

An Isadorable Unbound

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IN JUNE 1914, a group of six young German girls, the Isadora Duncan dancers, made their public debut at the Trocadéro in Paris. Barefoot, with flowing garments, they twisted and turned to the rhythms of masterpieces of classical music, offering glimpses of their strong, naked bodies. The audience was spellbound. The girls were known by their first names (Anna, Erika, Gretel, Irma, Lisa, and Theresa), but the poet Fernand Divoire quickly turned them into a brand when he came up with the moniker “Les Isadorables.” A fitting designation: while the girls appeared as a unit on the stage, their dances were very much the creation of an individual, the famous and idiosyncratic Isadora Duncan, who had bestowed her name upon them.

One of these girls stood out right from the beginning: Lisa Duncan or, as she was originally named, Elisabeth Milker (fig. 1). Long-legged, doe-eyed, muscular yet still enticingly fragile looking, and equipped with abundant, golden, shoulder-length curls, Lisa became an audience favorite in the United States, celebrated for her “airy leaps” and her sophisticated interpretations of Chopin.

In December 1914, when the Isadorables first performed at Carnegie Hall, Lisa was barely sixteen years old. Like the other members of the troupe, she had been recruited by Isadora when she was a child. Isadora had scoped Lisa out in Dresden; she was a working-class girl who was suddenly handed a chance at becoming a star of sorts. Dresden was known then primarily for its imperial architecture. For centuries, it had been the seat of the kings of Saxony. But the city experienced a rapid population growth at the end of the nineteenth century, with new residences mushrooming on the city’s outskirts. Surely this is where Lisa’s father, Karl Ernst Milker, listed as a *Bauarbeiter* (construction worker) in the Dresden birth register, had found employment. Her mother’s name was Ernestine. Lisa was



Fig. 1. Lisa Duncan, undated photograph.
Eastman Mss. Courtesy Lilly Library.

thus born, a day before Christmas Eve 1898, to parents with almost comically similar names, Ernst and Ernestine Milker, a coincidence, of course, but one that might be taken as a symbol of Protestant narrowness, of the constrictions and constraints much of Lisa's later life seemed destined to reject.

The house where Lisa was born, Prießnitzstraße 16, in a section of Dresden known as the Äußere Neustadt (Outer New Town) that suffered little damage during World War II, still stands—a faux-bourgeois structure in the Wilhelminian style with pediments

adorning some of the windows of the first floor. The ground floor now houses a barbershop. Back in December 1898, when the midwife, Frau Werner, showed up to deliver Lisa, she had to climb all the way up to the attic, where the Milkers' apartment was. No pediments or ornaments there. One imagines that Lisa's parents did not put up much of a fight when Isadora scooped up their angel-faced daughter and whisked her off to be trained in Berlin, where she had set up her school in the fashionable Grunewald district.



Beginning in 1902, Isadora had pioneered a form of expressive dance that made her a celebrity all over the world. She invented, single-handedly, a new version of the profession: that of the dancer as the creator, rather than performer, of original works of art. Her fame rested on her solo appearances, not on being the prima ballerina of a professional ensemble. And her inspiration came not from any of the schools of classical ballet but directly from the cradle of Western civilization, for Isadora had cultivated an intensely emotional relationship with Greek art and culture. In 1903, during a visit that lasted several months, she began to build a structure, part theater, part temple, on a hill near Athens, within easy view of the Acropolis. Accompanied by her siblings, sleeping under the open skies and sipping goat's milk, she, much to the consternation of the local population, ditched her Western attire for a kind of diaphanous tunic, which then became her signature costume (fig. 2). While she would make exceptions for public occasions (though never on stage), her brother Raymond stopped wearing anything else, complementing his outlandish outfit with homemade sandals. "Isadora was," wrote Janet Flanner in the *New Yorker*, "the first artist to appear unincinctured, barefooted, and free, a glorious bounding Minerva in the midst of a cautious, corseted decade." Grand gestures were Isadora's *métier*. Flanner reports that, for the opening night of Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ* at the New York Century Theater, Isadora bought up, for two thousand dollars, all the available Easter lilies in Manhattan, dousing the spectators with the flowers' intoxicating perfume.

