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Expressing the Inexpressible: Henrik Ibsen and Isadora Duncan*

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The two seemingly opposing forces of Isadora Duncan and Henrik Ibsen were complementary both in their spirit and in their epic effect upon the world of dance and drama, and indeed upon society in general. From the North and from the West, Ibsen and Isadora flashed into being like two unknown comets hurtling across the heavens, creating chaos and upheaval as they lit up the dark spaces of the world and, passing beyond our ken, leaving behind a glimmering trail of profound change, as well as misunderstanding and misinterpretation. I would like to show how these two apparently alien forces were driven by the same rhythmical and spiritual dynamics, 'towards the Joy and the Light that are our final goal'.

That a girl of nineteen, with no credentials, no institutional backing and no money should challenge the artistic establishment of wealthy 1890s San Francisco with the declaration of her belief in Truth and Beauty, telling a theatre director that she had discovered the dance—'the art which has been lost for two thousand years'; and that, twenty years earlier, a young man, far away from the centres of culture in hide-bound nineteenth-century Norway, should challenge the beliefs and double standards of contemporary society, showing with his revolutionary plays a way out of the mire of lies and deception up into the light of Truth, is as astounding as the dramatic realisation of their ideals. They challenged a sceptical and materialistic world with the burning beacon of Truth, through whose brilliant radiance shone glimpses of the Eternal.

The obvious differences between these two inflammatory artists are almost ludicrous. On the one hand there is the stern, bewhiskered, frock-coated Ibsen with his set habits—not only his habitual promen-

* This essay is based on a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy, 1 October 2012. Translations from Henrik Ibsen's plays are by India Russell. Translations from his notes and other writings are by India Russell, by Michael Meyer (from *Ibsen* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971]) and by William Archer (from his translations in *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, 12 vols [London: William Heinemann, 1908–17]).

ade and café table, but his method of writing. Ibsen said that he was driven to write, his ideas swept him along and it was only by extreme discipline that he was able to harness his creativity. His last twelve plays, the *Nutidsdramær* ('Contemporary Dramas'), were written at an incredible pace. With the exception of *En folkefiende* ('An Enemy of the People'), which was his immediate and furious response to the public's censorious reception of *Gengangere* ('Ghosts'), Ibsen wrote a play every two years between 1877 and 1899.

And, in dramatic contrast to Ibsen, with his strict working timetable (he usually finished each play in time for the Christmas market), the young will-o'-the-wisp Isadora, literally casting off the restrictions of Victorian dress and attitudes, bare-foot and bare-limbed in improvised draperies resembling Botticelli's *Primavera*, dancing erratically through England, Paris, Greece, Hungary, Russia and America, setting up schools on her way. Isadora, free-limbed, free-loving, tragic, revolutionary, dancing at parties and dinners, the Bolshoi and the Metropolitan Opera House, mansions and workers' communes, conversing with people with no knowledge of their language—full of the joy of life, that same *livsglæde* that Ibsen and his characters, far away in dark cold Norway, yearned for: Nora, Oswald, Rosmer, Allmers, Solness.

But these outward differences only serve to emphasise the similarity of the inner vision of Isadora Duncan and Henrik Ibsen.

So how does one come upon a glimpse of their vision?

I have long been fascinated by and lectured on the Craig, Isadora, Duse, Stanislavsky and Ibsen connection. And since my introduction to the 'real' Ibsen by my Norwegian tutor, I have been especially interested in the affinity of Ibsen's art with Isadora's.

In my research into the art of the volatile Isadora I have tried to sift fact from fantasy and, for many years, I danced with the Evening School Performance Group of London Contemporary Dance which teaches Duncan-influenced Graham technique. My one real glimpse of Isadora, the woman and artist, however, was when I worked for a short while with the 80-year-old Lily Dikovskaya, one of the then two remaining 'Isadorables' of the Moscow School.

Although Isadora's personal life can be documented fairly easily, her art almost resists definition. Whereas with Ibsen we have his plays, to 'read and live through in the order in which [he] wrote them'—which, he stresses, together with a knowledge of the Norway of their background, is all that is necessary for an understanding of his work—

Isadora's legacy is far less tangible. Even the few surviving dance notations, that are still interpreted, seem to give little of the essence of her work. She left a few writings on her art, including the odd references in her tampered-with, posthumously published autobiography, unwillingly written to relieve her penurious state in the south of France; and the teaching of 'Duncan Dance' was continued after Isadora's death, by her pupil Irma until 1947, and thereafter by other adherents; but how far it contained, or contains, the essence of Isadora's work is impossible to gauge. The Duncan Dance classes I have taken were very vague, lacking any 'spirit'. And even in her lifetime, the so-called Schools of Interpretative Dancing that sprang up professing to teach 'Duncan Dance' horrified Isadora, as her pupil and secretary write:

. . . girls, dressed in sloppy muslin Greek dresses, chasing sunbeams and being girlishly 'interpretative' had the power to infuriate her beyond measure.¹

The few remaining programmes of Isadora's concerts tell us the duration of her performances and the music and conductors she worked with. Part of her considerable library also remains, mainly with her last lover, Vitya Seroff, later to become one of America's distinguished music critics and biographers; and there are photographs and drawings, together with some reliable reports on her performances. But there is no film of her work, although at the end of her life she was courted (to no avail) by film directors. There is, however, one little clip lasting about a minute where we see, in a garden, Isadora, swathed in long Greek-like draperies, whisk quickly into a circle of men in evening dress, and whisk out again. That is all. But her fame persists. Films, books, anecdotes, newspaper reports, all have served to build up the folk legend of a free-spirited, immoral and outrageous woman who, when her long scarf caught in the wheels, died in a fast sports car in the south of France.

But despite the tenuousness of her legacy, the more I have thought and read about Isadora, the more I have found a similarity between the spiritual dynamics of her art and Ibsen's.

With regard to Ibsen's legacy, it is all too accessible. We have, not

1. Irma Duncan and Allan Ross Macdougall, *Isadora Duncan's Russian Days* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1929), p. 230.

only his plays, but his drafts, working notes, letters and speeches—all open to bad translations, misinterpretations, gimmicky direction and bad acting.

