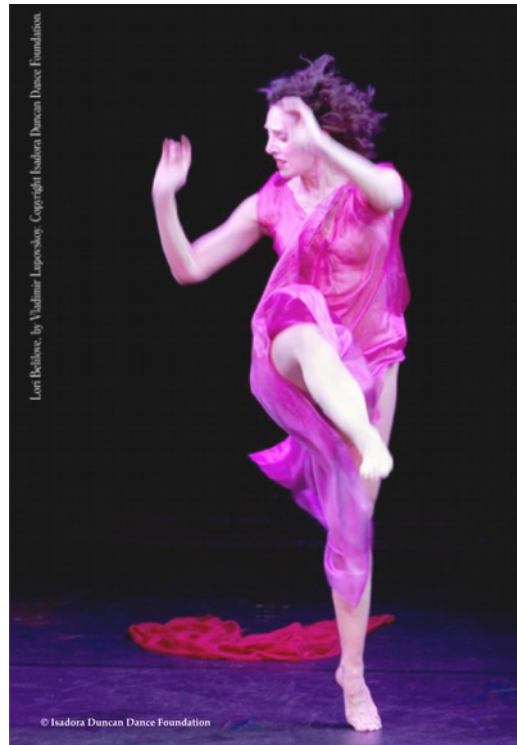


Figure 2. *Brahms: Waltzes* by Isadora Duncan. Performed by Lori Belilove. Photo: Vladimir Lupovskoy. Courtesy of the Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation.

The idea of the thigh almost as high as a shelf, and the way the foot points directly below the knee is pure Duncan—as opposed to tucked under the body, in the ballet style called *passé*. I love how her standing foot is on half toe, and the crisscross detail of her tunic giving her shape, and the way it's flowing—this is everything that she wanted to have happen in the experience of the viewer of her dance. The beauty is in the simplicity that she wanted.

There is another one—from the perspective of being a spectator in the wings of the theater [Figure 3]. It's as if he's watching from the wings—you get a spotlight, and the wings. Her arms are raised in front, she's in profile, and the arms express a delicacy in perfect harmony with the leg and torso. The curve in the body is gentle, and, although it is more of a sketch, it's in color and her head is dropped over and her arms are lifted. Again the knee is lifted, it's soft, rounded. It's almost as if she's a conductor moving. And the stage light is pouring in. She supposedly traveled with two footlights, or a banner of footlights, a green carpet, and blue curtains. The carpet was so she could have smooth flooring, and could dance barefoot. Unlike with the toe shoes that made noise on the wooden floors, I believe you could hear the music better when she danced.

In many of his drawings, the minimal backdrop is a combination aesthetic of both Duncan's and Craig's. The curtains and backdrop are rendered abstractly to underscore the simplicity of it. It's very modernist with the background so richly void, suggestive of worlds without the detail, compared to the scenery of the era for most ballet productions. There are no bushes and flowers. She's not physically placed in a natural space in a realistic way, but that's all hinted at. This was her vision—that her dance would transport us to a different place in our imagination.



Figure 3. "Gluck", drawing by Edward Gordon Craig, 1906. From *Isadora Duncan: Sechs Bewegungsstudien*, Insel Verlag, 1906. Reproduced courtesy of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Let's go to the drawing called "Untitled" [Figure 4]. She's literally floating on clouds, with a rainbow, and a storm below. Here you have him lifting her up into the stratosphere—queen of the forces of nature! Look at the power in the arms. The arms and the chest lift in heroic classic proportions and make her look like a goddess. Here she is streaming out of the heavens! The rounded oblong circles, the curvature, the roundedness, the humanness is all emphasized.

To me, in viewing Craig's art works of Duncan, the drawings reveal how observant and sensitive Craig was to Duncan's dance style and larger vision.

JB: As I'm hearing you describe Craig's drawings of Isadora, I'm struck by how different this is from his own developing visual aesthetic, which is highly rectilinear. I'm really seeing a distinction between them as you are describing her visual aesthetic, which he seems to capture.