And yet, for all the brouhaha surrounding her performances, she also cultivated the image of a modern chthonic goddess called to impress upon Americans how important it was to remain in touch with one's roots. "Contacting the earth barefooted revitalizes brain and body," she told the Cuban American writer Mercedes de Acosta. "Come, let's run." De Acosta, joining the many who had traveled that path before her, became one of her lovers.

Isadora was notorious for her art but also for her private life. She lost her two children and their nanny in a freak accident in Paris, when their chauffeur-driven car tumbled into the Seine. Among her lovers were the French Dadaist Francis Picabia, the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, the scenic designer Edward Gordon Craig (the father of her daughter), the millionaire Paris Singer (the father of her son), and the French aviator Roland "Ace" Garros. After the death of her children, when her hair had turned prematurely white, she took to dying it henna red, a fiery contrast with the cheesecloth garments in which she wrapped herself on stage. To George Bernard Shaw, who met her in London in 1918, she looked "like a full-blown peony." (Isadora helpfully informed him that while she wasn't much to look at, she was "very good to feel.")



When Isadora began performing in American theaters, she was already past her physical prime as dancer, but her Isadorables, whom she allowed to take her last name though she never formally adopted them, were the embodied promise that her technique would live on. It took some time for the American public, for whom naughtiness in dance meant the Turkey Trot or the Bunny Hug, to warm up to the spiritualization of physical desire the Isadorables propagated. Yet the American Left responded favorably to what Flanner described as the "welding. . . of metaphysics and muscle" Isadora and the Isadorables represented. In May 1915, Isadora, drawn by the artist John Sloan, appeared on the back cover of the *Masses*. The vaguely classical appeal of her art fit in with the Hellenism promoted by artists and writers of the period, which was inspired less by a return to the



Fig. 2. Isadora Duncan dancing in Greece, 1903.
Photograph by Raymond Duncan (1874–1966). Jerome Robbins Dance
Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

ideals of antiquity than by a new interest in a more relaxed approach to sexual mores. During Isadora's frequent absences—once for a period of two years—the Isadorables, managed by her brother Augustin, became the ambassadors of her philosophy in the United States. And critics inevitably singled out Lisa, “kin to Undine of romantic legend,” as the *San Francisco Examiner* exulted, for particular praise.

Isadora and her girls also attracted the attention of the German-born photographer Arnold Genthe (1869–1942). Dance was the first form of art ever practiced by humans, he declared, predicting that it would once again become a forum for their liberation from the shackles of social convention. “Creation is a dance, a molecular dance in ether,” bellowed the Irish writer Edward Raphael Lipsett in February 1917, in a manifesto he had composed for the *Delineator* titled “The New Dancing.” Genthe provided the photographs. Three of those featured students from Isadora's school, overseen by her sister Elizabeth.

Genthe was certainly aware of the inadequacy of the photographic medium to capture the primal energy of the Isadorables' dancing. As he recalled, Isadora herself proved remarkably resistant to his efforts; it took a lot of coaxing to get her into his top-lit studio in New York. In the photographs he took of her, Isadora is a luminously fleshy presence cast against a dark, monochromatic background. The real spectacle in Genthe's portraits is her skin, a white, rippling, velvety mystery, as gallantly and abstractly erotic as Greek sculpture. The soft focus of the camera poeticizes even Isadora's rather plain features, her upturned nose and round face. Overall, though, Genthe's photographs remain static, mere gestures toward that fleeting mystery in action that Isadora's performances created, dragging the viewer along into an experience that, if everything went well, would transform both dancer and spectator. To Genthe's dismay, Isadora adamantly resisted being filmed, too—in order to be great, her art had to be ephemeral, unrepeatable, a ritual unfolding in a particular place at a particular time for a particular audience. But what Genthe's images successfully capture is the dangerous intimacy Isadora's dancing engendered, when she, nearly naked herself, exposing her far from perfect body to the photographer's and viewer's inspection, renders us, her audience,

vulnerable too. For this is how we, were we only courageous enough to let go, would be seen by the camera as well: pared down permanently to the flesh we inhabit, stripped of the detritus of our daily existence, separated from animals only by our desire to lend shape and intention to the movements we perform.

