



Presence : Absence **The Search for Isadora** **Duncan on Kopanos**

By Lisa Kraus

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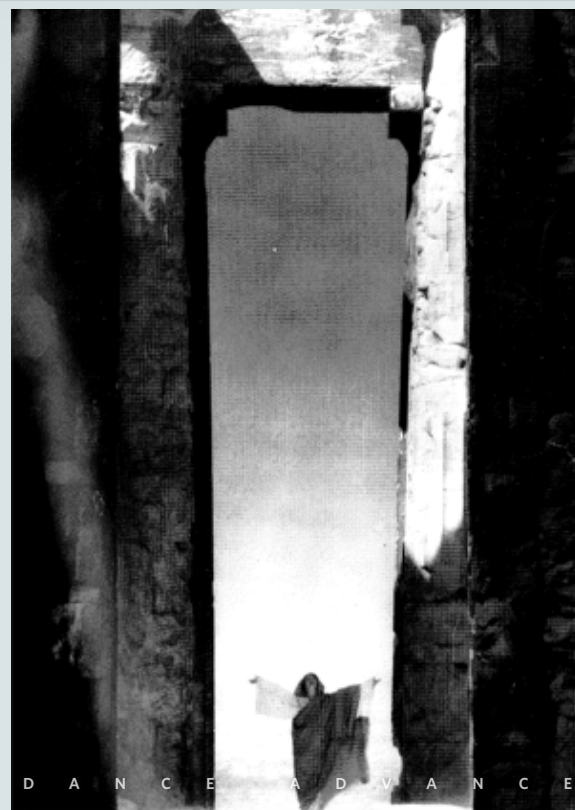
The search for Isadora Duncan on Kopanos

BY LISA KRAUS

Prelude

Celebrating a modern dance icon, interrogating her legacy, can be an unsettling proposition. You may not be quite prepared for what you find. It turned out that nothing could assuage my own distress at Isadora Duncan's absence from the hilltop called Kopanos that she once called home: not the twenty-second film clip of her that is the only one extant. Neither a present-day rendering of her choreography, even by those whose transmission came in a direct line, nor a contemporary reflection on the elements and significance of her achievement. All of these seemed—and yes, it is unfair to compare anything to a myth, but there you have it—pale in comparison to the imagined magnitude of Her.

Why would I have come to feel this way? The only time I danced an Isadora piece (1970s sculpture garden, filmy costumes) it seemed an embarrassing anachronism. We had not made any connection between her search for “natural movement” and our own investigations of “release” and “embodiment.” Isadora can be perceived as an anachronism in the contemporary dance scene. The breathy waves of the movement appear quaint today when rough and tumble, thud and edge prevail. But her essential project as I understand it was to move the viewer. And, reading account after account by witnesses whose lives seemed transformed, illuminated by watching her, I only wanted to count myself among that number.



Photograph by Arnold Genthe

We do want, and need, heroes. Isadora today seems a tarnished hero, her myth in her day carefully crafted, allying her dancing mission with philosophies extolling human potential and nobility, and with music imbued with epic grandeur. She put the capital letters into “Dance as High Art” through her diatribes on the subject.

It is so rare to be deeply moved by dance. From the traces she left it seems that Isadora was about exactly that. It was her reason for being: to hold up a mirror to us as flesh and blood humans: utterly fallible, but still, noble.

Climbing Kopanos

"And if she is speaking what is she saying? No one would ever be able to report truly, yet no one present had a moment's doubt. Only this we can say – that she was telling the air the very things we long to hear; and now we heard them, and this sent us all into an unusual state of joy..."

Gordon Craig, BBC radio talk, "Memories of Isadora"

As you mount the hilltop of Kopanos, a neighborhood in Athens, Greece, it's the massive stones that first catch your eye. Raymond Duncan piled them to form a square building, based on Agamemnon's palace. This was the Duncans' dreamed-of "dance temple" and the first building ever consecrated to Modern Dance. Raymond Duncan lived there for years after his sister Isadora went on tour to earn the money to keep on building. She was eventually drawn away from her preoccupation with ancient Greece by other inspirations, but Raymond and his followers remained constant in their celebration of ancient forms, dressing in Hellenic garb, weaving, and enacting faithful versions of ancient plays.