Konstantin Stanislavsky, co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre and ‘father’ of modern theatre, was a fervent admirer of Ibsen and Isadora, both of whom influenced him profoundly; and he once expressed a wish to be Norwegian so that, freed from the barrier of translation, the star system and histrionic acting, he could fully appreciate Ibsen’s plays. It was during his performance of Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* that Stanislavsky further clarified his ideas for his System of Acting, particularly the concept of ‘putting a motor in the soul’ learnt from Isadora. In 1900 a member of the Moscow Art Theatre described the transformation of Stanislavsky on stage during the play:

He was so imbued with the life of Ibsen’s character [Stockmann] that he became quite a different man. Those who happened to be near him on the stage were absolutely convinced that they were in the presence of a new person.²

However, the prevalent style of acting was far removed from the artistic approach Ibsen’s works required. In Russia, as in England, actors used stock gestures and declamatory speech and it was normal for the ‘star’ to be greeted with bouquets and applause even in the middle of a scene. But in 1858, in the little town of Asolo in Italy, the ideal Ibsen actress had been born—Eleonora Duse, with the intelligence and spiritual ability to convey the inner workings of the mind of the characters she played. She became the idol of the intellectuals, with Gerhart Hauptmann hailing her as ‘the greatest artist’ and ‘first interpreter of that psychological art that is now making its inevitable progress in the world’.³ In 1891, Anton Chekhov, having just seen Duse in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* in St Petersburg, wrote to his sister,

I have just seen Duse, the Italian actress, in Shakespeare’s ‘Cleopatra’. I don’t understand Italian, but she performed so brilliantly

2. David Magarshack, *Stanislavsky: A Life* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 213. See also p. 212, where Leonidov writes: ‘It was indeed impossible to separate Stanislavsky from Stockmann. It almost seemed that that would have been equivalent to tearing the skin off a living man.’

3. William Weaver, *Duse: A Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 97.

that I seemed to understand every word. What an actress! Never before have I seen anything like her. I looked at Duse and worked myself into a state of anguish at the thought that we have to educate our temperaments and tastes through such wooden actresses as X—and her like, whom we consider great because we haven't any better. As I was watching Duse, I realized why the Russian theatre is so dreary.⁴

Duse became the great Ibsen actress and was so enamoured of his work that in 1906 she travelled to Norway to play in *Rosmersholm* and pay homage to Ibsen. But he was then too ill to receive her—and she stood in the snow under his windows in the Arbiens Gade in Kristiania for a long time hoping to get a glimpse of him.

The strong connection between Ibsen, Duse, Isadora, Stanislavsky and Chekhov was their search for truth, their ruthless honesty and terrible vulnerability, and their going beyond externals to the unspoken, to the singing silence. But although appreciated by some contemporaries, mainly artists, they all suffered from adverse, usually virulent criticism. And it is the critics who, unfortunately, influence the public. It is the critics, failing to see beyond the surface and merely concentrating on the 'story line', who do such a disservice to Ibsen when they pose, for instance, meaningless questions such as whether it was believable that Irene in *Når vi døde vågner* ('When We Dead Awaken') had shown herself naked on stage. In the same way, Isadora Duncan's critics saw only the external, the semi-naked body; but Stanislavsky, seeing a bare-legged, barefoot dancer for the first time, saw the Inner Truth in Isadora's work. And it was only when he and a few other leading Moscow artists rushed forward to congratulate her on her performance in 1909 that the 'intelligentsia' dared risk applauding as well. As Isadora said to the students in one of the many imitative schools of her dance that had sprung up, if you *only* think about your legs or your body, that is all the audience will see. Blake's lines come to mind:

This Life's five Windows of the Soul
Distort the Heavens from Pole to Pole

4. Lillian Hellman, ed., *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov* (London: Picador, 1984), p. 139.

And lead you to Believe a Lie
When you see with, not thro', the Eye.⁵

In his essay *The Soul of Man*, Oscar Wilde writes:

When the public says a work is grossly unintelligible, it means that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new; when the public describes a work as grossly immoral, it means that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true.⁶

Both Isadora and Ibsen suffered from the scathing writings of journalists who castigated them as 'grossly unintelligible' or 'grossly immoral', or both!

HENRIK IBSEN 1828–1906

Henrik Ibsen was born in Skien on the east coast of Norway, into a well-to-do family which fell on hard times (as did Isadora's family); and Ibsen, who had had ideas of becoming either a doctor or a painter and studying in Paris, became at the age of sixteen an apothecary's apprentice in Grimstad, studied for a year at Kristiania University, failed to graduate and at the age of twenty-two was appointed by Ole Bull, the world-famous violinist, as 'director, writer and producer' of the newly founded National Norwegian Theatre in Bergen, with the specific task of writing one play a year. He also performed practically every task associated with theatre except that of acting.

I have always thought that if one looked down on Ibsen's *Contemporary Dramas*, as though a puppeteer, they would look like a dance; and I recently found out that, indeed, he had started his own puppet theatre as a child. He was also a very adept conjuror—which, together with the mysterious and elemental landscape of Norway, could account for the magic thread that runs through his works.

And it is interesting to note that, in those early days in Bergen, Ibsen's set and costume designs were extremely detailed and coloured

5. Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Blake: Complete Writings* (rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 753. I agree with Sampson's reading, 'five' (see note to line 103). I also read 'Five Windows of the Soul' as the subject.

6. Stuart Mason, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Morality* (London: Frank Palmer, 1912), p. 18.

with paint or crayon. And he choreographed his characters' movements, carefully tracing them in the stage plots and, later, when he was writing his great plays, would hang cut-out figures of his characters over his desk, which he moved around as the play developed.

Ibsen has been claimed as a modernist, naturalist, realist, socialist, feminist and mystic; and he has been dismissed as provincial, brain-sick, contemptible and a muck-ferreting dog—to give but a few examples of the abuse that was hurled at him. But, to me, most damning of all is the faint praise of that infuriating Henry James: 'What an old boy is our Northern Henry. He is too delightful—an old darling', he wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Robins.⁷

Henrik Ibsen was certainly *not* delightful or a darling—and he was *never* old. But whatever he *was*, writing for the stage was his life. In his last play *When We Dead Awaken*, the sculptor Rubek says that he was driven to create. Critics therefore assume that Rubek is Ibsen's self-portrait. But it is not as simple as that. And nor is Ibsen simple or a journalist or an autobiographer. He is an artist. As the paint on a water-colour brush dissolves and takes on a different life when dipped in water, so elements of Ibsen's life colour his poetry. But to find, as many critics do, that a character or situation exactly corresponds to an event, is akin to the impossible task of extracting dissolving paint from its solution. In his artist's soul, Ibsen's experiences have undergone a sea change and merged with the greater flow of life.

In 1880, in a letter to a friend, Ludwig Passarge, Ibsen wrote:

Every new work has had as its purpose for me that of serving as a process of spiritual emancipation and purification; for no man ever stands quite without some responsibility and some complicity in the society to which he belongs.⁸

Compare this with Isadora's statement some thirty years later in her autobiography, *My Life*:

I believe that in each life there is a spiritual line, an upward curve, and all that adheres to and strengthens this line is our real life—the

7. James McFarlane, ed., *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 168.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 91; see also Meyer, *Ibsen*, p. 291.

rest is but as chaff falling from us as our souls progress. Such a spiritual line is my Art.⁹

My Norwegian tutor Torbjørn Støverud (later Cultural Attaché for Norway), with whom, being the only student, I had private tutorials, always said that the best thing about his time at University College was our shared enthusiasm for Ibsen. I remember so well Støverud introducing me to *Hedda Gabler*. I was astonished at the brevity of the dialogue. Where were the 'speeches', where were the 'monologues'? It seemed that the longest uninterrupted parts were the stage directions! How could these brief lines constitute a drama or, indeed, a tragedy of Greek stature, as Oscar Wilde referred to the play in a letter to Lord Lytton? But I was only a novice, and as my understanding of the Norwegian language and culture improved I gradually grew to be able to see through Ibsen's scant dialogue to the poetry of the haunting world beyond words, with its misty vistas, all indicated in his detailed stage directions, leading up beyond the tree-line into the great reality.