No filmic record of the Isadorables' dancing has survived, although Genthe remembered trying his hand at it. To capture the "smooth coherence" of the girls' rhythm, he filmed them at two or three times the normal speed but projected the result at the standard speed. The finished reel he seems to have run off only for friends. But reviews, eyewitness accounts, and photographs allow us to reconstruct what their performances would have looked like: a fluid sequence of coordinated movements, with the girls' bodies bending, twisting, turning, and skipping, the dancer's arms following the motions of the torso, indicating where the body is going (if forward) or where it is coming from (if backward).

The Isadorables did not dance en pointe; the Duncan technique relies on the natural capacities of the human body (fig. 3). Isadora shunned the turnouts and extensions expected of the ballet dancer. There is no endpoint, only continued movement, with the body describing a line of flowing energy. Movement is not imposed but comes from inside; Duncan dancers don't use a mirror to adjust their performances. We don't know much about the dances of the ancient Greeks—no choreography has survived—but the designs Isadora developed for her dancers were clearly intended to have a classical effect, to conjure a time uninterrupted by the noises of modern life, if not entirely devoid of modern props. Lighting was important for her performances, of course, as was the minimal but effective set: Isadora traveled with her own collection of blue drapes that she would use as backgrounds.



Genthe normally preferred to take portraits of single dancers, although he would make exceptions for the Isadorables. One of the most memorable examples of the latter is a photograph of Isadora



Fig. 3. Lisa Duncan, Long Beach, California, ca. 1915.
Photograph by Arnold Genthe.
Jerome Robbins Dance Division,
The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

surrounded by her girls, gazing at a crystal ball, a secular priestess amidst her vestals, whose devotion to their leader is reflected in the poses they adopt (fig. 4). The girls' eyes are trained on what Isadora holds in her hands, a symbol of their promising future. The strong, uncovered legs of the two Isadorables in the front provide a kind of frame for a picture that plays on the contrast between cloth and skin, concealment and revelation. Lisa is right at the center of the group, her hand resting lightly on Isadora's back.

Lisa's beauty, a mix of childlike innocence and statuesque grandeur, resonated profoundly with Genthe, both privately (he dated her for a while) and professionally. Two photographs in Genthe's massive 1915 publication, *The Book of the Dance*, the first photobook devoted entirely to the aesthetics of dance, featured "Liesel" Duncan, as she was also called, with her powerful legs partially exposed, her arms extended, her head thrown backward, as if offering tribute to the higher power that had inspired her to dance.

Genthe recycled a version of that pose for his 1918 poster advertising the Red Cross Christmas roll call or, as we would say today, membership drive (fig. 5). The image also served as the cover for Percy MacKaye's illustrated masque *The Roll Call*, in which a demonic-looking avatar of Germany, complete with a spiked helmet, is assailed by the forces of peace gathered under the sign of the American Red Cross, which, incidentally, audience members are urged to join. Don't underestimate the Teutonic danger, "out there—in his blinded rage / Still roams the Despoiler!" In its original context, Genthe's image seems somewhat ironic: created by a photographer from Berlin, the poster represented Lisa Milker from Dresden, clad in a Greek tunic, as the epitome of American military resolve. She was the Statue of Liberty reincarnated, her hand holding not a torch but pointing toward the organization's insignia in the upper left corner of the poster.



