

Sergei Esenin

Angel, devil

SERGEI “SERYOZHA” ALEXANDROVICH ESEININ was born on October 3, 1895, in Konstantinovo, in the province of Ryazan in rural central Russia.

In 1915, at age 19, he moved to Petersburg where he presented himself to prominent poets. He read his poems in the cabarets, where his reputation grew—both for his poetic talent and his youth, good looks and curly golden hair. He first exploited his rural upbringing as the “peasant poet,” but soon abandoned peasant dress for fine suits. In 1919, Esenin and some of his fellow poets wrote a manifesto and called themselves the Imaginists or Imagists. They stressed the primacy of image, and their poetry often relied on coarse or offensive imagery to shock the public.

Esenin was not particularly kind to the women in his life. In 1913, he abandoned the woman with whom he was living, Anna Izryadnova and their son. In 1917, he married and had two children (Tatyana and Konstantin) with actress Zinaida Raikh, but his fears about her infidelity led to a divorce in 1921. In addition to affairs before and after his marriage to Isadora Duncan in 1922, he would marry a third time—without divorcing Duncan. In 1925, he married Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya, a granddaughter of writer Leo Tolstoy.

ESEIN'S DEATH

On December 27, 1925, Esenin cut himself and, using the Etruscan vase Duncan gave him at their wedding as an inkwell, wrote a suicide poem in his blood. He then tied a rope around a central heating pipe in his hotel room and hanged himself. He was 30 years old.

Esenin's suicide took place amid a wave of suicides amongst his fellow poets, many of whom were depressed and disappointed in the policies of the government established by the 1917 Revolution. Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote a poem about Esenin's death and soon wrote his own suicide poem. Marina Tsvetaeva addressed a

poem to the dead Esenin and Mayakovsky. Tsvetaeva's suicide later would be memorialized by Bella Akmadulina in yet another poem.

ESEIN'S SUICIDE POEM

*Goodbye, my dear, goodbye,
Goodbye. You are in my heart.
We'll meet again, I promise,
Though now we have to part.*

*Goodbye, my dear, don't say a word.
Don't cry. And don't be blue.
In this life, death is nothing new,
But living's nothing newer.*

“Esenin treated his own life like a fairytale. He was Ivan the Prince who flew over the ocean on a gray wolf to catch the Firebird, Isadora Duncan, by the tail. His verse too he wrote with the help of fairy tale magic, sometimes arranging words like cards in a game of patience and sometimes writing them out with his heart's blood.”

—Boris Pasternak



Images (clockwise from top left): Isadora Duncan and Irma Duncan with her first pupils in Moscow, 1921, Duncan Collection; Duncan and Sergei Esenin in Duncan's House in Paris; Sergei Esenin in Duncan's House in Paris, Duncan Collection

Isadora Duncan

*Dance icon
and iconoclast*

OUR CONCEPTION OF DANCE has been so influenced by Isadora Duncan that it can be difficult to trace how revolutionary her influence on dance was. Yet, about the same time, other artists also were beginning to practice new movement forms. Before Duncan, there was Francois Delsarte, and, among her contemporaries, there were Ruth St. Denis, who was interested in “orientalism,” Ted Shawn, and Loie Fuller and the Fuller Girls, with whom Duncan briefly danced. Duncan, though, embodied the zeitgeist of the changing dance forms and eclipsed her contemporaries with the force of her originality and presence.

Duncan rejected the elaborate costumes, tights and constrictive pointe shoes of ballet in favor of loose tunics and sandals or bare feet. Her costumes were somewhat scandalous at the time: They revealed her bare legs and her body often could be seen through the filmy layers of her tunics.

Duncan also worked to derive a more natural form of movement. Some claimed she was attempting to recreate classical Greek dance, though she refuted it. Instead, she felt she was on the cusp of creating a new type of dance, one that would spring naturally from the dancer.

Through movement, Duncan interpreted music that had not necessarily been composed for dance. Many early critics considered this an offense to the composers; but for all of her detractors, she had many supporters. Her willingness

to break perceived rules thus freed the dancers who followed her.

Many dancers who saw Duncan were influenced by her work and brought her concepts into their dance forms. Michel Fokine, the Russian ballet dancer and choreographer, began choreographing to music not originally written for dance; these works were emotional and expressive. Peter Lieven, a Russian Prince and dance patron, insisted that the changes in ballet wrought by Sergei Diaghilev in his Ballet Russes were due to Duncan’s influence.

“Toe walking deforms the feet; corsets deform the body; nothing is left to be deformed but the brain and there is not much of this in the women who dance modern dances.”

—Isadora Duncan

“For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus. ... I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born, the mirror of vision for the creations of the dance—it was from this discovery that was born the theory on which I founded my school.”

