

## **Book review**

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

Andrea Mantell Seidel (2016), North Carolina: McFarland and Company Inc., Publishers, 272pp., ISBN 978-0-78647-795-1, Ebook; ISBN 978-1-47662-369-6, £36.95 p/bk

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Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) was an American pioneer of dance who revolutionized the art form. Andrea Mantell Seidel's *Isadora Duncan in the 21st Century – Capturing the Art and Spirit of the Dancer's Legacy*, written in the style of a personal memoir, intimately shares the author's and the Isadora Duncan Dance Ensemble's personal lives in relation to learning and performing Duncan's works. The inclusion of personal anecdotes and Duncan's philosophical and theoretical writings pulls the reader in. As the author states, the book is in no way intended to portray an exact vision of Duncan's work onstage and her life offstage nor to present definitive interpretations. Rather the book is a form of somatic reflection focusing on the author's and her troupe's feelings and thoughts in relation to the Self and to Duncan's works. Seidel contextualizes her book within the canon of Duncan publications and highlights that few, if any, books address the process of preservation and the relevance of the work for twenty-first century dancers.

In twelve chapters, an introduction and an epilogue, the book records ephemeral feelings and offers insight into the past, helping the reader understand the power of Duncan's work and why she was such a visionary artist and woman. The author takes a chronological approach to exploring Duncan's choreography and recounts the troupe's and her own interaction with the work. What is very clearly highlighted is that third generation Duncan dancers are keeping her

philosophy and traditions alive through honouring the ‘free spirited’ dancer whose body and soul harmoniously grow and move together.

The author lays out the book by attaching key themes of Duncan’s teaching principles and performance works. In Chapters 1 and 2 the reader is presented with Duncan’s idea of ‘flow’ and ‘breath’ and how it relates to teaching children. Chapter 3 weaves in Duncan’s writing and theories to contextualize the troupe’s own work and approach to existing as a touring company in modern day society. Through the author’s retelling of their journey as a company, but also as individuals, we gain insight into the world of a Duncan dancer. Music was an integral part of Duncan’s work and in this chapter Seidel expands on that fascination. Perhaps more interesting to the somatic reader is the discussion of body in relation to the music and the Self. Chapters 4 and 5 have a spiritual undertone as the mysticism of Duncan is articulated and pulled into the work of the company. Through descriptions of *Ave Maria* and *Blessed Spirits* (c. 1910) the dancers explore the Self, the Spirit and the Soul that are tied to Duncan’s ecstatic states and movement principles. However, the book doesn’t only celebrate the life but also touches on death. The tragedy of Duncan’s life, which saw the loss of her children, were part of Duncan’s process of making and creating. Sadly, the author and others in the company, experienced pain and suffering and the author beautifully articulates these shared experiences through describing transformative states that were accessed through the dancer’s training and attuning herself to the state of ‘beingness’.

Lovely memories of Seidel learning Duncan solos take the reader back in time and into the rehearsal studio or a performance. What makes the book relevant to dancers of today may be the psychology behind training the soma and the exploration of the Self Reflecting on the dances, the process of making and performing and being a troupe, a dancer and teacher of today

might find similarities. Captivating descriptions of the dances and the études of Duncan's work, make the book worth reading, especially for anyone not familiar with specific pieces. Seidel does make references to academic writers and thinkers, like Maaïke Bleeker and Ramsay Burt, however such references are rare.

Chapter 7 serves as a historical framework contextualizing Duncan's choreography and situating it within the early twentieth century. The author has a critical eye and examines Duncan's choreography deconstructing her choices. The critique of choreographic decision making in *Southern Roses* (1911) is the crux of Chapter 7. Chapter 8 feels like a beautiful afternoon spent in a gallery exploring old Greek statues through the eyes of Duncan. The chapter discusses in depth the Duncan arm position and her idea of the 'natural' body. Tunics, fabrics and flow are tied to the Duncan costume and reflect women's emancipation and the restrictions of culture and society that Duncan was challenging. Chapter 9 stays with the feminist Duncan, although the author recognizes that Duncan hardly saw herself as political. The chapter considers *Bacchanal* (1903), the Nietzsche-inspired, Dionysian movement piece that was restaged by the author in a variety of ways, from a feminist perspective. While we are either meeting or being re-introduced to Duncan's psychology, we also are pulled into the author's mind as she overcame certain hurdles of restaging Duncan's work within a contemporary context. Duncan's work was seen as revolutionary in its day and the process of restaging and re-enacting the work today is as exciting to the author.

The book climaxes with Chapter 10 that beautifully discusses tragedy, Duncan's personal trauma and the author's real-life issues. The chapter presents Duncan in relation to the various influences of her day: musicians, composers, dancers and Greek statues and ideas. Chapter 11 discusses the creation and performing of *Mother* (1923) and honours tragedy in a powerful and

creative way. Finally, Chapter 12, entitled ‘Women warriors’ is a strong way to end the historical criticism of Duncan’s life and its legacy. The chapter introduces us to Stephanie, a dancer in the company, who survived a tragic car accident and continued to dance after she became disabled. The courage, will and spirit of this dancer, who learned to dance with her prosthetic leg, together with Seidel’s narrative, evoke a range of emotions and also serves as a source of inspiration.

Duncan’s life and work has energized many and this book speaks to academics, dancers, psychologists, historians, choreographers and artists. The book reminds the reader that Duncan’s work is a timeless beauty that constantly reinvents itself.

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