But to those who only see 'with the eye' it is the 'everyday' that Ibsen is portraying; and so he has been labelled a 'Naturalist' and compared with Zola. This annoyed Ibsen intensely, provoking the retort 'Zola descends into the sewer to bathe, I to cleanse!'. But his own countryman, fellow playwright and rival, Bjørnsterne Bjørnson, remarked early on that Ibsen had a leaning towards mysticism. Arthur Miller was of the same view, observing:

I take it as a truth that the end of drama is the creation of a higher consciousness and not merely a subjective attack upon the audience's nerves and feelings. What is precious in the Ibsen method is its insistence upon valid causation, and this cannot be dismissed as a wooden notion. This is the 'real' in Ibsen's realism for me, for he was after all, as much a mystic as a realist.¹⁰

And what is interesting is how in his final cycle of plays Ibsen kept this mystical side almost hidden beneath the control of his brilliantly wrought dramas, so that we only catch glimpses which are, in fact, all

9. Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1928), p. 252.

10. Arthur Miller, *Plays: One* (London: Methuen Drama, 1988), p. 21.

the more powerful because of their rarity. In one of his lectures, Eric Bentley, Professor of Poetry at Harvard, refers to this technique as 'anti-eloquence' and poetry beneath the surface:

Nietzsche speaks of the really deep calm being one like that of the sea, under which turbulence and power can be sensed, and the work of Ibsen suggests that the really effective prose in drama is that under which poetry can be sensed. The ordinary Naturalist achieves mere ineloquence and therefore *non-art*. Ibsen contrives anti-eloquence and makes *another kind of art from it*.¹¹

And I would agree. Poetry is often in the spaces between, and there is always in Ibsen's plays an underlying sense of poetry and that feeling of a rumbling volcano beneath the surface that at any moment could break out.

Rilke has observed that Ibsen brought onto the stage more and more powerful images. I would say that his works become more and more elemental; and that the images, concrete though they may seem, are merely veils through which one can glimpse the inexpressible, the ultimate Truth, as Ibsen gradually brings the elemental—natural and super-natural—onto his stage.

And it must be remembered that the elemental is a very present force in Norway, where one is almost overpowered by the elements. It is this elemental Norway that Ibsen stresses one must know, in order to understand his work:

Anyone who wishes to understand me fully must know Norway. The spectacular but severe landscape which people have around them in the North and the lonely shut-off life—the houses often lie miles from each other—force them not to bother about other people, but only their own concerns, so that they become reflective and serious and often despair. In Norway every second man is a philosopher. And those dark winters, with the mists outside—ah, they long for the sun!¹²

11. Cited from *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965) in McFarlane, ed., *Henrik Ibsen*, p. 307. It is interesting to note that the comment by Bentley on Nietzsche, one of Isadora's favourite writers, could also be a description of Isadora's art.

12. From Felix Philippi, 'Mein Verkehr mit Henrik Ibsen' (*Neue Freie Presse*, 1902), cited in Meyer, *Ibsen*, p. 17.

As a student, I stayed with the family of a fellow student of Bergen University in a remote settlement in a valley leading to a great fjord, and experienced the geographical and spiritual isolation of Ibsen's characters, as well as the mysterious power of the mountains and sea, the streams and waterfalls, all homes to elementals. From the *nynorsk*-speaking inhabitants I heard many stories of trolls and elementals; and they were not tales, but their real experiences. Even the statue of Ole Bull, outside the National Theatre in Bergen, depicts the underground fairy who taught him the violin. And the magic continues. In a recent issue of the *Anglo-Norse Review* there is a photograph taken in snow-capped mountains. It depicts nothing, apart from a wooden seat outside a solitary *hytte* and a road sign next to a deserted track; the sign bearing, beneath an outline of a ghost, the legend *Fare for spøkelseser* ('Danger of Ghosts'). Beneath the photograph the editor has written, 'Norway may be the only country in the world with a special sign warning that there may be ghosts.' In that remote valley I experienced the magic and melancholy of Ibsen's world, the 'light summer day with the great darkness to follow'¹³ that colours his plays.

Ibsen often stressed that the non-Norwegian would find it difficult to understand the power that the sea and the mountains had on the Norwegians. For Ibsen the sea stood for the dark, mysterious force within one, over which one has no control. Whilst he was writing *Fruen fra havet* ('The Lady from the Sea'), Ibsen said to a German friend: 'People in Norway are spiritually under the domination of the sea . . . I do not believe other people can fully understand this'.¹⁴ And in a long conversation with Henrik Jaeger, who was preparing a biography of him, Ibsen said:

There is something extraordinarily fascinating about the sea. When one stands and stares down into the water it is as though one sees that life which moves on earth, but in another form. Everything is connected; there are resemblances everywhere.¹⁵

Like Ibsen, Isadora was spiritually at one with the natural world and particularly the sea. In an essay found in one of her notebooks, *The Dance and Nature*, she writes:

13. From a draft of *The Lady from the Sea*. *Collected Works*, xii.330.

14. Meyer, *Ibsen*, p. 603. 15. *Ibid.*, p. 605.

I see waves rising through all things. Of all movements that satisfies the soul's sense of movement, that of the waves of the sea seems to me the finest. Looking through the trees, they also seem to have the waves' long undulations. It would seem all free, natural movements, trees, the flights of birds, the bounding of animals conform to this wave pattern.¹⁶

My very real experience of Ibsen's natural world then led me to follow his second piece of advice, that of reading and 'living through' the *Contemporary Dramas*¹⁷ which resulted in my dance-drama, *The Secret Rooms of The Mind—Ibsen's Spiritual Evolution*.

In 1859, Ibsen wrote a long poem called *På vidderne* ('On the Heights'), which seems to be a vision of the evolutionary form his great play cycle would take. Critics have said that the poem poses the question of whether an artist should plunge into life or absent himself from it, which seems somewhat trite. To me, the poem seems to describe the path of the mystic, the path that Ibsen was already embarked upon. The narrator in the poem leaves his home and his mother, in the valley, to seek solitude in the mountains. On his way he meets a girl, spends the night with her and promises to return and marry her; but when, after much travelling and turmoil, he comes up onto the heights of the mountain plateaux, his view changes and he realises that he can only exist in its rarefied air. The poem concludes:

Now I'm resolved, I follow the call,
the commandment to walk in the heights!
My lowland life I have outlived;
on the mountain plateaux
is freedom and God,
down there stumble the others.¹⁸

16. Francis Steegmuller, ed., *Your Isadora: The Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 91.

17. The only indication of a 'theory' of writing which Ibsen ever provided appears in an address 'To the Reader', dated March 1898, which served as a preface to his *Collected Works*: '. . . [the reader must] apply himself to the works—read through and live through them—in the same order in which I have composed them (*jeg har digtet dem*'); *Efterladte Skrifter*, ed. Halvdan Koht and Julius Elias, vol. 1 (Christiania and Copenhagen: Gyldendankse Boghandel, 1909), p. 313. It is interesting to note that Ibsen uses the verb *å digte* 'to compose (poetry)' and not *å skrive* 'to write'.