What drew the Duncans to Athens was their long-standing perception of ancient Greek culture as the wellspring of sacred dance, and ancient Greek art as an inspiration for a new "natural" dance. The reasons for their attraction to Kopanos are obvious: the hilltop's magnificent view of the Aegean and Athens spread below, the luminous air and wide sky—a landscape not unlike their native California. In such a spot it's easy to feel in touch with the elemental and closer to whatever gods one hews to.



Photograph by Lisa Kraus



Photograph by Lisa Kraus

Construction on the "dance temple" began in 1903 and its central large space opens to the sky through a grid of skylights, recalling that it was never completed during the Duncans' lifetime. Kopanos is located in the municipality of Vironas, which in a visionary gesture took on the reconstruction and completion of the space in the 1980s. Now home to the [Isadora and Raymond Duncan Dance Research Centre](#), it offers a multitude of dance classes and sponsors many choreographic projects.

Choreographer [Carol Brown](#) was first invited to the Centre in 2003 to investigate connections between dance and architecture. I observed her and her dancers' working process and performances over a week in fall 2005, where Brown and collaborator Dorita Hannah created *Her Topia*, commissioned by the Centre as part the New Zealand born choreographer's most recent residency. Brown's dance-making grows out of a context of perpetual research; her choreographic images arise from a complex framework of ideas and conceptual linkages. In engaging with architecture, she considers a multitude of relationships—the actual to the virtual, the whole to the fragment, and the historical to the present day. "If the building carries a trace, how do we incorporate it?" she asks, challenging

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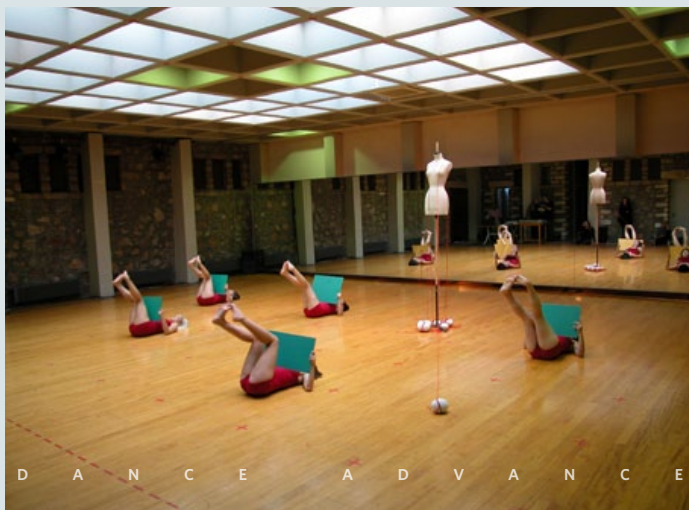
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her dancers in a rehearsal of *Her Topia*, the second of her projects with the Duncan Centre. In a rigorous ten-day process, very brief for the scale of the work to be created, Brown coached a group of all-female performers by softly talking through the links to the Duncans' story, with exceptional elegance of thought and locution.

Watching made me interrogate my perception of Isadora's most essential qualities, and raised questions for me about the ways in which choreographers appropriate the work and mythos of others. It also fed my ongoing contemplation of contemporary performance work: how, when works are crafted out of a succession or layering of non-literal images, do they cohere and communicate meaning?

Brown created *Her Topia* in collaboration with scenographer Dorita Hannah, and the Centre billed the dance as a "Dance Architecture Event." "*Her Topia*" is a nod to French philosopher Michel Foucault's "heterotopia," a term he coined to refer to a social "counter-site," a space paradoxically powerful and marginal, distinguished from a utopia by being actual rather than idealized or imagined. Like Kopanos.

Brown and Hannah, inspired by many facets of the Duncans' achievement and biography, fashioned distinct images in their work: composites of movement, sound, and objects that they "stitched" together through the recurring use of particular materials. Stones were held, placed, and carried, echoing their use as the main building material of the Centre and their connection to the mythic figures of Niobe and the Caryatids. Mirrors suggested fragmentation and the play between real and unreal. The color red recollected Isadora's Russian epoch and the fatefully tangled red scarf that caused her death. The costume choices reflected Isadora's iconoclastic approach to clothing: a gargantuan dress, a contemporary take on the restrictive sheaths she might have railed against, and an interpretation of her "tunics" as present-day athletic wear.