The faux-classical symbolism of such images powerfully appealed to the writer and political activist Max Eastman (1883–1969), who wasted no time in falling in love with Lisa. Eastman's dissertation at



Fig. 4. *The Isadorables*, 1917. Photograph by Arnold Genthe.
Jerome Robbins Dance Division,
The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Columbia University (completed though he never officially submitted it) dealt with Plato and how his philosophy fostered yet ultimately suppressed physical desire. He had written several poems about the subject, including “A Child of the Amazons,” the long title poem of his first collection, published in 1913, in which he tells the story of Thyone, who briefly jeopardizes her membership in the virgin tribe by falling in love, thus betraying the women’s patron saint, the “unpassioned” goddess Artemis. “My blood doth burn against the sacrifice, / To momentary deeds, of passionate / Lifelong desire, and the deep hopes of love!” Of course, Thyone relinquishes her desire, and, her limbs springing firm with pride, once again pledges to prove herself equal to the world and ready for the battlefield, a warrior ready to subdue “unto. . . symmetry the monstrous world.”



Fig. 5. *The Roll Call, a Masque of the Red Cross*, 1918.
Photomechanical print (poster) by Percy MacKaye
after a photograph by Arnold Genthe, 80 × 48 cm.
The Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Like Eastman's Artemis, Isadora became irate when her girls fell in love and threatened to renounce, as Eastman's Thyone did, their membership in her tribe. Lisa's affair with Eastman was only the first step toward her eventual break with her mentor and teacher. By anyone's standards, Eastman was not the greatest catch: he was technically still married, to the brilliant lawyer and sculptor Ida Rauh, whom he had abandoned, along with his infant son, to carry on a torrential affair

with the actress Florence Deshon. But Deshon was in Hollywood, dallying with Chaplin and other luminaries, and Eastman had never learned to curb his desires. Neither had Lisa. If her relationship with Genthe was gentle and comforting, her affair with Eastman, consummated at the latter's country house in Croton-on-Hudson, was radical, uncompromising, or, in one of Lisa's favorite words, "ecstatic" (fig. 6).

The timing was inopportune. Isadora, increasingly worried that her hold on the Isadorables was slipping, had announced her intention to take them back to Europe, with performances planned in France, Greece, and Switzerland. But Eastman's pain is the modern reader's gain: during her months abroad, Lisa wrote frequently to her new lover. Her fascinating letters, written in her large, sprawling, virtually illegible handwriting, now part of the Eastman Manuscripts at the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana, reveal a remarkable, determined woman and artist, while also shedding new light on Isadora Duncan, her teacher and sometime nemesis.



The Isadorables left New York in June 1920 on the steamer *Transatlantique*. Freshly in love, Lisa saw the entire world around her transformed into a reflection of her innermost feelings. Even the ocean seemed to perform a kind of Duncanesque dance, with the waves rising and falling to the rhythms of her desire. Wherever she went, things appeared animated, participating in revels destined to please just her. On 31 July 1920, Lisa reported from Paris that even the angels in Notre Dame were dancing for her—to the music of Gounod's "Ave Maria," as the Isadorables had done in New York to great acclaim. When the world itself dances, who needs art to make a copy if it?

Lisa was now less than ever in the mood for practice sessions with Isadora, which started again when the group reached Versailles. Yet there were still moments of transcendence. Isadora's dancing, she wrote to Max from Versailles, was more beautiful and (an interesting choice of adjective) "more inhuman than ever." When she watched her during those moments, she felt so happy she had to cry: "tears—tears—were



Fig. 6. Lisa Duncan in Croton, 1920. Photograph by Max Eastman.
Eastman Mss. Courtesy Lilly Library.