LB: But she lifted him to warmer, more compassionate places. I am mad at that boy. He missed a huge opportunity to live life to its fullest. He was not ready for Isadora, on so many levels. He couldn't believe in the magnitude of her heart and art. Somewhere else he got his notion of using and abusing women.

JB: He certainly did.

LB: We've got that notion pretty well understood. That aside, what she fell in love with, was probably the artist. That's where they came together. As for all of the other things—opposites attract! He challenged her to grow up, and she challenged him to grow up. They really were—what did they call themselves? Two villains. I think from early on that was their dynamic. They would be provoking each other forever. There's a huge dramatic scene that we depict in a dance-theater work I produced, in which it's clear that they fought intensely. In the show, they seemed to both come upon an idea of minimalism separately, and then when Craig saw Isadora dance, he said, "Where'd you steal my ideas from? My work! My work!" She realized that he wasn't going to let her go very far artistically, that he was going to claim ownership of ideas they shared together, and she was going to be left sharpening his pencils and looking after the little ones (even other women and children in his life). Isadora had the strength and wherewithal to say no, even though she was madly in love with him. He grappled with her "no," and at the same time respected it. And of course he wanted her introductions to famous people. He had his own charisma and beauty, his history with his mother, and his own entourage. They were roaming in the same bohemian circles together, hugely romantic beautiful young people when they met, though he was older.

JB: One crucial introduction that Isadora made happen—perhaps the most consequential one—is the introduction to [Konstantin] Stanislavski.

LB: And Eleanora Duse.

JB: Yes, definitely—and Duse. While Stanislavski was deeply impressed with Duse's acting, it has been easier for critics to see what is distinctly modern about their practices than it has been to do the same for Duncan and Craig, by whose art Stanislavski was equally inspired. Often, Isadora and Craig are considered as transitional figures—not-quite-modernists, suspended between Victorian and modern art. The fin-de-siècle strands in Craig's thinking are obvious, and in some ways his theory of acting never gets beyond Henry Irving, however posthumanist his vision of the übermarionette might sound to our twenty-first century ears. But how do you place Isadora in relation to modernism? This has been a point of scholarly contention. Obviously, she was drawing some of her aesthetic ideals from ancient Greece, in a kind of late-Victorian Hellenism, but she's also highly modern in many ways—a manifesto-writing female artist and performer (Preston 144–182)! How do you situate Duncan's relation to modernism in dance history? This could be different than the way in which we situate Craig in theater history, where he seems to occupy this liminal position.



Figure 4. "Untitled", drawing by Edward Gordon Craig, 1906. From *Isadora Duncan: Sechs Bewegungsstudien*, Insel Verlag, 1906. Reproduced courtesy of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

LB: She was the muse of modernism, truly. She did so many new things, and she wanted to strip away the prudish Victorian thinking and usher in modernism. In her dance *The Three Graces*, I think of it as energy and form, closer to Art Deco! She streamlined the use of the body, the bones, the concept of dances and abstract portraits. Even in her interpretation of the Gluck opera *Orfeo*, the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice are androgynously intermixed. At one point you can be Orpheus descending, and then you can be Eurydice thinking through it, feeling it—there's that mixture in the same dance. This is not realism; she's not a literal storyteller. What's *not* modernism is realism.

JB: I think we can agree that the turn against realism—against some forms of realism—is *the* modernist turn. Whether we place Craig in the category of modernist artists with an asterisk after his name or not, I think it's clear that he belongs in the category.

LB: With Isadora, there was an abstract element that was new at the time. Is it where we are now? No. But she paved the way. Now, on the use of music, [dissenting scholar] Anthony Shay has some points. Isadora wanted to dance without music, in silence, but she also said that she didn't think her audience was ready for dance without music. She wrote this!

Now, if you look at some Duncan dancers, I'm sorry to say, you might get a froufrou Victorian feel ... and a look of stereotypical ancient Greek dancing.

JB: What should a non-expert eye look for to detect *good* Duncan dancing?

LB: There is an immediate power in the use of the body, in the central part of the torso. There is also a wholeness in the way gestures flow from the body, and confidence in the delivery.

