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ISADORA DUNCAN DANCE: THE REVOLUTION OF AN ARTIST IN RUSSIA, 1905-2003

By Dr. Andrea Mantell Seidel

Isadora Duncan, the revolutionary matriarch of the modern dance, made her first Russian concert debut in 1905 at the Marinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. It was an epoch making event that forever changed the great Russian Imperial ballet tradition. Russian impresario Serge Diaghileff, the founder of the Ballet Russe wrote after seeing Isadora's performances in St. Petersburg, "Isadora gave an irreparable jolt to the classic ballet of Imperial Russia.... She pointed the way, and Fokine and I followed" (Terry, 40, 42). Isadora subsequently was to return to Russia at least six times during her life, finding great inspiration in the plight of the oppressed Russian workers.

Nearly 100 years later, three members of my Miami-based company, the Isadora Duncan Dance Ensemble, my daughter Merina, and I would make a personal and professional pilgrimage to St. Petersburg to bring our American Duncan legacy to Russian dancers and in turn, to discover what might remain of Isadora's art in contemporary St. Petersburg. CEC International Partners, a New York/St. Petersburg based organization that sponsors artist exchange between central and Eastern Europe sponsored our trip. Our programs, held in conjunction with the International Goethe Festival in celebration of St. Petersburg's 300th anniversary, included master classes, a lecture on Isadora's Russian years, and a performance at the Baltiski Dom Theater.

In 1921, Isadora established a school in Moscow at the invitation of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Education who endeavored to bring art to the people. The Soviet anti-capitalistic ideology appealed to Duncan's disillusionment with American millionaires who failed to fund her schools in France, Greece, and Germany. While few foreigners had ever received such support as did Isadora, eventually the poor conditions in the Soviet Union, famine, and Lenin's New Economic Policy and its temporarily imposed free market reforms, eliminated state aid for her school. Her devoted pupil and adopted daughter, Irma, maintained the school until about 1930 when the harsh conditions in the Soviet Union forced her to go to America where she joined Anna Duncan in founding the American School of Duncan Dancers. Irma's pupils maintained the Russian school for nearly a decade; however, eventually, the revolutionary, individualistic spirit that gave birth to the great legacy of the modern dance was suffocated under repressive Soviet regimes.

Our hosts informed us that there was very little depth or continuity in the training of contemporary dancers outside of the exclusive ballet worlds of the Kirov and Bolshoi. In the last few decades, particularly after the fall of communism, there seems to have been a pastiche of exposure to modern dance, largely the work of Martha Graham and more recently, to the choreography of Pina Bausch and her European contemporaries, as well as some training in jazz and contact improvisation. The interest in my classes in Duncan technique and repertory was extremely high since Duncan and her husband, the famed poet of the Soviet Union, Serge Essenin, are legendary figures in Russia. Essenin remains a popular, beloved figure in

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**Cornelius Kweku Ganyo, 65, Arts Council Director of the
Ghana National Folklore Company, Arizona State University Faculty, and
Arizona Commission for the Arts Roster Artist**

By Pegge Vissicaro

Cornelius Kweku Ganyo, a legendary Ghanaian master drummer dancer, died February 20, 2003 at the age of 65 due to respiratory failure from a massive stroke. Many people knew him as Uncle C. K. or Nana C.K., terms of endearment for a man who dedicated his life to preserving and teaching traditional dance and music primarily from the areas of Ghana, Togo, and Benin, West Africa. Born August 26, 1937 in Adafienu, Ghana, Mr. Ganyo was the son of a judge and member of the Ewe tribe. He was endowed with the gifts of drumming and dancing and learned in depth the relationship between movement and drum language. In 1957 when Ghana gained its independence, a strong nationalistic movement led young C.K. on a twenty-year research mission funded by the Ghanaian government to study traditional dance and music of various ethnic groups such as the Asanti, Dagbamba, and Ga. Later he was appointed to direct the Arts Council National Dance Company and toured worldwide with that group from 1966-1983. He left Ghana in 1983 and permanently settled in the United States, recording with Baba Oluntunji and Charlie Parker. Kobla Ladzekpo, one of C.K.'s first teachers in Ghana, resettled in California and invited Uncle C.K. to the University of California at Los Angeles and CalArts Institute in Valencia to work as an artist/lecturer. Kobla's younger brother C.K. Ladzekpo came to the U.S. several years later to teach at the University of California, Berkeley. Together C.K. Ganyo, Kobla Ladzekpo, and C.K. Ladzekpo created the foundation from which West African music and dance education grew in the U.S. In 1987, Mr. Ganyo came to Phoenix,

Arizona, forming the dance and music performance group Adzido. Notably, Adzido, a Arizona Commission for the Arts sanctioned ethnic arts ensemble, inaugurated CCDR's Humanities and Arts program with a concert at the Coconino Center for the Arts in 1991.