streaming down my cheeks” as she gave in to “the agonizing pain and ecstatic joy of my heart.” Nevertheless, such epiphanies were rare; she felt caged and discouraged. As Isadora waxed poetic about her new plans—more performances at the Trocadéro in Paris and then perhaps a tour of Switzerland—Lisa realized she had grown weary of her teacher’s whims. Some of Lisa’s ennui was no doubt the result of living in Versailles: “all these huge empty palaces and deserted gorgeous gardens are enough to make one feel most miserable and sad.” Isadora had taken rooms for herself at the best hotel in town, “six magnificent rooms in the style of Louis XIV—which to my idea are too awful for words.” Lisa was longing for the sweet simplicity of the little house in Croton, where she had spent a few days with Max and “where the colors are cheerful and happy looking, and all things are there for a



This might
be a bog for
all we can
see.
1920, Aug. 30

Figs. 7 and 8. Lisa Duncan on the Lido in Venice. To Max Eastman, 30 August 1920. Front and back. Eastman Mss. Courtesy Lilly Library.

purpose or artistic reason.” She was hoping that Max would send some photographs. But above all, she needed to perform, desperately, not just listen to Isadora hold forth about future opportunities.

Venice was an improvement. Earthbound for once, rather than leaping through the air, Lisa had her picture taken as she was wading in the lagoon: “This might be a bog for all we can see” (figs. 7 and 8). From Venice, they took a boat to Greece, stopping in Corfu, which allowed her to pursue her favorite activity—transforming the landscape she saw into an imaginary painting in which no detail is extraneous. For Lisa, this wasn’t idle aestheticism but the promise of the ultimate freedom to be herself, something she saw reflected in the women of Corfu too: “the blue sea surrounded by blue soft lined mountains—almost floating in the air like gigantic sweeping

clouds—the country there is dry and dusty—the first impression is very strange—everything is one color—gray almost silver—it gives a lovely effect but only from far—the women are beautiful—dark and big eyed with extraordinary grace—they carry golden colored jars on their heads and walk so majestically and calm in perfect freedom.”

When Isadora and the Isadorables arrived in Athens, they went straight to Kopanas, the little hill on the outskirts of the city, now part of the city’s Municipality Byron (Vironas), where Isadora’s abandoned house was. The structure had no roof, no windows and floors, a fit abode for goats rather than humans. But the view from there was, wrote Lisa, “too beautiful for words,” a phrase she saved from triteness by immersing her half-formed sentences in a sea of Dickinsonesque dashes: “in the distance the ocean soft and blue and the mountains grouping around it—the acropolis seems to be looming over them all so overpowering in all its eternal beauty—the Parthenon is silhouetted against a pale brightshining [*sic*] sky—the only background which could add to its perfection.” In the city, the columns of an old temple, extending into the sky like a mute prayer to the “greatest harmony of beauty and thought,” made her eyes water. “My heart beat fast with ecstasy.” Greek architecture was “sunshine thought expressed in marble [*sic*],” the alphabet of desire written in stone that seemed alive even at night, when the caryatids of the Erechtheum were performing just for her, a promise of redemption and peace: “I can’t put in terms all its beauty and joy—It is something that can only be felt with a human heart and soul—longing for the eternal truth and simplest of expression of life.” A far cry from the attic on Prießnitzstraße.

Meanwhile, Isadora was pursuing her own love affair with Greek architecture. It was in the Parthenon that the American photographer Edward Steichen (1879–1973), who had joined the group in Athens, took his series of Isadora portraits. In one of the most iconic installations (fig. 9), she appears dwarfed by the phallic columns, clad in one of her transparent gowns with her arms locked above her head, perhaps a mockery of the traditional fifth position in classical ballet, the *bras en couronne*. The sun-filled landscape is a mere blur in the background.

Steichen's is a self-consciously artistic image, as if it were a still from a movie based on a Greek tragedy. For Lisa, however, dance was not a pose, not an attempt to distill life into gesture, but a living, lived reality. On a drive to Euthis to see the theater of Dionysus, one of the gods in Isadora's pantheon, she felt herself skipping up the rocky cliffs side by side with the black goats, "dancing because the sun is shining and the sky is blue—Oh! So blue. And the air is so light that one just wants to fly—fly—fly."

