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## Russians Return a Dance Legend to California

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, August 8th, 2018

Regarded by many as “the” ballerina of this generation, Natalia Osipova starred at Russia’s Bolshoi before she moved to international stardom, guesting with American Ballet Theater and currently reigning at Britain’s Royal Ballet. For this weekend’s world premiere of *Isadora*, Osipova steps away from classical ballet tutus and into the world of Greek tunics favored by the ballet’s subject, modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan.

Originally, choreographer Vladimir Varnava was selected by Osipova to create a new  *Cinderella* for her because she loves the shaded, melancholy Sergei Prokofiev ballet score and the shoe losing heroine was one of the few classical roles on her bucket list that she had not danced. The original proposal took a sharp turn when the choreographer asked which the ballerina loved most, the fairy tale or the Prokofiev music. The music was the clear winner. Varnava made a counter proposal to create a ballet about Isadora Duncan, in whose story he sees similarities to Cinderella. At a recent rehearsal, Varnava described them both as seeking happiness while living an unhappy life, Cinderella perhaps finding her happily-ever-after in a prince at a ball, while Duncan’s life was forever clouded with tragedies briefly punctuated by shorts bursts of happiness, mostly when dancing or teaching dancing.

Born in California in either 1877 or 1878 (depending on the source), by age six Duncan reportedly was teaching dance classes to augment her single mother’s music lessons to help support the family. Never formally trained, Duncan’s improvisational style proved uncommercial to producers. She turned to solo concerts in the homes of the rich which funded the family’s move east and then to Europe where she continued her performances. The breakthrough came in a Paris performance in 1900; followed by adoring audiences, establishing a school whose students were known as “Isadorables,” celebrated artists capturing her in paint and marble, not to mention multiple lovers, including the wealthy Singer sewing machine heir who fathered her second child.

Duncan and others, including Loie Fuller and Mary Wigman, are credited as igniting a counterforce to highly structured ballet that became known as modern dance. As the Victorian era of corsets and long hair waned, Duncan’s bobbed hair and bohemian lifestyle foreshadowed the era of the flapper of the 1920s. The arrival of the automobile was a recurring source of tragedy starting with the 1913 drowning of her two children when their car rolled into the Seine and later in two additional car accidents in which Duncan was injured. While she continued to tour Europe, she considered herself a communist (something that helped get her U.S. citizenship revoked) and in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution Duncan settled in Russia for three years where she hoped for a new order. She found artistic turbulence and marriage in 1921 to the much younger Russian poet

Sergei Esenin who left Duncan in 1922 and died either by suicide or assassination in 1925.

After three years in Russia, Duncan returned to Europe where in 1927 she climbed into the passenger seat of a fatal convertible where her long silk scarf wound around the back wheel, strangling her instantly.

Described in the program as “A Tribute to Isadora Duncan,” everyone involved in this new endeavor agrees that this is not an effort to recreate Duncan’s dancing, but a focus on her life, particularly the time in Europe and especially her time in Russia.

In our digital age, it is hard to imagine that less than two minutes of film exist of Duncan dancing. The excerpt of an outdoor concert shows Duncan twirling twice, moving out of camera range, then returning to accept applause. The clip includes some still photos and repeats the excerpt including one in slow motion. What is striking is less the brief twirl than the audience who can be seen clearly: the men standing with hats, starched collars and hats while a seated woman sports a long skirt, corseted jacket, styled hair and a hat, all very formal in contrast to Duncan in the comparative freedom of her loosely draped toga.



Natalia Osipova as Isadora Duncan. Photo by Doug Gifford.

Significantly, one person who did see Duncan dance was choreographer Frederick Ashton in a 1921 London concert. In 1975, when Ashton created his tribute to Duncan, *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan*, he described trying to capture Duncan’s freedom of movement, the driven intensity of her dancing and the way in which she seemed to fuse music and dance and how “she had the most extraordinary quality of repose. She would stand for what seemed quite a long time doing nothing, and then make a very small gesture that seemed full of meaning.” Notably, for his tribute, Ashton selected Royal Ballet principal Lynn Seymour to take off her pointe shoes and don a Duncan-esque tunic.

This is [an interview with Ashton](#) about the work and an excerpt with Seymour in ballet slippers. There is also [a later video of Seymour performing](#) at a memorial tribute to Nora Kaye. Ashton’s paeon remains in the Royal Ballet’s repertoire and here’s the link for a barefoot Tamara Rojo. In 1983, the Joffrey Ballet brought Ashton’s ballet to Los Angeles danced by Jodie Gates who is now vice dean of USC’s Kaufman School of Dance.