Photograph by Lisa Kraus



Photograph by Lisa Kraus

As it quotes from Isadora's *Revolutionary Dance* and Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece*, *Her Topia* layers eras of history. Recordings of Joan Baez protest singing, a musical nod to sixties political counterculture, evoke Isadora's own maverick stance and vanguard politics, and an ominous loop of Wagner and a moving aria from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* recall Duncan's passion for monumental and stirring classical music. A final section around a long mirrored table alludes to a bacchanal, recalling Isadora's Maenad spirit and search for the ecstatic.

The event begins and ends outdoors. As the audience mills about on the terrace, a welcoming introduction cites Ariadne, Arachne, and Niobe as personages one might encounter in the course of the performance. This spurs the viewers to connect the imagery they will see with the mythology they all know (all Greek schoolchildren study the ancient myths).

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After a choral section with striding women bearing stones atop their heads like twenty-first century Caryatids (noble and upright sculptures of women serving as roof-bearing columns), and “revolutionary” dancers striking poses of effortful work, the piece wends its way into the building, where spectators break into smaller groups and view a series of installations.

In the room where Raymond Duncan did his weaving, we see a woman at a treadle sewing machine, stitching on the voluminous dress she is wearing. The dress is too cumbersome to maneuver with any ease. Continually irritated with her impossible task, she tries, in a subsequent outdoor dance to a ratchety sound score, to move her own constantly collapsing joints. She finally slinks off, dragging the weighty material of her clothing behind her

Prior to their work on *Her Topia*, Brown and Hannah generated the image of the “Black Widow” through reflecting on the violence perpetrated by and on veiled women in the Middle East. They asked, “How do we consider the body in the era of the body as a bomb?” In relation to Isadora, the Black Widow suggested Arachne, the woman-turned-spider. For Hannah and Brown this sewing figure, with her “mismanaged” dress, is akin to a spider spinning her own web. She recalls the kinds of spiders who consume their own young, evoking the image of Isadora as a dominating mother to her students, several of whom she adopted.



Photograph by Lisa Kraus



Photograph by Lisa Kraus

Another section of the work unfolds in two adjoining smaller spaces. In each stands a veiled woman, one in deep crimson, the other in white. As the audience observes them from the periphery, the willowy red figure walks slowly, pausing now and again, perching along a line of stones. She balances a weighty stone on her head, on her shoulder, and finally [ultimately] on her recumbent belly. One wall refracts her shattered image in strips of mirror as a video of water, reduced to a high contrast abstraction, sluices down the opposite wall. The veiled white dancer, seen through a glass partition, presents an enigmatic jumping doppelganger. With its plays of light and dark, and changing degrees of transparency, reflection and solidity, the experience of this installation was richly mysterious. As a viewer, casting one’s glance in any direction frames a different, richly layered visual field, evoking a feeling of mysterious depth. I was reminded too of Bill Viola video works that focus on the primordial and transformative forces of fire and water.

Hannah and Brown, both New Zealand natives, were struck by the ways in which many cultures, including their country’s Maori, hold myths of women being turned to stone. The Greek incarnation is Niobe, who is turned to stone after her children are murdered as punishment for her arrogance. Following the accidental death of her own biological children, Isadora saw herself as a Niobe-like figure.

If viewers don't know that the veiled woman in red is Niobe, they surely would sense the weight of her suffering. Yet the main dancer performing this challenging role did not know how to perform with such emotional depth and structural simplicity, and seemed to suffer from the lack of careful guidance that a more luxurious rehearsal process might have provided. As a theatrical experience what might have been quite powerful easily became unglued.

Knowing how to approach such a task is exactly what Isadora could teach. Her tragic loss created a lasting well of deep grief that transmuted into a resoundingly powerful performing presence. The Niobe installation in *Her Topia* refers to this Isadora, and it was this space that, for me, attempted to tap most profoundly into the Duncan legacy and legend.

The young, lyrical Isadora was already fueled by a tempestuous emotional life. She selected pieces of music—Chopin nocturnes, Beethoven symphonies—to match her own transporting feelings of rapture and grandeur. She felt *before* moving, and, as an older performer, she became intrigued with the possibility of holding her audience transfixed without moving outwardly at all.

