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Isadora Duncan in the 21st Century: Capturing the Art and Spirit of the Dancer's Legacy

by Andrea Mantell Seidel. 2015. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company. 272 pp., 39 b&w illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 paper. ISBN: 978-0-7864-7795-1
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Andrea Mantell Seidel's *Isadora Duncan in the 21st Century: Capturing the Art and Spirit of the Dancer's Legacy* fills a critical gap in the extant scholarship on early twentieth-century dance artist Isadora Duncan. Rather than focusing on Duncan's biography, this text foregrounds Duncan's choreographic legacy from the perspective of a dancer and scholar who has spent thirty-five years coaching and performing Duncan's work. Seidel writes from inside the dances, analyzing signature Duncan repertory pieces, and positioning Duncan's legacy as a relevant, rather than simply historically located, art form. There is a broad audience for this text, ranging from legacy Duncan dancers, like myself, who are grappling with defining the significance of Duncan's work in our contemporary performing and teaching lives to dance students and scholars curious about Duncan's method to those more generally interested in how movement conveys meaning.

Duncan revolutionized early twentieth-century Western concert dance with her bare feet, breath-initiated gesture, and real-life thematic content. Early writings on Duncan emphasize her charisma, many lovers, and global lifestyle. These accounts do not examine her choreographic legacy as distinct from her specific stage persona. The conflation of Duncan the choreographer with Duncan the performer has led to the erroneous assumption that Duncan was a gifted improviser whose ephemeral dance art disappeared with her tragic death. Seidel's book unravels this myth, describing in detail iconic Duncan repertory pieces and demonstrating that the dance works Duncan

created stand on their own as works of art, separate from Duncan as the original performer.

Part memoir, Seidel narrates her own experiences as a legacy Duncan dancer, including her years of coaching with Duncan dance luminary Julia Levien. In 1994, Levien and Seidel produced the video, *Isadora Duncan Technique and Repertory*, featuring Seidel's youth company, the Isadora Duncan Dance Ensemble (published in 1995 by Dance Horizons Video). *Isadora Duncan in the 21st Century* traces Seidel's experiences directing the company, offering a heartfelt portrayal of her attempt to put into practice Duncan's "school of life" ideal. Within the creative and aesthetic framework of Duncan dance, Seidel nurtured a community of dancers as they matured through adolescence and into young adulthood. Seidel draws parallels between the thematic content of the dances and significant life lessons, positioning dances in the Duncan repertory as developmental rites of passage.

According to Seidel, the aim of this book is to reveal how Duncan's choreographies express or reflect the dancer's inner life. Seidel reviews the handful of published sources documenting Duncan's technique and repertory, including a text authored by original Duncan pupil Irma Duncan (1970) and Nadia Chilkovsky Nahumck's collection (1994) of Laban-notated dances, in addition to Levien's technique book (1994). Seidel asserts, "this present book thus seeks to help fill in the gaps in emotional and psychological content omitted by Nahumck, Irma Duncan, and Levien" (9). Seidel's focus is on the relationship between the dancer and the dance, and she emphasizes the dance as a vehicle for personal growth and transformation and as something more than an art object or form of aesthetic expression.

Nevertheless, Duncan dance is aesthetically specific and rooted in turn-of-the-twentieth century, white, middle- and upper-class values. Dance scholars ranging from Ann Daly (1992, 1995, 2002) to Susan Manning (1997), Ann Cooper Albright (1997a, 2006), and Sally Banes (1998) have critiqued representations of whiteness and the conservative feminism of Duncan's work. Daly and Banes read Duncan's notions of "nature" and "woman" as romanticized and limited by her conflation of womanhood with motherhood and her desexualizing of the white female body by aligning it with spirituality and art. Yet, they also credit Duncan

with creating a space of agency and subjectivity for women in dance by challenging the objectifying effect of the male gaze. Duncan dance is steeped in European classicism and romantic representations of innocent maidenhood, sexual blossoming, and the wholesome, nurturing dyad of mother and child. How is this a relevant narrative for diverse contemporary dancers in the twenty-first century? Seidel addresses this question by acknowledging the representational limits of Duncan's aesthetic perspective and positions her own globally informed and culturally diverse dance background in contrast. Seidel recounts her search for a personally meaningful dance form, admitting that:

The postmodernism of the late 70s and early 80s, which rejected the emotional narratives and humanistic concerns of the early moderns, was too cerebral for my nature. . . . While cultural dance forms outside the western canon fascinated me, I always felt too much the "outsider" for the distinctive vocabulary of dance forms of Asia, India, or Africa. (2)

Seidel explored a wide range of movement practices, from her private studies with Humphrey-Weidman soloist Eleanor King to flamenco, southwestern Native American dance forms, and unsuccessful attempts at choreography. Seidel found the movement experience she was seeking in Duncan dance, and she incorporated the diverse styles that informed her dance journey, including her "deep interests in yoga, meditation, Eastern philosophy, and the sacred dance practices of Asian, Native American, African, and other non-western cultures," into her company's training practices (65).

