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Author

Smith, Fiona

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Focusing on breath and dynamism today through remembering Isadora Duncan

by Fiona Smith

For an assignment about channeling history in the studio, I decided to channel Isadora Duncan in a Modern III class taught by Kate Skarpetowska. Kate's movement phrasing is relevant to this part of dance history in the sense that it follows a naturally rhythmic pattern of tension and release, a concept which I think translates well to Duncan's use of cyclical breath, expressiveness, and a "dynamic physical imagination" (Albright).

Much of what makes Duncan such a remarkable figure in modern dance history is her all-encompassing stage presence, an accomplishment which stems from her ability to interact with the space around her in an authentic and captivating way. My goal in embodying this historical figure was to apply her movement philosophy in a way that supports Kate's choreography while also feeling true to my own bodily intuition, thereby working to develop my personal performance quality.

Beginning during warm up, I focused intently on my use of breath. In the reading, it is said that, "As an expressive dancer, Duncan used her breath to initiate movements, both her dynamic attack and her lyrical suspension. The cyclical nature of the breath regenerates itself, insuring a continuity of movement that Duncan then shaped dynamically and dramatically" (Albright). Following this framework, I used inhalation to support my body while in an upright, held position and exhalation to enhance the weighted release into contraction, each step transitioning into the next in smooth succession. As the class progressed into faster and more complex phrase work across the floor, I maintained this attention to breath and was able to move efficiently through space while also suspending certain movements for a more visually dynamic execution. By following a regenerative breath pattern, I felt supported in my steps and free to layer my own movement personality over them.

Another part of Duncan's philosophy that I found to be relevant to this work was the idea of expressive gestures stemming from her study of the Delsarte System of Expression. Although exact emotional gestures do not typically come up in Kate's class, there are several moments in her choreography that involve moving through a particular position of the arms/hands in a thoughtful manner. When encountering these moments during class, I thought about the Delsarte poses and worked to apply that expressiveness to each position. Having Isadora Duncan in mind here helped me to be more intentional and aware of how each gesture, even the most subtle, has the power to convey something meaningful to the audience.

One challenge I faced when embodying this historical figure came with the fact that Duncan's movement does not follow the same technical standards that are required for the work in Kate's class. Kate's and Lar Lubovitch's movement style are supported by a strong ballet basis with clear expectations for limb placement, whereas Duncan's is generally more loose and varied. Therefore, it was sometimes difficult to balance the need for strong technique with my attempts to embrace Duncan's naturalist aesthetic. Despite this discrepancy, I felt as though Duncan's movement philosophy was very valuable for finding freedom in my performance; embodying her

ideas helped me discover an enhanced sense of openness and fluidity within the choreography which I hadn't previously achieved. Overall, dancing through the lens of Isadora Duncan in this class was a very enlightening experience and I would like to continue working with her ideas regarding breath and dynamism more in the future.

Fiona Smith is entering her final year at UC Irvine; she will be graduating in the spring of 2027 with bachelor's degrees in Dance and Applied Mathematics.

Source:

Albright, Ann Cooper. "Isadora Duncan (1877-1927)." *Dance Heritage Coalition*, 2012.