—Isadora Duncan



Images (clockwise from left): Duncan, Pregnant with Patrick, Photo: Arnold Genthe, 1909; Duncan dancing Mazurka, Chopin Opus 17, No. 4, Photo: Arnold Genthe, 1915; Duncan with her pupils, Photo: Paul Berger, Paris, 1908

Kindred Spirits

Duncan and other artists

ISADORA DUNCAN HOPED to restore dance to its rightful place in the pantheon of arts. Her relationship with numerous musicians, artists, sculptors and designers was only natural to her because of their shared understanding of their roles as artists. Each time she had a love relationship she called it a “cerebrale,” using the French to describe the intellectual or artistic sympathy she felt with her lovers. Her known and possible lovers included actor Oscar Beregi; avant-garde set designer Edward Gordon Craig, with whom she shared a passion to simplify and return to core artistic principals; Italian actress Eleanora Duse; and poet and playwright Mercedes de Acosta. Duncan also had a passionate friendship with theater innovator Constantin Stanislavsky, who wanted to do for theater what Duncan had done for dance.

It is only natural that Duncan would have a deep bond with musicians. She had affairs with pianists Walter Rummel and and Victor Seroff. Composer Ethelbert Nevin was angered when he heard Duncan was dancing to his music, but when he saw her dance he suggested a concert together. Cosima Wagner, widow of the composer Richard Wagner, was so impressed with Duncan she asked her to dance in her husband’s opera *Tannhauser*.

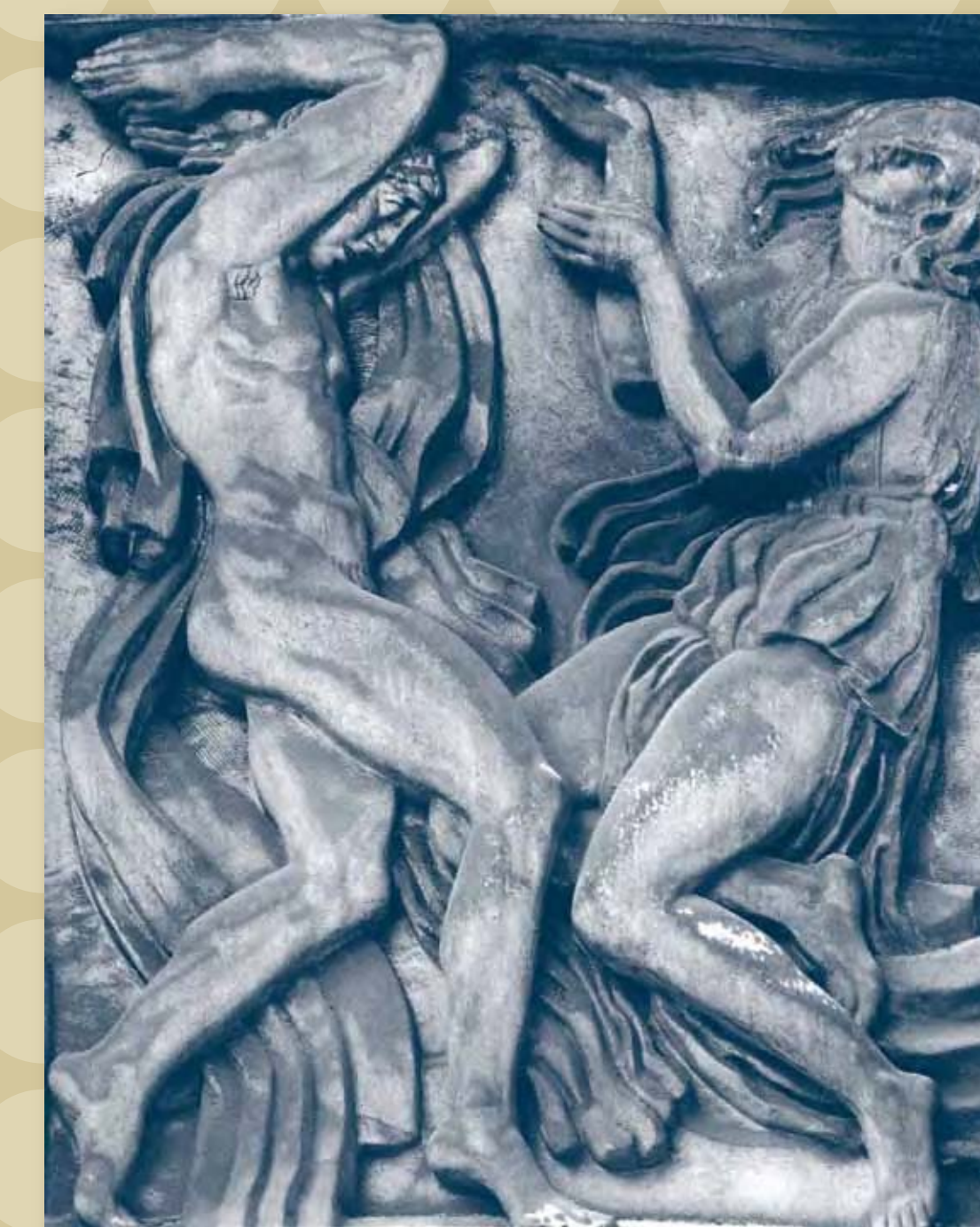
Duncan also was the subject of numerous visual artists. Her dancing was captured by Pierre Auguste Rodin, José Clará, Abraham Walkowitz, André Donoyer de Segonzac, Jules Grandjouan, Mikhail Dobrov, Léon Bakst and Fritz August