Isadora wrote about what would turn out to be her final performance on July 8, 1927: "How to make an 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 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 matinee I achieved it for the first time."

From many accounts of her performing it seems she invariably did hold audiences captive. Her gestures rang true. Viewers identified with her and were buoyed by her performances. Referring to the middle-aged Isadora, Agnes de Mille wrote: "Isadora could match any monument. She could match life. And yet at the time she was an overweight woman who at frolicsome moments seemed almost inept. Anyone else doing similar things would have been downright ridiculous. Isadora was never ridiculous. Isadora raised her arms and the stars rocked."

Hannah and Brown chose to focus on certain of Isadora's many roles—feminist iconoclast, political revolutionary, tragic figure, artist of expansive vision. I, in turn, began to focus on the aspect of Isadora which seemed most compelling to me, and which I felt to be absent from *Her Topia*: Isadora's capacity to be moved and thus move others, implying the presence of an inner journey of emotional discovery as much as artistic process of performance image-making.

She sought movement from her depths to find one true gesture after another. She was not afraid to wait in stillness for something real to come. And she included her audience in her quest for the ecstatic, the transcendent, and the profound, holding up to us a mirror in which we could see ourselves as fallible, vulnerable, and noble, all at once.



Photograph by Lisa Kraus



Photograph by Lisa Kraus

The more I watched tapes, read, and conversed about her, the more I longed to see her myself, to see what it was that made students in cities from Budapest to Berlin to Paris unhitch the horses from her carriage and carry her through the streets.

The Dancing Koan

We could ask whose work today shares this communicative power: Butoh artists certainly, Kazuo Ohno and Eiko and Koma come to mind. Among those connected to the postmodern lineage I think of [Deborah Hay](#) who cultivates in her dancers a physical immediacy and sense of choicelessness about their actions, along with a very human vulnerability that have, for me, the most direct contemporary correspondence to Isadora.

I encountered Hay's methods at the European Dance Development Center in the Netherlands in the 1990s. Most of her emphasis was on the *how* of performing. She generated materials with a minimum of fuss, swiftly creating both the score for the overall performance (not unlike a roadmap of events and cues) and the choreography (the actual steps and movement phrases). The focus was on realizing the potential of both score and choreography *through the doing* of it, allowing it to transform in the process. Quality of attention was paramount and, in fact, much more significant than the *'what'* of performing.

Hay's method challenges the performer to contemplate a riddle-like phrase *while* performing. I like using the word "koan" to describe these riddles, "koan" being a paradoxical statement that a Zen teacher assigns a student to contemplate. Because it is impossible to penetrate the meaning of koans with conventional thinking, contemplating them is considered a tool on the path to attaining enlightenment. Hay would provide the dancers with context for each koan, explaining its broader intent.

The koan "invite being seen" places the performer in an open relationship to the audience, with 360-degree awareness rather than privileging one "front." Envisioning oneself as "53 trillion cells alive and changing" dislodges the ego's customary self-consciousness in performing, perhaps in a similar way to Isadora's imagining of herself as not one soloist, but as one of a vast chorus.

The koan "Aha nada" highlights the simultaneous ordinariness and exceptional qualities of just about anything we might find or perceive. "Aha" denotes surprise and excitement, and an invitation to regard whatever one has - sensations, visual experiences, fellow dancers - as unique and important. "Nada," or "nothing" in Spanish, is the counterweight, re-asserting ordinariness. Watching a dancer work with this koan, we can see their simultaneous appreciation of and matter-of-fact relationships with the most elementary actions and perceptions. I think here of Isadora's attraction to Greek sculptures depicting "ordinary" movement like the lacing of a sandal.

Another koan called "Tower of Babel" was, especially in a group format, about attempting to find a way to communicate with other performers while "speaking one's own language." Isadora's own dance language, so radical for her era, was nonetheless based in an acute observation of everyday actions which, she believed, would be understood far better than the rarefied and constricted forms she rebelled against.