The reality of modern Greece was not lost on Lisa. None of Isadora's dramatic poses (fig. 10) could make them forget the fact that Thebes was a disappointment, a city of dirty little huts and dirty little children playing in the dirty streets. In Athens, from the balcony of their hotel, they witnessed the embattled Greek Prime Minister Venizelos driving through town, surrounded by soldiers, welcomed by virtually no one other than the Duncan girls, who were waving their scarves and banners at him. "I waved this American flag," Lisa wrote to Eastman back in New York, knowing that he would appreciate the irony of her display of patriotism. "What do you think of that?" Venizelos looked up at them, perhaps because he recognized Isadora. But for as long as Lisa was in Greece, the boredom of being an Isadorable was gone, and she was deliriously happy. "There is always the Acropolis to flee to—where all petty silly feelings seem to cease to give place to complete freedom and happiness." This was the country of sun and truth. She was, she said, "dizzily happy" (fig. 11).

Breaking free of Isadora was now only a matter of time. The Isadorables had been contracted for more performances in the United States, but Isadora insisted that they stay in Europe and work out a new program. For now, Lisa's commitment to the group won over her desire for freedom. "We want to give it all possible chance to grow and develop into something greater and we all feel that in staying together—growing together but thinking separately and individually—we can accomplish something." Back in Paris in November, the Isadorables were working day and night, dancing at the Trocadéro to music by Gluck and Wagner for audiences of up to four thousand, accompanied by a large orchestra. At night, Lisa was so tired that she could barely keep her eyes open, although sometimes she would pick up a recent



Fig. 9. Isadora Duncan in the Parthenon, Athens, 1921.
Gelatin-silver bromide print by Edward Steichen.
Courtesy Toledo Museum of Art.



Fig 10. Isadora Duncan and Irma, Lisa, and Margot in Thebes, Greece, 1920. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

volume of Eastman's poems, *The Colors of Life* (1918). Greece had helped her realize what distinguished her from Isadora. If her teacher—as Anna Pavlova, one of Isadora's rivals had once said—lived to dance, *Lisa was dancing to live, dancing to stay alive*. Being separated from her lover, while it hurt, was no longer a problem. When Lisa danced, she could easily conjure everything, including Max Eastman: “There are moments when you seem so very near to me and that is when I dance. . . I move—love—and live.” Her love didn't require her lover's presence: “I love you most when I dance—when you are infinitely more closer [*sic*] to me than even in your wildest sweetest embrace.” She did invite him to come and join them (“We could read and play to-gether and speak French”), but by then Eastman had other worries. In February 1922, Florence Deshon, with whom he'd had a tortured on-again, off-again affair, had died suddenly, likely by her own hand.



Fig 11. Lisa Duncan, undated photograph. Unknown photographer.
Eastman Mss. Courtesy Lilly Library.

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In the spring of 1921, Isadora accepted an invitation from Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar for “Education and Enlightenment,” to come to Moscow and inaugurate a new dance school (“WE WILL GIVE YOU SCHOOL AND THOUSAND CHILDREN [*sic*]”). Of the Isadorables, only Irma elected to accompany her. Left behind in Paris and likely relieved that she did not have to sever ties formally with her mentor, Lisa set out on her own, with

Isadora's ambiguous blessing: "either be true to me," she had told the Isadorables, "or leave me on your own names and your own responsibilities." Lisa chose the latter option, developing her own distinctive style of performance and founding her own studio in Paris. While she had begun a new chapter in her life, Eastman kept reliving their relationship. "All things that move are memories of you," he intoned in a sonnet he dedicated to her. Among those memories: "The waves that linger glimmering and slim / Along my body when I dive and swim." An accomplished and passionate swimmer and diver, Eastman had absorbed Lisa's lesson: if she could conjure him when she danced, he would summon her presence in *his* element, the water. He stayed in touch with her as best he could, visiting her repeatedly when he was living in Antibes with his new Russian wife. "I love Lisa and I always will," he told Eliena.