In terms of musicality, not stepping on every beat is important. Now, that may sound crazy but to me that's a kind of realism, a literalism. Isadora honored the tempo and rhythm and musical structure. This is not Cunningham, no! [laughs] But she started to abstractly engage in musical structure to create her own story, as opposed to the fairy tale stories of the ballet. She is a trailblazer on this point. She chose to dance her own life, and dance themes of abstract psychological states, in the context of storytelling. She took the Greek myth—you may remember me dancing the Furies [Figure 4]—this isn't me playing a Fury. She's talking about evolution, about Darwinism! And female power! It speaks to feminism and to the liberation of the woman. She took it that far—she embellished it. It's not just the Furies in the underworld!

You ask, what should an audience look for in a Duncan dancer? A direct connect to the audience—a focus on, and an embrace of, the audience in the moment. Clarity of selfhood and self-realization need to go along with dancing Duncan's style and works. You have to know who you are. You can't just imitate these movements. While a lot of this movement looks very much like a Greek vase come to life, there are a whole lot of oppositional tensions in the profile lines, and the music has to be very internalized.

In bad Duncan dance, it doesn't go anywhere; the choreography doesn't build emotively.

As I said, Isadora loved the work of Duse. The breath and the gestures are large and inclusive. Nothing is contorted or technically weird—like twenty turns and then a stop! [laughs] It's not about technical showmanship. ... What else would *the audience* see? I'm challenged by that question.

JB: I ask because you know it from the inside.



Figure 4. *Dance of the Furies* by Isadora Duncan. Performed by Lori Belilove. Photo courtesy of Lori Belilove and the Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation.

LB: Yes, but it's hard to say what people would see, and experience ... [In bad Duncan dancing] there's no inner narrative. There's a YouTube video of a Duncan dance, by a dancer who had some training in Duncan dance. She went to one person who knew a certain dance, and so she resurrected it. And her performance was so repetitive; it does not build. Beautiful girl, beautiful costume, but it just went nowhere. She just doesn't know what the dance was about. There was one comment on YouTube: "If this is what's left of Duncan dance, I'm not interested." Point taken.

JB: YouTube unfortunately circulates more widely than you can personally.

LB: I'm going to keep dancing and coaching as fully as I can, for all of my days!

JB: What you just said about Duse leads me to another question. People often spoke and wrote about the *power* of their performances—the sense that the performance is coming from an extremely vital, extremely intelligent performer. It strikes me that Duncan conceives of the performer—especially the female performer—as a power source in a way that contrasts sharply with Craig's concept of the ideal actor. I think of the puppet-like terms she uses to describe ballerinas—who are the opposite of her concept of an artist. For Craig, a puppet is the ideal actor—the übermarionette! This might seem like the point at which they diverge. Can you talk about this?

LB: Yes, of course. It's almost ludicrous—it seems like they are on opposite ends of the spectrum. But at some point, truly Isadora was talking about getting out of the way. Your small personality, your smaller self, needs to be checked in at the door, so that you can perform with your larger self. I think that Duncan dancers take on a philosophy and an aesthetic that enables them to live a large life. This was another aspect of Duncan's work. And she and Craig do come closer on that point—they both want art to go to a higher place.

JB: So the idea that “personality,” in the everyday sense, does not drive performance—this is the point at which what seem like oppositional concepts of the performer come together.

LB: Yes. She did want the personality to be out of the way. In Duncan dance, you want to warm up until you are a pure instrument of expression. She introduced the idea of the performer as a vehicle.

Do you know David Mamet? He says [to actors], “Just read the script! Just read it!” Get out of the way! In dance, we can say, “Just do the movement!” I think Craig also wanted personality out of the way. Now, as a particular kind of man, he didn’t want the emotional piece at all! [laughs]

I went to the Duncan archives at UCLA, and there are contracts from when she was with him, journeying to perform in Germany, Holland, and Russia, and he signed them! Later, she signed them. But he was her manager, signing her contracts! And she allowed this! I wonder what led to that arrangement.

JB: I suppose you can interpret that two ways. One is that this arrangement would free her up to focus on her art; the other is that he’s managing her career.