Like Isadora, Hay made discoveries about performing powerfully through her own practice that she has endeavored to transmit to younger dancers. Two recent works, performed at Danspace in New York and on tour



Deborah Hay. Photograph by Libby Lewis / Rino Pizzi

by ensembles of highly regarded younger professionals show how Hay's practices develop an alternate kind of virtuosity. Through her guidance and the practice of the (present-day equivalents of the kinds of) koans described above, Hay helps her performers deepen and solidify their ability to share with us their own sense of surprise at the unfolding of each vivid moment.

Whereas the young dancers of *Her Topia* held their faces mask-like in a default postmodern blankness, Hay's dancers reminded me of deMille's description of Duncan's own face: an ordinary face, waiting, and anticipating the arrival of fate.



Photograph by Carl Root

“This is our dancing city. This is our dancing world”

In the virtual image before me in the dance being created in *Kopanos*, I longed to see the real Isadora. *Her Topia* included the one brief clip extant of her dancing, digitally manipulated through every special effects trick in the video collaborator's arsenal. Various-sized monitors morphed Isadora into two symmetrical Rorschach figures twirling apart and together, or frozen nearly still, her image trembling epileptically. This Isadora reversed and reversed again, forward and backward in a continual time shuttle. After watching for a while, the image, performing a metaphysical trick of electronics, shattered into its composite black and white pixels, like a human body reduced to small piles of its elements. Where did the whole go?

The image of Isadora, who stated unequivocally that art can either be religion or commerce, was employed here not as a springboard for a new creation, but as “material,” like a juicy tidbit to be sampled. Our world is proficient in chew-it-up-and-spit-it-out image-making. Yet, handling her image this way ruffled the feathers of my own sense of propriety and tradition, even if the point was to highlight the way twenty-first century technology treats icons. If much humor had been elsewhere evident in *Her Topia*, the videos might have worked for me. Ours is an era of fruitful appropriation and fusion that often allows for wonderfully layered hybrid art. But I found this final video unraveling, leaving nothing of substance, unspeakably sad.

How can a choreographer convey respect while appropriating another's work and image? Isadora was similarly guilty of a cavalier attitude toward Greek culture. By choosing to use a plaintive Greek song whose words, origins,

and associations could not be readily understood by the co-creators, or by collaborating with a videographer who makes use of Isadora's image without having deeply studied the implications, Brown in *Her Topia* similarly appropriated without knowledge. Both Isadora and *Her Topia* make me wonder how or whether we can responsibly use materials we don't fully comprehend.

For the swift on-site phase of creating *Her Topia*, Hannah and Brown needed to arrive with images and materials in hand, not unlike the private chef who whisks into a client's kitchen to turn out a sumptuous feast. The timeframe allowed the collaborators no leeway to confront the questions that arose from having their ideas finally physicalized, let alone for experiment or adjustment. The dancers had to don the movement and actions like pieces of clothing, without the time or clarity of direction that would enable them to truly inhabit them. Working under the gun with a cast and collaborators lacking shared history, and mediating a cultural divide, the two were required to take chances, to be diplomats and stellar organizers as well as generators of their unusual vision.

As an observer of *Her Topia's* countdown to performance I was privileged to learn about its underlying concepts and narratives. Yet I repeatedly missed the power of these foundational ideas as they were translated into the actual moment of performance. Hannah and Brown are far from alone in having more cues for meaning in their work than an audience member will comprehend. Following on post-modern dance's involvement with abstraction and indeterminacy stemming from the ideas of John Cage, Merce Cunningham and the Judson Church performers, many present-day dance-makers have re-embraced narrative, creating performance works that simultaneously refer to something specific while remaining determinedly non-literal. Given the open-ended and seemingly scattershot approaches to "making meaning" from at-times obscure cues and signifiers, one can see performance after performance where it's quite clear that something intended to be meaningful has taken place but the viewer isn't quite clear what or why.

In contrast, Isadora's dances, although in her time highly controversial, might be seen today as having refreshingly simple structures and transparently obvious themes. The complex *Her Topia*, with its well-reasoned rationales for the appearance of each abstracted image has no guarantee of becoming successful theater. Like any other creation to be experienced on its own terms, the effect of its ideological underpinnings as a basis for choice-making needs to be regarded during the process with a detached eye and the work tuned accordingly. In the swift process of creating *Her Topia*, there was no time for this, and the succession of images remained a series of experiences whose meanings were cryptic and references opaque.