Ashton’s successor at the Royal Ballet, Kenneth MacMillan could not resist Isadora Duncan. Like the upcoming premiere, MacMillan’s 1981 *Isadora* focused on Duncan’s personal life employing spoken word, video and other multimedia with Merle Park dancing Isadora and actress Mary Miller speaking lines from Duncan’s autobiography. Broadcast on television, the 2.5 hour ballet received mixed reviews. In 2009, the Royal Ballet unveiled a pared down one-act version that the *New York Times’* Alastair Macaulay found [only accentuated the ballet’s central conceptual problems](#). The ballet’s proponents regard MacMillan’s ballet as searing drama aimed at bringing in a new audience, just like Duncan.

For more dramatic treatments, there’s [a 1966 BBC television film from Ken Russell](#) before he took on Tchaikovsky in *The Music Lovers*. 1968 found [Vanessa Redgrave sizzling all over the stage and](#)

world in *Loves of Isadora*, also known as *Isadora*.

While Duncan's dancing was revolutionary compared with turn of the century ballet, her innovations have long since been absorbed by the modern dance developments that followed her. With the flamboyant innovative contemporary dance today displayed everywhere from the stage to television advertising, exact replication of Duncan's dance today would risk looking woefully dated.



"Isadora" choreographer Vladimir Varnava taking to the press. Photo by AL Haskins

In that regard the selection of Varnava as the choreographer and his expanded role as co-librettist and essentially the director may avoid the criticisms leveled at MacMillan's focus on Duncan's life.

During the rehearsal open to the media last week, producer Sergei Danilian described the two acts as focusing first on Europe with costumes emphasizing blues and then Duncan's time in Russia with costumes emphasizing either vibrant scarlet or Soviet Union brown.



"Isadora" dancers in rehearsal. Photo by AL Haskins

The first part of the rehearsal involved most of the 20 member cast in a dream sequence. As the music begins, most of the cast manipulate a wide red silk scarf that extends across the stage behind Osipova and several lead dancers. As the silk floats up and down, one female dancer is lifted onto a male dancer's shoulder with the corps circling around, draping the female dancer and also over the head of her male partner suggesting a baby bump as the silk coils around the pair. As the music shifts, the dancers again extend the silk across the stage, then take turns draping sections over Osipova's shoulder until she is enrobed in a toga with a swirl of fabric and dancers snuggled at her feet.



Natalia Osipova. Photo by AL Haskins.

Varnava's movement emphasizes wide-open arms and undulating torsos. With today's music and slightly different rhythm, the moves could be hip hop. This is even more evident in the second section in the rehearsal. Vladimir Dorokhin, a rubber-boned dancer resembling Ray Bolger's Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz portrays Duncan's poet husband Sergei Yesenin as a lascivious drunk with a quartet of drunken friends.



Vladimir Dorokhin and Natalia Osipova. Photo by Doug Gifford.

The big question for many modern dance fans is whether a classically trained Russian ballerina like Osipova can truly capture Isadora.



Natalia Osipova in "Isadora". Photo by Doug Gifford.

Osipova is no stranger to contemporary movement, her versatility and ability to dance barefoot was amply demonstrated in *Solo for Two*, where Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev danced a trio of works from

seriously contemporary choreographers Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Ohad Naharin and Arthur Pita. The Guardian review of *Solo for Two* closed with a vote of confidence: “But the climax of the evening belongs to Osipova alone when, having throttled her delinquent lover, she executes a fierce dance of triumph on his grave. It’s the kind of satisfying revenge no classical ballet heroine is ever allowed, and Osipova makes it look like a world of fun.” The recent rehearsal of *Isadora* offered a small glimpse of her ability to unleash and surf her powers. For dance nerds like your scribe, two more tantalizing tastes are available in two clips of early rehearsals with just Osipova and Varnava: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iVAW3A12wI>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuDduXfkyjQ>. The first is 26 minutes, the second is 8 minutes.

From the choreographer’s comments at the rehearsal, the dance legend’s three years in Russia appears to get somewhat disproportionate attention, but after all, it is a largely Russian effort that is bringing this native Californian back to the U.S. Also, while driving to Orange County for the premiere of *Isadora*’s world premiere is daunting, the alternative is heading to Moscow in September, the only other scheduled performances. Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Dr., Costa Mesa; Fri., Aug 10, 7:30 p.m., Sat., Aug. 11, 2 & 7:30 p.m., Sun., Aug. 12, 1 p.m., \$29-\$169. <https://www.scfta.org>.

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