18. Frederick Delius, on a walking tour in the Norwegian mountains with the

Four years later, Ibsen is working on a 'world-historic drama' which was finally realised in 1873. In this great, two-part play, *Kejser og Galilæer* ('Emperor and Galilaean'), set in the fourth century, Julian attempts to re-establish Paganism and bring about a transfiguration of Christianity and Paganism into a *tredje rige*, a Third and greater Realm.¹⁹ In the final scene, when Julian has been killed by the Christians, the mystic Maximos pronounces:

The Third Realm shall come! The spirit of man shall take back his heritage again,—

and the last words, spoken by Makrina, are:

... the Mighty One shall descend in clouds to judge the living dead and the dead living! —

which anticipates what will be Ibsen's final play, *When We Dead Awaken*.

After this drama with its huge cast and wide-ranging scenes of action, Ibsen becomes, in 1877, minimalist, composing tightly wrought plays with sparse dialogue, a small cast and shadowy interiors, all set against the dramatic Norwegian landscape. And from this austere foundation he begins the evolutionary and spiritual climb of the *Contemporary Dramas*: out of the *gyngende myr* ('quaking bog') of *Samfundets støtter* ('The Pillars of Society'), where the grand lives of the 'leading men' are founded on lies and hypocrisy and where they 'sail with a corpse in the hold'; through *Et dukkehjem* ('A Doll's House') of the Helmers, where Nora has finally to cast off her 'masquerade costume' to start out on the search for *det vidunderlig* ('the miraculous'); into the rain- and mist-besieged home of Fru Alving living with her Ghosts, and her artist son, newly returned from Paris, who, as the final stages of syphilis render him helpless, cries out blindly for the sun, *Solen! Solen!*²⁰ Then quickly and angrily, because of the shocked and virulent response of the public to *Ghosts*, into the home of Dr

composers Edvard Grieg and Christian Sinding, conceived his *On the Heights, a Melodrama for Speaker and Orchestra* whilst they all enthusiastically recited Ibsen's poem.

19. This is what Friedrich Hölderlin was attempting in his *Hyperion oder der Eremit in Griechenland* and the later poems. I have discussed Hölderlin more fully in 'Friedrich Hölderlin—Lightning Conductor of the Divine', *TAR* 11 (2008) 110–38.

20. Cf. *Kejser og Galilæer*, where, in broad daylight, the dying Julian asks if the sun is

Stockmann: An Enemy of the People, who, after being reviled for trying to help the town by his discovery that the spa-baths are infected, proclaims that

the whole of our vaunted social system is founded upon a cesspit of lies..... As long as man remains of the common people and hasn't worked his way out into spiritual aristocracy.... he remains like my brother, your own smug, sleek mayor – thinking what his superiors think, expressing opinions he's heard them express. The men who do that are spiritually of the plebeians!

He concludes:

The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone!

With this pronouncement the everyday world begins to retreat, and the mystical and inexplicable begin to take their place on Ibsen's ever moving stage. Having taken off society's veils, Ibsen proceeds to put his own back on.

In *Vildanden* ('The Wild Duck') the whole of the back stage becomes a secret room of the mind, cut off from the everyday by a solid and a gauze screen. The loft, which should only be mistily glimpsed by the audience,²¹ is young Hedvig's natural home, her *havsens bunn* ('depths of the sea'), a place where she can nurture the animals, including her beloved wild duck, and be nurtured herself; a place where, in her youthful vision, she can ponder on the mystery of whence they and she came and whither they are going. It is a place of the spirit which Hedvig can enter freely, which Hjalmar and his father visit but do not inhabit, and which the homely and down-to-earth Gina never enters. And with this fine balance of the everyday and the mystical housed within their little flat, the Ekdals lead a happy and protected life with their two 'wild maimed ducks', Merchant Werle's and Hedvig's. Until, that is, the twisted 'idealist', Gregers Werle, tramples and destroys their magical garret, sacrificing both for the sake of 'truth', not spiritual truth but the prosaic truth of Hedvig's parentage.

sinking. His last words are: *O, sol, sol, –hvi bedrog du meg?* ('O, Sun, Sun, –wherefore hast thou betrayed me?').

21. It was however all too obvious in the Peter Hall production I introduced.

We then leave Ibsen's tragi-comedy and the home of the innocent Ekdals, where humour and happiness had reigned until the troll, Gregers destroyed it; and enter the gloom of *Rosmersholm*, where no one has ever laughed and where censorious portraits of generations of pastors look down accusingly on Rosmer who has broken away from the church: Johannes Rosmer, who in the secret room of his mind is haunted by the nightmare white horse of guilt, which holds him back from realising his, essentially unrealisable, plan of founding a race of 'glad, noble people':

ROSMER Oh, all these confused imaginings! I'll never be rid of them. I feel it for certain. I know it. Suddenly they'll come rushing in upon me with memories of the dead.

REBEKKA *Ligesom den hvide hesten på Rosmersholm*. Like the white horse of Rosmersholm.

ROSMER Yes, like that. Seething in from the dark. In the stillness.

From the various visions of water—Nora's fear of drowning ('Under the ice, maybe? Down into the cold, coal-black water'); Hedvig's 'depths of the sea'; and Rosmer's mill-race where he and Rebekka commit joint suicide, thereby joining Rosmer's former wife—we come to *Fruen fra havet* ('The Lady from the Sea'), and Ellida's secret room, the sea, in which takes place her mystical marriage to Friman and the sea. In his preliminary notes to the play, which is set in Lysanger in northern Norway, Ibsen writes:

He or she who stands on the heights yearns for the secrets of the future and communication with distant worlds. Everywhere there is limitation. The result is melancholy like a hushed, wailing song over the whole of human existence and over the deeds of men. A light summer day with the great darkness to follow—that is all. Has the line of human development gone astray? Why have we come to belong to the dry land? Why not to the air? The longing to possess wings. The strange dreams that one can fly and that one does fly without being surprised at it—The sea's power of attraction. Longing for the sea. Human beings akin to the sea. Bound by the sea. Dependent on the sea. Compelled to return to it. A fish species forms a primitive link in the chain of evolution. Are rudiments thereof still present in the human mind? In the mind of certain individuals?

Ellida is relating the story of her mystical marriage to the sea and Friman:

We talked mostly of the sea. Of storm and calm. Of dark nights on the sea. Of the sea in the glittering sunshine days we also spoke. But mostly we talked of whales and dolphins and seals, that lie out there on the skerries in the midday warmth. And then we talked of gulls and eagles and all the other sea-birds that you know. Think, is it not strange. When we talked of such things, then it seemed that both the animals and the birds of the sea were related to him....