In performance I kept asking "why?" Why are the women on the floor holding mirrors to their own body parts and then showing the audience themselves in their mirrors? Why does the veiled woman walk so slowly and why does the white one keep jumping? Why does the woman in the small room sit sewing her own endless voluminous skirts? Yes, I knew the intent, but the performed imagery didn't communicate it on its own, or cohere on its own terms. Rather than moving or satisfying me, *Her Topia* remained a predominantly cerebral exercise, hinting at a dark emotionality but remaining ambiguous and unmoored.

Happily, I suppose, there seemed to be few who questioned the event of *Her Topia* in this way. It played to maximum capacity audiences and was indeed a highly successful exercise in community building, drawing attention to a legendary figure and the singular spaces of the Duncan Centre. The events in each space had a compelling visual interest. Even if the project's import was ambiguous the effect of so much dedicated, creative industry was stimulating and affirming. Greek people are well practiced at celebrating and at the event's end, and when the dancing extended out beyond the hilltop of Kopanos to the rooftops of Vironas, the sense of euphoria was palpable. "This is our dancing city. This is our dancing world," might have been the subtext, something Isadora would have fully endorsed

Biography of Lisa Kraus

Lisa Kraus is a choreographer, teacher, and writer whose career has included dancing as a member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, choreographing and performing extensively with her own company and as an independent, teaching at universities and arts centers, and writing reviews, features and essays on dance for internet and print publication. She has trained in many forms and aesthetics including Graham technique, Indonesian dance, and the work of the Judson Church experimentalists.

Ms. Kraus has a longstanding professional relationship with the Netherlands. She first performed at major Dutch venues with the Trisha Brown Dance Company in a 1980 tour organized by the Netherlands Theater Institute. That same year, she began a ten-year association with School for New Dance Development as an annually-invited guest teacher. In 1990 she relocated to the Netherlands to teach dance technique, composition, and improvisation at the European Dance Development Center in Arnhem for nearly a decade. Her recent public dialogue with Anouk van Dijk at Philadelphia's Susan Hess Studio rekindled her curiosity about the similarities and differences in U.S. and Dutch culture.

Ms. Kraus has created over 30 performance works, several with her former New York-based company featuring John Jasperse, Sasha Waltz and Meg Stuart. Presented by venues across the U.S., Europe and Australia including London's Dance Umbrella, Sydney's Performance Gallery, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and New York's Danspace Project, Dance Theater Workshop, the Kitchen, and P.S. 122, her work has been awarded support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, Dance Advance, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and other foundations and private sponsors. A resident of the Philadelphia area since 2000, she is currently on the faculty of Swarthmore College and is the New Edge Resident Artist in Dance at the Community Education Center, developing *the Partita Project*, a work in collaboration with virtuoso violinist Diane Monroe.

Lisa Kraus began writing to chronicle her teaching of Trisha Brown's *Glacial Decoy* to the Paris Opera Ballet in 2003. Since then she has become one of two main dance critics for the Philadelphia Inquirer and is a frequent contributor to Dance Magazine where she has written on such subjects as "Americans Abroad" (April 2006) about U.S. dance artists based in Europe. Recent writings have also appeared in Dance Research Journal, the Contact Quarterly, and the Dance Insider.

Postscript

At the Archaeological Museum an American couple were readying for a snapshot, the wife clowning in the same heroic pose as the stately marble god behind her. A museum guard intervened, saying "a little more respect, please." Repeatedly I saw guards make this same request of visitors, as if we foreigners were constitutionally out of synch with the depth of pride the Greeks held for their own culture. While in Athens, I was told that a British gathering in recent memory held a cocktail party in the very pit that the Elgin Marbles were spirited out of.

By some accounts, the Duncans at Kopanos may similarly have missed some of the essential meanings of what surrounded them. But Isadora's art was certainly fed by her encounter with both the real and imagined Greece. And now, allegiance to continuing innovation and discovery informed by history is once again the stance of the Duncans' dance temple.

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Links:

Carol Brown: www.carolbrowndances.com

Isadora and Raymond Duncan Dance Research Center: www.isadoraduncancenter.org

Deborah Hay: www.deborahhay.com



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