He also was a faculty associate at Arizona State University's Department of Dance from 1990-2002, offering the first traditional West African dance and music courses at that institution. Uncle C.K. Ganyo's legacy lives on through the thousands of students he influenced worldwide. He is survived by his wife, Florence A. Ganyo of Tempe, AZ, eight children, and eleven grandchildren. Mr. Ganyo was laid to rest with other family members in the Denu Cemetery, Ghana, on March 20, 2003.

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Russia today, and much that is commonly known about Isadora is in relation to her turbulent marriage to Essenin. A visit to the Engleterre Hotel where Essenin committed suicide was a poignant moment in our journey. However, a lunch of Russian blini and caviar at the historic Stray Dog Café dating from 1913, where Isadora, Essenin, Dostoyevsky, Stanislavski, and other great artists and intellectuals of that period dined and informally exchanged their art and ideas, brought a more immediate and vibrant sense of the era. It was a privilege to visit this historic gathering place of Russian's intellectual and artistic elite, commemorated through numerous old photos and famous signatures on the old stonewalls.

The highlight of our Duncan workshops was a meeting with Olga Trout and a subsequent visit to her dance school, "The Cultural Centre of Pure Art." Olga informed us that her "Plastic Ballet Theater" was dedicated to a "pure interpretation of Duncan philosophy." Many of these schools of "plastique" emerged in Russia after her arrival, adopting Duncan's bare feet, tunics, and "serious" music. However, according to Ilya Schneider, Isadora's secretary in Russia, they were devoid of expression and true naturalness of movement (Kurth, 487).

While the company members went off to visit Moscow, Merina and I arrived at an elegant classroom not far from Nevsky Prospect, the Champs Elysee of St. Petersburg. We were greeted by about 20 beautiful Russian, tunic-clad children, ages 8-14 years who had prepared a full program of class work and dances for our visit. Merina and I sat watching the children with their earnest and eager faces rhythmically respond to the music of Schubert, Chopin, and other romantic composers utilized in the Duncan repertory. I was transported back in time to the Dalcroze schools of Eurythmics and "plastique" of the early 1900's, as the children marched, hopped, and skipped to a variety of rhythmic exercises.

Olga and the children then invited Merina to get up and improvise to Schubert's "Moment Musical," one of the early dances that Isadora performed in St. Petersburg. Reluctant and shy to respond spontaneously to this "foreign class," Merina complied at Olga and her proud Mother's urging. Charming as the Russian children's dances were, their understanding of Duncan's artistry was "impressionistic" and lacking in a depth of understanding of line, form, idea, and choreographic structure. I emphasized in my Russian classes that Duncan left a transmittable legacy of technique and repertory, that her art mediated Apollonian balance and form with Dionysian ecstasy. Duncan's seemingly effortless motion and the numerous imitators in Russia, Europe, and America who wafted in similar free-flowing tunics in undisciplined, romantic reverie fueled a myth that Duncan's art was merely improvisational, perpetuated by both Russian ballet critics and American writers throughout the early and mid-20th century.



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At the end of their demonstration, Olga and the young children showered Merina and me with gifts, including a handmade head wreath of fall leaves, and expressions of gratitude for introducing them to the technique and discipline of the Duncan technique that they would now incorporate into their lessons. In that moment, I felt our trip had accomplished all that I had hoped for.

The performance at the Baltiski Dom also brought its own rewards with a nearly full house and splendidly warm, enthusiastic applause from the audience. We opened the performance with Schubert's *Ave Maria*, as Isadora had done in the years after the Revolution, in part as a homage to the slain Russian workers, and in part, as a way to resurrect her own spirit after the tragic death of her two children. We closed the performance with *Dubinushksa*, perhaps the best known of Isadora's Russian pieces, set to a revolutionary working song of 1905. This dance, along with *Revolutionary*, which I danced to the music of Scriabin, depicts the rise from slavery to freedom, the struggle of man's spirit upward to self-mastery. On November 7, 1921 on the fourth anniversary of the Revolution with Lenin in attendance at the Bolshoi Theater, Duncan and a hundred little children in red tunics electrified Lenin and the Communist officials with their Russian dances and a closing performance of L' Internationale (Terry, 56).

Isadora Duncan Dance Ensemble dancers Michelle Vazquez Kickasola, a Cuban-American and Ivette Sotomayer, a Nicaraguan-American, raised in Miami where the outspoken, dominant Cuban community is virulently anti-Communist, worried that our red tunic dances choreographed to songs of the Red Army, might be offensive to the audience in a democratically reformed Russia in the 21st century. On the contrary, however, we learned from our hosts attending the performance that many young people are apolitical and viewed the music and dance as simply part of their history. However, many of the older generation, particularly those originally from impoverished independent states such as Georgia and Uzbekistan, lamented that life was economically better under communism.



In 1924, three years before her death, Isadora wrote to Irma referring to the students in her Moscow school:

*My art was the flower of an epoch, but the Epoch is dead and Europe is the past.
These red tunic kids are the future . . .*

With the failure of the Russian school and the ultimate failures of Communism in the Soviet Union in the 20th century, the "red tunic kids" were not to carry on Isadora's prophetic vision extolled in her famous treatise on *The Art of the Dance*.