Von Kaulbach. Arnold Genthe and Edward Steichen photographed her. Additionally, she was immortalized in the Théâtre des Champs Élysées. Maurice Denis used her image in murals and Emile-Antoine Bourdelle used her in his design of the theater’s exterior bas-relief. It is through these representations that we learn so much about Duncan’s art.

Duncan once said: “The relation of the new school of dance to sculpture is a very close one.” In return, the French sculptor Bourdelle said of Duncan, “To me it seemed that there, through her, was animated an ineffable frieze wherein divine frescoes slowly became human realities.”

“I have taken as a guide the rhythms of the great Masters; not because I thought I could express the beauty of their works, but because in surrendering my body unresistingly to their rhythms I have hoped to recover the natural cadences of human movements which have been lost for centuries.”

—Isadora Duncan



Images (clockwise from top left): Duncan in a bas-relief sculpture by Antoine Bourdelle on the Théâtre des Champs Élysées; Charcoal portrait of Duncan by Leon Bakst, 1908, Pushkin State Museum of the Arts, Moscow; Watercolor study of Duncan dancing by Abraham Walkowitz, 1908-1917, Duncan Collection; Duncan dancing “Air Gai” from Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Aulis* in a color engraving by Mikhail Dobrov, circa 1910, Bakhrushin State Theatre Museum, Moscow

When Isadora Danced

praise and criticism

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IVE PERFORMANCE, by definition, is ephemeral, an unrepeatable moment shared by an audience and the performer. Because of the era in which Isadora Duncan lived, there are written accounts, photographs and illustrations, but no detailed films of her dancing. One must piece together what her work meant through the images and accounts of others. It is inevitable that such a groundbreaking performer should attract praise and criticism for the same performance, sometimes within the same newspaper.

“Poetry to her is not merely the printed page. She dances it.”

— Anonymous critic in *Director*, 1898

“Miss Duncan is undoubtedly graceful and her dancing has become quite a fad, but I must confess that to see her once is enough. ... I cannot see how the dances ‘interpret’ as is claimed the exquisite quatrains of Fitzgerald’s translation of the Rubaiyat.”

— Critic in *Torun Topics*, September 15, 1898

“Miss Duncan’s dancing is really art. Fine, graceful, strong in character and really original art. She had a right to declare war on the wide ballet skirts and colored tights.”

— Reviewer C.K. in *Politiken*, April 24, 1906

“...her costume was tucked up to the knees. All the seats were creaking from the effort everyone made not to miss any detail. In this way, Isadora Duncan conquered the many. ... But the enthusiasm was not total until she was waltzing to the tune of *An den schönen blauen Donau*, and wearing a short red blouse which exposed her leg from a little above the knee. ... If, later she had worn the same costume for the Offenbach dance, she might have been cheered.”

— A critic signed Moustache in *Politiken*, April 24, 1906

“I saw her in Russia in 1920 or ’21. I thought she was awful. I don’t understand it when people say she was a great dancer. To me it was absolutely unbelievable — a drunken fat woman who for hours was rolling around like a pig. ... I don’t believe she ever danced well. She was probably a nice juicy girl when she was young.”

— Russian-born choreographer George Balanchine in *Horizon*, 1961

“Actually, she didn’t do one step that was difficult or complicated. Anyone of any age could duplicate what she did but not how she did it. When she raised her arms, it was an incredible experience. She could also stand still — and often did — but it was an alive stillness and it was dancing.”

— British choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton

“The famous American barefoot dancer, Isadora Duncan performed last night ... and was a success with her dance idylls in which she transforms music into plastic art and at the same time makes alive the figures from old paintings. ... This ‘dancer of the future’ ... is nude or almost nude under a light robe.”

— Notice in the Danish paper *Politiken*, April 24, 1906



Images (clockwise from top left): Duncan in a pose from “Narcissus,” Chopin Opus 64, No. 2, Photo: Elvira, Munich, circa 1903; Duncan in a pose from “Polonaise,” Chopin Opus 40, No. 1, Photo: Elvira, Munich, circa 1903-1904; Duncan circa 1905, Duncan Collection; Duncan rehearsing in the Duncans’ studio in Paris, Photo: Raymond Duncan, Paris, 1900; Duncan dancing “The Priestess,” Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Photo: Elvira, Munich, circa 1903