Seidel gestures toward multiculturalism; yet, she is also critical of popular culture's influences on young dancers. Citing her experiences teaching at an arts magnet middle school in Miami, she "was struck by the number of adolescents who dressed provocatively with dyed hair and heavy eye makeup" (53). She laments that "we no longer have rites of passage or meaningful rituals that clearly define what it means to be a woman nor identify the appropriate behaviors that lead to a productive, balanced

emotional and social life" (58). It seems Seidel is still arguing for Duncan dance as a more moral or "appropriate" training for young dancers than other popular dance styles and techniques, including jazz and ballet. Seidel's focus is on the potential for dance movement to function as a ritual container, even in the context of performed concert dance. There is an implicit hierarchy here that situates ritualistic dance forms above entertainment dance and places Duncan dance in the former context. Even though Seidel presents a globally informed worldview and worked with a diverse company of dancers, her argued preference is for dance as a spiritual act, upholding Duncan's early-twentieth-century assertion that worthy art must have a religious intention.

Structurally, Seidel introduces each chapter with a first-person movement description. Seidel aims to create an embodied experience of movement for the reader, detailing weight shifts and coordination specific to Duncan dance. In describing the recumbent figure's movement in Duncan's duet choreography to Chopin's Nocturne in E, Seidel narrates, "With a series of reluctant pauses, my cupped hands intermittently draw closer to body center and reach towards Angel as she steps backwards, beckoning me with her hand to follow the light. . . . As the light fades, I too run, following her into the realm of hope and faith, in triumph over darkness and despair" (190). Although some of this thick description reads as a bit overdetermined, Seidel conveys the rich imagery behind the movement that is often used in coaching these dances, and she layers this imagery with the dancers' inner dialogues. The earnestness in these descriptions contrasts with the sense of self-aware irony that characterizes much postmodern performance. Seidel uses this strategy to illustrate her larger argument that these dances provide performers with an opportunity for self-reflection by linking the personal with the universal, further implying that the dances serve as containers for ritual growth and transformation. Seidel privileges an aesthetic of emotive humanism in dance.

Seidel examines the unique skill set that Duncan dancers develop to perform the range of dances in Duncan's repertory and acknowledges Duncan's relationship with theater director Constantin Stanislavski, who brought psychological realism to acting. Seidel reads Stanislavski's practice of "affective memory" as

drawing on personal experiences to inform performance, and she highlights relationships between the dancers' lives and themes that arise in the dances. Seidel notes, "The personal stories and challenges faced by dancers in the company hopefully also reveal the power and meaning of the dances and resonate with readers' own lives in a visceral, authentic way" (10). This connection is particularly effective in Chapter 12, "Women Warriors," when Seidel narrates the courage of a young dancer who lost a leg in a car accident and persevered to return to performance.

In this text, Seidel progressively demonstrates that Duncan's dances are powerfully enlivened by multiple bodies, and she acknowledges the need for diverse representation in the work. She addresses the limits of Duncan's feminism and her "inability to transcend the racism of her time" (225). Seidel also charges the next generation of contemporary practitioners with continuing to explore intersections of gender, race, and class within the framework of Duncan dance.

Seidel concludes with an epilogue detailing the work of current Duncan legacy dancers and their activities, including the organization of the Isadora Duncan International Symposium. She glosses the contexts in which contemporary Duncan dancers are working, from repertory companies and studios to secondary and higher education and dance movement therapy. As part of the next generation of Duncan practitioners who embrace a twenty-first century perspective on representation, identity, and intersectionality, I appreciate this book's treatment of the legacy of Duncan's technique and repertory as distinct from her persona and hope it sparks further critical discourse.

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Choreographies of 21st Century Wars

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Choreographies of 21st Century Wars is a densely packed collection of illuminating essays devoted to examining the "complex relationship between choreography and war in this century" (1). For the most part, the essays are deeply dark