It was the dancers of the American Duncan school, including our mentor Julia Levien, the most well-known of these third-generation dancers who danced with Anna and Irma in the 1930's, who would carry on the depth, integrity, and artistry of Isadora's great humanistic legacy. Julia, who is now 92 years "young," as she says, has come to Miami every winter since our company was founded in 1992, to inspire and encourage us, and to continue to transmit the more than 60 dances in Isadora's repertory. It is to Julia and this living legacy of embodied knowledge that she carries and passes on to our company of fourth, fifth, and sixth generations of Duncan dancers, that our work in the 21st century in the US and abroad honors and pays tribute to.

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Bio

Andrea Mantell Seidel is Artistic Director of the Isadora Duncan Dance Ensemble, based in Miami, Florida. She and CCDR director Joann Kealiinohomoku are trustees of the Eleanor King Trust. Mantell-Seidel has lectured, taught, and performed the Duncan and King work throughout the US and abroad, including the Kennedy Center in Washington, Hong Kong International Dance Festival, and New York Lincoln Center Festival Out-of-Doors. She is Associate Professor of Dance in the Department of Theater and Dance, and Director of the Intercultural Dance and Music Institute at Florida International University.

Pegge Vissicaro, Ph.D.

Pegge Vissicaro is now Dr. Vissicaro, having completed her doctorate at the University of Arizona, with Specialization in Educational Media and Computers, College of Education, Division of Curricular Instruction, and Program of Interdisciplinary Curricular Instruction. Her dissertation,

"Emic Etic Interaction: Processes of Cross-Cultural Dance Study in an Online Learning Environment," was successfully defended on September 26, 2003. Dr. Vissicaro is an Assistant Professor in the ASU Dance Department and a member of the CCDR Board of Directors.

The Enduring Power of the Arts

Two events happened in the last few months that demonstrate why the arts are called "Affective." These events show the resilience of human beings as expressed in and by the arts.

The first event was reported by Jim Wildman on the program "All Things Considered," over National Public Radio, August 3. He reported that an evening of American and Iraqi music was presented at the Baghdad Convention Center for an audience of US officers and servicemen and Iraqi residents. An Iraqi-American serviceman stood up and shared memories of dancing in Iraq when he was a child. He began to dance in the aisles and soon dozens of others in the audience joined him, holding hands and moving from side to side in a line dance. For the moment, at least, the anxieties of war were put aside.

The second event took place on December 9, as reported and shown on CNN-TV. The Iraqi Symphony Orchestra traveled to America to play a concert with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, playing both western and Iraqi classical musics. The packed audience included President and Mrs. Bush. Despite war and destruction, the Iraqi Symphony, founded several decades ago, was professional and excellent. It was reported that the members of the Iraqi Symphony have never stopped meeting and practicing together.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS to Daniel Kott and Jeanne Neff

When CCDR's "old" fax machine bit the dust, Dr. Kott came to CCDR's rescue and sent a working machine from Texas. Daniel Kott is the Director of The International Folk Culture Center located on the campus of Our Lady of the Lake University, San Antonio, Texas .

A long time leader of recreational folk dance in Flagstaff, Jeanne Neff donated 217 issues of *Viltis* magazines, beginning with year 1953, to CCDR's library. She began actively dancing while a student at Oregon State College, in Corvallis, and over the years expanded her repertoire of international dances at annual folk dance workshops held in the Western states. She continues to share her international knowledge here in Arizona. Thank you Jeanne.

Membership Notice

Previously the CCDR membership year was uniquely the anniversary of individual memberships. Now and in the future membership will commence every January 1. For those of you who paid dues during the middle of 2003, we suggest (and hope) you will consider the balance of your current membership to be a donation to CCDR, so you will renew NOW for the year 2004!

Gift-Giving in 2003

This helpful idea is gleaned from information in a recent newsletter out of Northwestern University.: "long-term appreciated stocks make an excellent choice to fund your charitable gifts. You are able to claim a deduction for the full fair-market value of stock, but you do not have to recognize or pay tax on any of your paper gain when you make the gift."

Capital Campaign

CCDR has set its sights on the year 2007 for building an extension to its library and archives. That means CCDR must raise \$150,000 in the next three years. Please make a donation now so it can be earning money for this important "bricks and mortar" project. For those of you who have visited the CCDR facilities you know how desperately this extension is needed to house, protect, and make available the precious CCDR collections. If you are affiliated with a university or dance institution, please consider encouraging it to take an organization membership in CCDR. Students visit CCDR in Flagstaff to utilize the library archives, and other collections. And, as you know, CCDR is always available for consultation.

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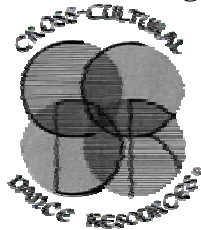
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