He took from his pocket a key-ring and then drew from his finger a ring that he always wore. From me he also took a little ring that I had. And these he thrust together into the key-ring. And then he said that we two were wedded together to the sea . . . And therewith he cast the key-ring, with all his might, as far as he could, out into the deep.

Ibsen's fairy-tale element has now become more powerful as the everyday begins to recede and the inexpressible inhabits the stage.

In *Hedda Gabler*, which, as Oscar Wilde commented, conforms in structure and effect to the Sophoclean theory of tragedy, Hedda's secret room is of course the *indre værelse* ('inner room'), where hangs the lowering portrait of her father, General Gabler. Into this room, in which she has had her piano and her pistols moved, she finally retreats when Tesman, her husband, says her help in the reconstruction of Eilert Løvborg's manuscript is not needed; and here, on the sofa beneath her father's forbidding image, she shoots herself. Tesman, in his plodding way, has had a premonition of what will happen when he says:

Å, Hedda, – man skulde dog aldri vove seg ind i eventyrlandet. Hva?
Oh, Hedda, –one should never dare enter the land of fairytale. What?

In the following play, *Bygmester Solness* ('The Master Builder'), we find Wangel's daughter from *The Lady from the Sea*. This is the only instance of a character in the *Contemporary Dramas* reappearing in another play. Like a troll, Hilde Wangel suddenly appears again in Solness's life to claim her 'kingdom', which, she says he had promised her in Lysanger when she was a little girl. Like Rosmer, Solness's secret

room is within, where his troll lives. He is speaking both to himself and to his 'princess' who will bring about his destruction by her demand for her 'castle':

Do you not think, Hilde, that there are individual chosen people who have been given grace and power and ability to WISH FOR something, to DESIRE something, to WILL something—with such perseverance and so relentlessly—that they must get it in the end. Do you not think so?

It is not one's self that works such great things. Oh no,—helpers and servers, they are involved as well, if anything is to come of it. But they don't come of their own volition. One has to persistently call them up. Inwardly, you understand. There we have it! That's it! . . . There's a troll in one you see—it is THAT which calls to the powers without. And one has to submit whether one wants to or not. Oh, there are so incredibly many devils present in the world that one doesn't SEE, Hilde! . . . Good devils and bad devils. Fair-haired devils and black-haired. If only one knew whether it was the light or the dark that had hold of one!

And at the mention of his building castles in the air, the trolls rush in on him and he falls to his death.

We now come to the last three plays—which, as James Joyce has observed, move out into the air and the natural world. And, I would add, into the realm of the mystical.

When I first read *Lille Eyolf* ('Little Eyolf') I had a most powerful dream of great sweeps of sky and water and earth, and saw huge patterns and minute patterns and they all related to each other and formed a whole—glaciers, fjords, mountains, rocks, earth and seas. And then I saw in little crevasses, tiny knots of humans all busily teeming about. And when I woke up I thought: which is greater, Earth or Man?

And this is why Ibsen's Nature is so important. The critic who dismissed *Little Eyolf* as unimportant and unactable because of its provincial setting in a small fjord village is himself provincial. The reader interprets, re-invents, according to his personality. However, if the critic had had the advantage of my translation of the First Act, he might (though I doubt it) have had a different view. I have always been convinced that the translations have missed a vital point; and it

all depends on the translation of one ambiguous word which, according to the interpretation, can radically alter the text. Critics usually see the 'Rat Woman' (*Rottejomfru*) sequence as subsidiary to the main theme of the play, a mere colourful episode based on Ibsen's recollection of an actual rat woman. But the brief and strange encounter of Eyolf and the Allmers with the Rat Woman, and its terrible consequence, is the whole reason for the drama.

Whereas, in *The Lady from the Sea*, the mystical marriage of Ellida and Friman with the sea takes place *before* the action of the play, Ibsen is seen here, seven years later, to be bringing the mystical onto the stage, the inexpressible powers beyond human limitations. Eyolf is not only the main character of the play but one who is in natural unity with the world of the inexplicable, the world of troll magic, the world of the mystic that Ibsen has gradually been drawing onto the stage since *The Wild Duck*.

In the great penultimate play, *John Gabriel Borkman*, Borkman finally leaves the prison of the upstairs ballroom from where, throughout the First Act, we hear his footsteps pacing up and down, as he rehearses how he will receive the emissaries of the bank begging him to come back. Going out into the dark, snowy, winter evening, he climbs up with Ella Rentheim to The Lookout, a high promontory on his estate, where, overlooking the far mountain ranges, his 'kingdom' housing 'the bound millions', he cries out:

But I will whisper it here to you in the stillness of the night. I love you, you who lie apparently dead in the deep and in the dark! I love you, you life-craving assets—with all your dawning company of power and honour. I love, love, love you!

And there, on the cold, snow-bound heights overlooking his 'kingdom', with his wife whom he did not love and her sister whom he did, holding hands over him, he dies.

Ibsen's 'dramatic epilogue' and final play, *When We Dead Awaken*, which, with its rhythmical descents and ascents, entrances and exits, moves into the realm of mystical dance, takes place entirely in the open, high in the mountains. His spiritual evolution is almost complete.

ISADORA DUNCAN (1877–1927)

Artur Schnabel, Sir Charles Hallé, Walter Damrosch, Count Alexei Tolstoy, Anna Pavlova, Fokine, Diaghilev, Stanislavsky, Duse, Ellen Terry—the list of Isadora Duncan’s friends and admirers is seemingly endless.

Critics and detractors there most certainly were, but they fade into insignificance in the light of Isadora’s astounding achievement, in the world of dance, but more importantly in the world of the spirit. Not only did she profoundly influence the ballet²² and inspire a new dance form that became known as modern; Isadora moved audiences throughout Europe, Russia, Scandinavia and America, releasing them from the stranglehold of materialism and taking them into the realm of Beauty and Truth. Like Ibsen, Isadora ‘forced the world to accept her on her own terms’. As the American writer, Gerald Jonas, states:

With all her misfortunes and disappointments, Isadora Duncan’s achievement was epic. She defined herself and her art, controlled her own career, and forced the world to accept her on her own terms. In the history of Western Culture, no woman since Sappho has been so identified with a major artistic genre. Although she left behind no institution to carry on her work, she served as a catalyst for a whole new art form—the dance known as modern.²³

In the same way, the young James Joyce, who learnt Norwegian in order to grasp Ibsen’s work, writes to him how he has ‘sounded [Ibsen’s] name defiantly through a college where it was either unknown or known faintly and darkly’. And he continues:

But we always keep the dearest things to ourselves. I did not tell *them* what bound me closest to you. I did not say how what I could discern dimly of your life was my pride to see, how your battles inspired me—not the obvious material battles but those that were fought and won behind your forehead—how your wilful resolution

22. Thus Tamara Karsavina wrote that ‘Fokine . . . made *Eunice* (1907) as a direct tribute to [Isadora] . . . Pavlova . . . and the whole corps de ballet had bare feet or make-belief [sic] ones’ (quoted in Fredrika Blair, *Isadora: Portrait of the Artist as a Woman* [Wellingborough: Equation, 1987], p. 117).