On 14 September 1927, Isadora Duncan died, in appropriately dramatic fashion, her neck broken by an oversized scarf that had wrapped itself around the axle of a sports car chauffeured by her new love interest. One quick jolt and she was dead, an insistently modern, brutal death. Eastman paid tribute to Isadora in a short essay he contributed to a commemorative volume collecting Genthe's photographs of her. As he was celebrating what he believed Isadora had done for American youth, he probably wasn't actually thinking about her but rather about Lisa, the embodied, muscular promise of what Isadora with all her art had only been able to gesture at: "All the bare-legged girls, and the poised and natural girls with strong muscles and strong free steps wherever they go—the girls that redeem America and make it worthwhile to have founded a new world—owe more to Isadora Duncan than to any other person." Men like him had benefited too: by their example, Isadora and the Isadorables had ushered in a new generation of males "unafraid of beauty. . . unafraid of the natural life and free aspiration of an intelligent animal walking the earth," firm in their resistance to American squeamishness.

In Germany, a similar appreciation for strong, young, white bodies would soon harden into nationalistic ideology. Leni Riefenstahl's "Tanz an das Meer" (Dance to the Sea), from the 1926 movie *Der*

heilige Berg (The Holy Mountain), was directly inspired by Duncan: against the shifting backdrop of rugged mountain walls or the infinite shimmering ocean, Riefenstahl skips, bends, stretches, waves, swivels, and turns. The entire scene is more theatrical than filmic thanks to the fixed camera angle, which contains the dancer rather than allowing her to expand into space (perhaps Duncan was onto something when she resisted being filmed). It was that staged quality that appealed to Adolf Hitler so much that he asked to meet Riefenstahl, the beginning of a long friendship the details of which Riefenstahl later did her best to obfuscate. The smoke-wreathed beginning of Riefenstahl's 1936 epic *Olympia* certainly derives from Isadora's fascination with shapely Greek bodies, but it goes on to celebrate their magical transformation into athletic young Aryans. Mary Wigman, founder of a dance school in, of all places, Dresden, also fell in with the Nazis and choreographed a mass youth dance for the 1936 Olympics. Yet the Nazis' love affair with pagan dance petered out; ultimately, boots on the ground mattered more to them than legs high up in the air. Goebbels wanted dance to be cheerful rather than life changing; in 1942, Wigman's school was closed.

While Lisa continued to teach the Duncan method to her students, her own art did not remain stagnant. In Paris, she began to collaborate with the innovative actor, singer, and dancer Georges Pomiès. Tall, blond, slim, and broad-shouldered, Pomiès had a memorable lozenge-shaped face that glowed like a mask on stage. If the origin of Isadora's fluid gestures was in the soul, Pomiès's art was cerebral. It was abstract, marked by absolute geometric precision, the merger of mind and body in a spectacle that existed in a world of its own. "The dancer creates nothing beyond himself," he wrote. "There is no end product with which he may satisfy or at least calm his senses." Pomiès danced fully clothed, in shirt or pullover and trousers, a far cry from Isadora's fluttering hierophantic vestments. But Lisa, who joined Pomiès in performances at the Salle Pleyel or the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, was ready for that change.

In 1925, Paul Colin, whose designs had helped launch the career of Josephine Baker, created a promotional poster for Lisa that features

her standing en pointe: her extraordinary body straight as an exclamation mark, her arms and thighs the same circumference as her waist, her head turned all the way around and bent back at an impossible angle, her buttocks and strong thighs melding with the shiny, enormous grand piano—a glorious thing emanating from a glorious thing, space, sound, and motion fused into a single brilliant image, leaving viewers as spellbound as the tiny, long-armed pianist hovering, in some versions of the design, in the upper right corner (fig. 12).