LB: Or that he ruined it. ... Her brother did some managing. But at one point, Isadora was supporting Craig, and his wife, and some of his kids! It’s scary. It makes *me* mad!

JB: Even by the standards of the early twentieth century, Craig’s treatment of the women in his life is horrendous. He was pilloried in his own time for it, too. And his vision of the artist is exclusively masculine. But what about Isadora’s conception of the dancer? Gender seems so crucial to the way in which she conceives of dance.

LB: Actually, she had twenty boys and twenty girls at her first school. That was her first vision. (We know that Craig was there for some of the auditions.) Her first vision was to have both. When I think of movement [in Duncan dance], it is very androgynous. My first teacher was a man. She did say, when she let the boys go, that the girls needed it more, because of the cultural conventions at the time. They [women of that era] were corseted, for god’s sake!

You are just a being, an instrument on this earth, and you unfold yourself. It is not overly sexualized, no. It is *sensual*, but not sexual, and certainly not titillating or teasing and coquettish.

JB: That much seems clear even from reviews of the era, in which people who found her overwhelmingly appealing say, first, that she was wearing no clothes, and second, that the performance is completely pure. I’m thinking of one article in particular [by Carl Van Vechten]. (Van Vechten 24).

LB: Yes, I have a letter written to Isadora, in which an American president says that she is the purest thing he had ever seen! Many cultural critics wrote about her, of course, and they said very similar things.

JB: What else do *you* want to say about Craig and Duncan?

LB: I think there was a tremendous love, and a combustible energy between them. The dance of the future, the theater of the future, the music of the future—they were on that wave, in their bohemian circles, and it was a terribly exciting time. I will repeat that I think the dynamic between them was extraordinary, and so were the distances between them. You can see this in the letters that went back and forth between them. This first love was her sexual awakening. She embraced experience, they both did for

the time it lasted, and I respect her for that—being a serial monogamist myself! [laughs] How modern she was! She was modern in other ways, too—taking in kids who were orphans, kids of different nationalities, kids of unknown origins ... and using her performing earnings to support Craig, and at times his wives and children!

JB: Talk about an alternative family structure!

LB: Yes. Regarding training in her school she thought the girls needed dance to find themselves. She saw dance as a way of life. She wanted everyone to dance, and experience the joy and spiritual rewards, though she drew the line at professional performance. She thought that the inside feeling was just as important as the outside expression.

JB: We're verging on Isadora's politics at this point. I'm wondering more broadly about the extent to which you see her larger political commitments as being integral to her dance, or only tangentially related.

LB: I think Isadora was sometimes confused, politically. She hated war; she turned her school into a hospital during the First World War in France! Her dance called *The Revolutionary*—that work is a humanitarian cry out for justice. She stated she knew nothing of politics; she just felt sympathy for the downtrodden.

JB: She certainly was not alone in that.

LB: Ultimately, though, she believed that the true revolution was an inner revolution. She was not a politician. She believed in compassion; she was a humanitarian, and these are the timeless messages that she expressed through her dances. That is what Duncan dance is really about. Anyone who comes to my classes or Company because they want to wear a scarf and look pretty won't stick around very long. It has to go deeper.

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Lori Belilove's direct lineage and prestigious performing career have earned her an international reputation as the premier interpreter and ambassador of the dance of Isadora Duncan. As a third generation Duncan dancer, Belilove is considered the living embodiment of Duncan's grace, power, and mastery of weight. Deemed "irresistibly joyous" by *The New York Times*, she is the leading dancer in the award-winning PBS documentary *Isadora Duncan: Movement From the Soul*. Lori has toured solo and held residencies across America performing in colleges and universities and festivals. Internationally, she has toured extensively, and was recently appointed Artistic Director of the Duncan Dance Academy in Shenzhen, China.

Jennifer Buckley is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Iowa, where she teaches courses in modern and postmodern drama, performance, and print cultures. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, *Theatre Survey*, *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, *Theater*, and *Comparative Drama*. Her current book project is titled *Beyond Text: Theater and Performance in Print*.