23. Gerald Jonas, *Dancing* (London: BBC Books, 1992), p. 198.

to wrest the secret from life gave me heart, and how in your absolute indifference to public canons of art, friends and shibboleths, you walked in the light of your inward heroism.²⁴

He could have been writing about Isadora, as Gordon Craig would have agreed. In an article entitled 'Memories of Isadora Duncan', Craig writes:

Before the twentieth century, the dance was safe. Critics were not present to write them up or write them down in the next morning's newspapers. But this century . . . all sorts of different people's interests had to be considered. All therefore became very unsafe. Into this dangerous world leapt Isadora.

He continues:

I shall never forget the first time I saw her come on to an empty (concert) stage in Berlin in 1904. . . . She was not echoing any ballet master, and so she came to move as no one had ever seen anyone move before, . . . How is it that we know she is speaking her own language? And what is it she is saying? No one would ever be able to report truly, yet no one present had a moment's doubt. Only this can we say—that she was telling to the air the very things we longed to hear and until she came we had never dreamed we should hear, and now we heard them, and this sent us all into an unusual state of joy . . .²⁵

Her début in the same year in St Petersburg had a lasting influence on ballet. The invitation had come from Russians who had seen her dance in the West, particularly in Germany; where, as well as being continually fêted, she had added to her already large library, as Seroff writes:

This was a period in which she re-dedicated herself to the passionate study of German philosophic works, as well as German literature, which she had begun two years earlier in Munich. She acquired a

24. The draft English version (the Norwegian has been lost) of a letter from Joyce to Ibsen on the occasion of his seventy-third birthday; quoted in Meyer, *Ibsen*, p. 844.

25. Arnold Rood, ed., *Gordon Craig on Movement and Dance* (London: Dance Books, 1978), p. 248.

large collection of these works as permanent additions to her library. It represents a staggering list of authors for the library of a beautiful young woman in her early twenties, who was a dancer. Having in my possession part of her library, I can attest to the thoroughness of her studies on the evidence of the volumes annotated in her own hand.²⁶

Diaghilev knew Isadora well in St Petersburg and went with Fokine to her first performances, writing:

Fokine was crazy about her, and Duncan's influence on him was the initial basis of his entire creation.²⁷

Isadora and Pavlova became mutually admiring friends, and Pavlova said that she learnt from Isadora the fluidity of her arm movements in *The Dying Swan*.²⁸

In 1905, Isadora and Craig, whom she had met and fallen in love with the previous year, went to Moscow where she gave a performance. One reviewer wrote in *The Scales*:

Bodily movements are as spiritual as sound. One can have no doubt of that upon seeing Isadora Duncan In her dance . . . every movement is an incarnation of a spiritual act. Isadora's statement that, 'The dancer, after long study, prayer, and inspiration, attains such a degree of understanding that his body is simply the luminous manifestations of his soul' is thus no mere figure of speech but the description of an actual state which can be communicated.²⁹

Compare this with Isadora's statement in her autobiography,

In those far-off days which we are pleased to call Pagan, every emotion had its corresponding movement. Soul, body, mind worked together in perfect harmony. Look at those Hellenic men and maidens caught by sculpture's lure—you can almost tell what they will say to you when they open their lips, and, if they do not open them, what matter, for you know just the same.³⁰

26. Victor Seroff, *The Real Isadora* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), p. 63.

27. Blair, p. 116. 28. *Ibid.*, p. 117. 29. *Ibid.* 30. *My Life*, p. 235.

Isadora's discovery, which revolutionised the Russian ballet and greatly influenced Martha Graham and other dance pioneers, was that the source of all movement was in the solar plexus. That, plus her very fine understanding of music and rubato, or natural rhythm, made her a dancer (although she always said she wasn't a dancer), whom audiences from all walks of life raved about.

Ellen Terry, after seeing Isadora dance the *Marche Slave* in 1921, said she had never seen true tragedy before. Famous musicians and composers who were at first incensed that she should be using 'good' music, wanted to work with her when they saw her dance. The pianist Harold Bauer assured her that she was more of a musician than a dancer, that her 'art had taught him the meaning of otherwise inscrutable phrases of Bach, Chopin and Beethoven'. In her autobiography, Isadora writes:

My studies of the piano [begun with her mother], and of the theory of orchestral composition must have remained in my subconscious. Whenever I lie quiet and shut my eyes, I can hear the whole orchestra as plainly as if they were playing before me, and for each instrument I see a god-like figure in movement of fullest expression. This orchestra of shadows danced always in my inner vision. . . .

I spent long days and nights in the studio seeking that dance which might be the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body's movement. For hours I would stand quite still, my hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus. . . . I was seeking, and finally discovered, the central spring of all movement . . . the unity from which all diversions of movements are born. . . . I, contrary to the ballet school, sought the source of spiritual expression to flow into the channels of the body, filling it with vibrating light—the centrifugal force reflecting the spirit's vision. . . . When I had learned to concentrate all my force in this one Centre, I found that thereafter when I listened to music, the rays and vibrations of the music streamed to this one fount of light within me—there they reflected themselves in Spiritual Vision, not the brain's mirror, but the soul's, and from this vision I could express them in Dance. I have often tried to explain to artists this first basic theory of my Art. Stanislavsky mentions my telling him of this in *My Life in Art*.³¹

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 84.

In 1907, in Nice, Isadora, recovering from the difficult birth of her daughter Deirdre, is writing to the father of the child, Gordon Craig. I include this passage because it depicts the struggle of the artist and particularly Ibsen's (on whose grave is the symbol of a hammer):

I practise a little each day. The beginning is like breaking stones. One loves to work when once begun, but it *is so difficult to reach the right state to begin* (Underlined by Craig with the comment, 'true'.)—sometimes I wish I might dissolve into a mist rather than begin again—The feminine spirit has a *special* aversion to entering in that land of abstract ideas where work is—Indeed only a few in History have succeeded in doing it alone—& then only through suffering, & I object to suffer. (Craig has noted, 'Oh dear Topsy.')

To *wrench* oneself from Time & place and self & enter where time & place & self do not exist—that is a great pain—but then also a great reward. Is anything comparable to the feeling of having come in contact with that eternal idea of Beauty—a wrench, an awful suffering, a feeling of battering for ages against an impassable barrier, & then suddenly & sharply a glow, a light, a connection with the idea like entering into a God—a happiness indescribable, triumphant—That's what I feel when I try to work, only many times I get only as far as the suffering & battering & then a blank fall to despair. (Craig notes, 'With all artists it's so.')