Under Pomiès's influence, Lisa's style evolved. Still, she was more interested in conveying the motivating spirit behind her choreography than in adhering slavishly to the details of proper execution. Instead of coordinated gestures, she offered expressiveness. In *Apparition*, set to the music of Chopin (a favorite in Isadora's repertoire), Lisa would rapidly move her arms, simulating a winged creature in flight, thus creating what audiences described as a mesmerizing trompe l'oeil effect that made them forget they were watching a dance. But Lisa also turned her attention to piano pieces of Debussy (a composer Isadora had disliked), with a particular fondness for his "Danseuses de Delphes" from *Préludes* (I): slow, unhurried music, marked "lent et grave" by the composer, who, inspired by the figures on a column found at the sanctuary of the Pythian Apollo in Delphi, had created a progression of soft, languid chords meant to simulate harps and flutes. In this piece, Debussy had wrapped ancient statuary in the modern "vapors of. . . sacred perfumes," as the pianist Alfred Cortot observed. This was, in short, not the pagan classicism Isadora had favored.

Pomiès died in 1933, at the age of thirty-one, but Lisa continued to work. She staged Gluck's *Orphée* (an Isadora favorite) at the Opéra Comique in 1935, adding her own distinctive interpretation to the choreography she had inherited. For example, she fitted the Furies out with masks, asking them to roll around the floor and to form a ten-headed monster with legs looking as if flames were emanating from its body: Isadora meets expressionism. "Deviant Duncanism," as some observers believed. Lisa's art made her an instant target for the Nazis. When they marched into her beloved Paris, she hid in the country. After the war, when she tried to reassemble the pieces of her life,



Fig. 12. Lisa Duncan, 1925. Poster by Paul Colin (1892–1985).

Collection of Christoph Irmischer.

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reopening her school and resuming her performances, she became ill. Lisa moved back to Dresden, now reduced to a somber pile of rubble by the allied bombings. Somehow the broken city of her birth had become the appropriate backdrop for her ruptured career.



In the early 1960s, Eastman, who was writing his autobiography and wanted to make sure he had permission to mention their relationship, tried to locate Lisa. Anna, fellow Isadorable, knew where she was. In his letter, Eastman offered to send her money. Lisa declined. Dresden, some of its wounds patched up by hastily built, prefabricated buildings in the unlovely, distinctive Eastern-bloc style, was now a major industrial hub in communist East Germany, and Lisa knew that any mail would be read and intercepted by the authorities. She had left all her things behind in Paris: “Traveling is so difficult nowadays one hesitates to charge oneself with too much luggage and then I had no room for it all.” While she had never forgotten Eastman and the ecstasy they shared, she was, characteristically, not sentimental about the past. Even in communist Dresden she had all she needed, notably a book on ancient Greece, “full of beautiful photographs of Temples and especially of the Parthenon,” a record of humankind’s greatest achievements. Ancient Greece had come to Dresden, rather than the other way around. Oh, yes, and she was still dancing. “I took part in two performances—both the same day,” she wrote. “I danced one of Isadora’s heroic creations with some women I got together.” In the audience were mostly “simple people,” she added, workers like her father had been once. “But they reacted wonderfully and a strong voice screamed ‘Bravo.’” Dance transcended all barriers of time and geography. “I myself never danced with so much enthousiasme [*sic*] and faith as on this very day. . . . Sometimes a light comes from heaven—and then all again seems dark.” And so she pressed on, waiting for those moments of illumination. At age seventy, she took a much younger lover, as Eastman found out from Irma Duncan, another ex-Isadorable. When Lisa died a few years later, on 24 January 1976, a town official noted that date right on her birth certificate, in ballpoint

pen—death being, as well it should be, a mere postscript, an afterthought to a life lived unconstrained by how it began, a life in which place had ceased to matter except as the temple for one's art.

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