That there is so much pain connected with so simple an effort I put down to my sex. Now a man works *easily*—it flows from him naturally. (Craig retorts with two exclamation marks, 'Does it!!')³²

It is amusing to note, in the light of this letter, that after reading Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*, Isadora coined the expression 'the infernal feminine' (as against *Das Ewig-Weibliche* 'the Eternal-Feminine').

This description of the artist's struggle to express the inexpressible could be seen as a summing up of Ibsen's last twelve plays, where *The Pillars of Society* marks the beginning of the long, hard struggle up into the Light of Truth. In fact the 1898 collected edition has on the cover a *bas relief*, by the artist Stephane Sinding, of just such a struggling figure.

32. Steegmuller, ed., *Your Isadora*, p. 212.

In 1909, Craig having left her, Isadora had met and then lived with the millionaire Paris Singer, and for the first time had no financial worries. The following year she gave birth to a beautiful boy, Patrick. The photographs of Isadora with her two children attest to their almost unearthly beauty. Singer had plans not only of building a theatre for Isadora but of setting up a school in Paris for her.

In 1911 the great conductor Walter Damrosch invited Isadora to tour America with him. She found a 'marvellous sympathy' with him, writing:

Often I thought to myself, what a mistake to call me a dancer—I am the magnetic centre to convey the emotional expression of the orchestra. From my soul sprang fiery rays to connect me with my trembling vibrating orchestra.³³

She continues:

Sometimes when I looked down from the stage and saw the great brow of Damrosch bent over the score, I felt that my dance really resembled the birth of Athena, springing full-armed from the head of Zeus. . . .

In Washington I was met by a perfect storm. Some of the ministers had protested against my dance in violent terms.

And then, suddenly, to the astonishment of everyone, who should appear in the stage-box on the afternoon of a *matinée* but President Roosevelt himself. He seemed to enjoy the performance, and led the applause after every item of the programme. He afterwards wrote to a friend:

What harm can these ministers find in Isadora's dances? She seems to me as innocent as a child dancing through the garden in the morning sunshine and picking the beautiful flowers of her fantasy.³⁴

Full of joy, full of light, a flame of inspiration and hope to so many, Isadora's life was soon to change suddenly forever.

In 1913, on the day of the tragedy, Singer took Isadora, her pupils and Deirdre and Patrick to lunch during which he spoke of his plans again.

33. *My Life*, p. 238. 34. *Ibid*, p. 239.

'It will be Isadora's theatre,' he said. 'No,' Isadora replied, 'it will be Patrick's theatre, for Patrick is the great composer who will create the Dance to the Music of the Future.' After lunch Isadora returned for a rehearsal leaving, at the suggestion of their nurse, the children with her in the hired limousine. She writes in her autobiography:

I entered my great studio, . . . [thinking that], after all, I am very happy—perhaps the happiest woman in the world. My Art, my success, fortune, love, but above all, my beautiful children!³⁵

And then Singer staggered in saying the children were dead.

The automobile had stalled and the chauffeur got out to crank the motor. He heard it start, and then suddenly the heavy vehicle backed away from him and rolled towards the Seine. He sprang at the door but could not pull it open. The car gave a lurch and careered with its three occupants into the river. When it was finally raised, the two children and their nurse were dead. Craig wrote to his mother, Ellen Terry:

There was a most beautiful moving ceremony in [Isadora's] studio, *the most moving ceremony I have ever been to*. Nothing but exquisite music, Grieg's *Death of Aase*. Then a piece of Mozart . . . , and a wailing, infinitely moving melody of Bach. I thought my heart would break. Poor Isadora behaved splendidly. She knelt hidden by her sister & two brothers on the balcony. Then the coffins were carried out through the garden all strewn with white daisies and jessamine to the white hearses drawn by white horses. [They] tell me she is really heroic, encouraging the others, saying '*there is no death*'—Everybody in Paris is moved to the depths of their hearts.³⁶

In a letter to Craig, in the following June, Isadora wrote:

I know that all these so called Happenings are *illusions*—Water cannot drown people—neither can going without food starve them—neither are they born or do they die—*All is*—and the Eternal Truth is only seen in precious moments by such spirits as Phidias, Michelangelo—Rembrandt—Bach—Beethoven—others—and yourself. . . . all the rest is semblances, illusions—veils—, I know that, but what will you—at present my poor Body cries out and my mind is

35. *Ibid.*, p. 289. 36. Steegmuller, ed., *Your Isadora*, p. 321.

clouded— . . . I am all torn to pieces and bleeding—I wish I could see you a few moments—Bless you.³⁷

It was in Italy that the one person who *could* comfort her came forward, Eleonora Duse—who, unlike other people, encouraged her to talk about her children. In her autobiography Isadora writes:

[Duse] once said to me: 'See the stern rough sides of the Croce, how sombre and forbidding they seem beside the tree-covered slopes of the Ghilardone, the sunny vines and lovely flowering trees. But if you look at the top of the dark rough Croce, you will perceive a gleam of white marble waiting for the sculptor to give it immortality, while the Ghilardone gives only the wherewithal for man's earthly needs—the other his dream. Such is the artist's life—dark, sombre, tragic, but giving the white marble from which spring man's inspirations.'³⁸

Duse loved Shelley, and sometimes in the frequent storms during their sad long walks, when lightning would flash over the sea, she would say, 'Look! The ashes of Shelley flash—he is there, walking over the waves!' Another time, during one of their 'promenades', Duse gazed at Isadora, saying, 'Isadora, don't, don't seek happiness again. You have on your brow the mark of the great unhappy ones of the earth. What has happened to you is but a Prologue. Do not tempt Fate again.'³⁹

And after Isadora had danced for her the adagio from Beethoven's *Pathétique* (it was the first time she had danced since the death of her children), Duse said, 'What are you doing here? You must return to your art. It is your only salvation.'

And she did, with all the whirlwind energy of someone driven.

With help from Singer, she establishes a school in Paris, legally adopting her six original school pupils, who join her to help with the teaching. On to Greece, where she tries to start a school but is prevented by political difficulties. America, South America, Russia, where she and Irma establish a school. She tours Russia. She meets the young poet, Esenin, and although she is against marriage, marries him in order to be able to take him to the West where she hopes to further his work. But America turns against her. Isadora and her husband are

37. *Ibid.*, p. 326. 38. *My Life*, p. 308. 39. Weaver, *Duse*, p. 293.

branded as 'Bolsheviks' and she is deprived of her American nationality for her 'red propaganda'. On leaving America, Duncan tells the press:

Had I come to this country as a foreign financier to borrow money, I would have had a great reception. As I only came here as a recognised artist, I was sent to Ellis Island as a dangerous individual. I am not an anarchist or a Bolshevik. My husband and I are revolutionists. All geniuses worthy of the name are.⁴⁰

And in Russia, she tells reporters:

I have been driven out of America. The United States is insane on the question of Bolshevism. In that land of the free there is no more freedom! The American papers printed details of my personal life, what I ate, what I drank, the people I associated with, but never once said a single word about my art. Materialism has become the curse of America!⁴¹

And Esenin, the highly sensitive, fine poet and protective lover of animals and the natural world, wrote:

The strength of reinforced concrete, the enormous bulk of the buildings, have compressed the brains of the American and narrowed his sight. The customs of the Americans reminded me of the never to be forgotten customs of Ivan Ivanovitch and Ivan Nikiforovitch in Gogol's story. Just as for the heroes of Gogol's story there was no better city than Poltava, so for the Americans there is no better and no more civilised country than America.

'Listen,' an American said to me, 'I know Europe. Don't argue with me. I have been all over Greece. I saw the Parthenon. But all that is not new to me. Do you know that in the State of Tennessee we have a much better, much newer Parthenon?' Such words make one wish to laugh and to cry at the same time. They characterize America marvellously, especially her inner culture.⁴²

40. Duncan and Macdougall, *Isadora Duncan's Russian Days*, p. 178.

41. Ilya Ilyitch Schneider, *Isadora Duncan, The Russian Years*, trans. David Magarshack (London: Macdonald, 1968), p. 123.

42. From his article 'The Iron Mirgorod', published in *Izvestia*; quoted in Schneider, *Isadora Duncan*, p. 123.

In 1924 the Russian Government can no longer support the school, so Isadora returns to Europe to try and earn money for it.

In December 1925 Esenin commits suicide. Isadora, then in Paris, sends the following telegram to the ever hounding, scurrilous newspapers:

The tragic death of Esenin caused me great pain. He had youth, beauty, genius. Dissatisfied with these gifts, his gallant spirit sought the impossible. He destroyed his young and beautiful body but his spirit will live for ever in the hearts of the Russian people and in the hearts of all who love poetry. I protest against the frivolous statements published by the American press in Paris. There were never any quarrels between me and Esenin and we have never been divorced. I mourn his death with pain and despair.⁴³

To Ilya Ilyitch Schneider, the director of her school in Moscow, and great friend of Esenin, she writes:

Esenin's death was a terrible blow to me, but I cried so much that I cannot suffer any more and I am so unhappy myself now that I often think of following his example, but in a different way. I'd prefer the sea. . . .⁴⁴

In 1926 Isadora is in Nice, penniless and beginning, against her will, to write her autobiography to earn some money

In July, 1927, in Paris, at the Mogador Theatre, Isadora gives what is to be her last performance. Her young lover, Vitya Seroff, accompanies her to the Mogador the day before the performance for the dress rehearsal. He later describes it, commenting that few people witnessed Isadora's rehearsals:

After watching the men of the orchestra take their place, she went down to greet Albert Wolff, who was standing at the conductor's desk waiting for her to begin her rehearsal. The orchestra was about to clear a space for her, but Isadora shook her head and told them it

43. Schneider, *Isadora Duncan*, p. 210 and Gordon McVay *Isadora & Esenin* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p.241.

44. Schneider, *Isadora Duncan*, *loc. cit.*

would not be necessary—all she needed, she said, would be a chair placed near the first violins and the conductor's desk. Whispering to Wolff, she asked him to play Franck's *Redemption*, and without taking off her cape or hat, she remained immobile in her chair, listening to the music. In fact, after the orchestra finished playing the composition, Isadora still sat motionless in the silent theatre, while Wolff waited for further requests. Then Isadora walked up to him, thanked him, bowed graciously to the orchestra—and that was the end of the dress rehearsal. And she performed triumphantly on the following day. . . . Her interpretation of Franck's *Redemption* was monumental, and her *Ave Maria* . . . was so heartrending in its simplicity that it provoked unashamed sobs throughout the audience. At the end of the performance she was cheered and called back to the stage again and again. Perhaps she was expected to make a speech, as had been *de rigueur* after her previous performances. But she made none.⁴⁵

Two days later, in a long talk with Seroff, Isadora says that Duse's art of 'stillness' had shown her the true expression of tragedy. (Bernard Shaw also says this in his praise of Duse.)

'I understood that a long time ago,' Isadora said, 'but how to make the audience stop breathing? How to hold three thousand people hanging with you on that one note which you musicians mark in your scores with a fermata—meaning you can hold it as long as you like? Yes, to have your audience remain breathless as long as you yourself remain on the stage, mute and immobile. That is true art, and I believe at that *matinée* I achieved it for the first time.'⁴⁶

On the 14th September, Isadora, who loves fast driving, arranges for a demonstration drive in a Bugatti racing car that had caught her eye in a shop in Nice. At about nine in the evening the young mechanic picks her up from her studio. It is a chilly evening and her friends advise her to wear a cape but she refuses, just throwing her shawl round her as she walks to the car to take the passenger's seat, close to the rear wheels.

Adieu, mes amis. Je vais à la gloire! Isadora calls to her friends.

45. Seroff, *The Real Isadora*, p. 420. 46. *Ibid.*, p. 424.

At the first movement of the powerful car, her long shawl, entangled with the wheels, instantly breaks her neck.

Isadora Duncan, who at one time had been classed as an alien and denied entry to Russia, America and France, died a Russian citizen, still deprived of her American nationality. After her death, a New York Russian newspaper wrote:

The time will come when freedom-loving Americans will throw the Statue of Liberty, that symbol of so-called freedom, into the sea, and raise in its place a statue of Isadora Duncan, who was the personification of true freedom and who called for the brotherhood of nations.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Henrik Ibsen and Isadora Duncan brought the terrible grandeur and the mystical harmonies of Nature onto the stage, from where they pointed towards the 'splendour and the glory'. And I believe that the trajectories of the dance-like eloquence of their seemingly different art forms met in the universal Realm of Truth and Beauty.

Ibsen's daughter-in-law (and daughter of Bjørnson), who was with Ibsen at his end in 1906, writes:

His face was transfigured in death; all the tightness and severity that had marked it in life were smoothed away. It was as though for the first time I saw how beautiful he was.⁴⁸

In the final scene of Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, Rubek and Irene climb up towards the avalanche that is about to engulf them:

Up into the light, amid the splendour and the glory—Up to the promised mountain peaks above—and an awakening to the day of resurrection after the long dreamless sleep of death.

And in a letter read out at her funeral, Isadora proclaims:

47. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

48. Bergliot Ibsen, *The Three Ibsens*, trans. Gerik Schelderup (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p. 158.

In a moment of clear-sightedness and strength, we understand that even the worst Afflictions, Catastrophes, Horrors, are but a veil of mystery hiding other truths.

I, who by my work have always tried to preach that Joy is stronger than Sorrow, that Death is but a door that leads us to the Eternal Harmony of the Universe; that the fearsome appearances of physical suffering and matter are merely an illusion that the initiated know how to interpret, I will never forgive myself if, because of my words, repeated by you, a few souls, as sorrowful as I am, have been discouraged.

I am going at once to start work, forward, always with the voices of the unseen Angels, with Beauty, the divine Music, towards the Joy and the Light that are our final goal.⁴⁹

49. Duncan and Macdougall, *Isadora Duncan's Russian Days*, p. 382 and McVay, *Isadora & Esenin*, p. 251.

