

# Yesenin's American Wife

Charles Borden Photo: Corbis/RPG

Isadora Duncan will return to Moscow in June, some 82 years after she left the city and her stormy marriage to one of Russia's greatest writers, Sergei Yesenin – at least her spirit will return in the form of Lori Belilove, the founder of the Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation in New York. Because of Lori's dedication from childhood to the preservation of Isadora's dance, and their similar backgrounds, some have even suggested that she is actually Isadora's reincarnation. Lori will have a series of performance in Moscow between June 29 and July 6 for the festival *Moskovskoe Deistvo*, some in the building where Isadora's dance school was located on Uliitsa Prechistenka. If Lori is Isadora's reincarnation, one can only wonder where Yesenin is today.



Isadora Duncan is considered by some to be the mother of modern dance. She lived and performed to express the inner spirit of women. She transformed Ancient Greek rituals, with their expressions of beauty and strength, into her dance. The first two decades of the 1900s were not only revolutionary in Russia; the sounds of revolution were beating in other countries, and in culture and the arts. Isadora was part of this artistic revolution.

Isadora first visited Russia briefly before the Russian revolution and made her debut there in the Hall of Nobles, St. Petersburg, in December 1904. Other performances followed in St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1905. She returned to Moscow in 1921 with one of her students from Hamburg, Irma Erich-Grimme, to open a dance school. There she met Yesenin, in the studio and apartment of artist Georgy Yakulov at Malaya Bronnaya 10, a house built in 1903 by Ilya Pigit, the owner of the Ducat tobacco factory. The house had been divided into flats that became artist studios; Yakulov, Konchalovsky, Ryabushinsky, and others worked in this house. This was the time of the *Bubnovy Valet* (Jack of Diamonds) artists group, known as the Russian Cezannists, who met in Konchalovsky's studio. Their first exhibition was staged in 1921.

For Americans, Sergei Yesenin was simply Isadora Duncan's Russian husband; but in Russia, Yesenin was one of the country's greatest poets, a poet of the people, whose simple straightforward verses inspired workers and soldiers. Shortly after the revolution, Yesenin tried to join the Communist party, but he was





considered an individualist – “alien to any and all discipline,” a hooligan. In 1921, he published a collection of poems – “Hooligan’s Confession.”

*“One joy I have left:  
My fingers in my mouth – and a merry whistle.  
Infamy has come to me,  
That I am an abuser and scandalmonger.”*

Though dismissed in elitist circles as a “peasant poet,” and officially disapproved because of his life of excess, his works survived Stalin to be learned by heart by students at school and to inspire popular songs. In October 1921, at Georgy Yakulov’s apartment 38, Sergey and Isadora met for the first time. Yesenin was

a striking figure, with blonde hair and light blue eyes; he was 17 years junior to Isadora. Yesenin spoke only Russian and Duncan knew only a few words of the language. Isadora arrived at Yakulov’s studio after midnight. Anatoli Mareingof described the meeting. “In her soft, red gown; her copper red, shiny hair; large body, soft and easy. Her eyes glanced around and came to rest on Yesenin. His small mouth softly smiled. Isadora reclined on the sofa, and he on her leg. She put her hand on his hair and said “Golden head.” It was surprising that of the maybe ten Russian words she knew, these were two of them. She kissed him on the lips. And then, roundly forming her soft lips, like the wound from a bullet, said “Angel” in her broken Russian. She kissed him again. At four in the morning the two left the apartment together...”

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Isadora lived at Prechistenka 20, the location of her dance studio. Sergei who had already been twice married, moved in. Isadora and Sergei lived there until they separated in 1923.

In 1922, the two sailed for the United States with stops in Europe. Yesenin became the first Russian poet to officially travel from the Soviet Union. The West did not suit Yesenin; he feared he was losing the spiritual basis of his art, and it can be supposed

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that his role as Isadora's tag-along husband was difficult. He still did not speak English and, of course, she had not learned much Russian – one could say at least Sergei and Isadora did not have communication problems. As he followed Isadora on her dance tours, he drank his way through the high society of Europe and the United States. Like a free spirit ensnared, his mental and physical health deteriorated. He was bored, depressed, and suffered from hallucinations. Finally, on their return to Paris, Sergei smashed up their room at the Crillon Hotel and was carted away by the police. Freed by friends, Isadora put him in a mental hospital.

Isadora was also controversial, and concerts in the United States were cancelled. As she and Yesenin left the country, she proclaimed, "Goodbye America. I shall never see you again." Isadora and Sergey returned to Moscow in August 1923, and by October they had split for the last time.

*"I don't pity, don't call, don't cry,  
All will be gone, like haze from the white apple trees.  
Seized by the gold of withering,  
I will never be young again."*

Sergey wrote in 1921 that "Generally speaking, a lyric poet should not live long." In December 1925, he moved into St. Petersburg's Hotel Angleterre, and on December 28 ended his life at age 30. Isadora, after returning to Europe, did not live much beyond Yesenin. In September, 1927, she borrowed a friend's sports car in Nice. She left a message saying, "Adieu, mes amis. Je vais a la gloire! (Farewell, my friends, I go to glory)." As she drove away, her trademark long scarf became snared in the rear wheel of the car, ending her life.

A small museum dedicated to Sergey Yesenin is located at 24/2 Bolshoi Strochenovskiy Pereulok in Moscow, not far from the Dobrininskaya metro station. The building that was their home and Isadora Duncan's dance school still stands on Prechistenka, now the office of a department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Isadora will return to Moscow and her school, in the body of Lori Belilove, in June and July. We asked Lori to provide some additional insight into the life and art of Isadora Duncan.

#### **What were the "rules" of Isadora Duncan art?**

The ground rules include having an open heart, and that means understanding that love and compassion are the highest human experiences worthy of expression. Further, a dancer in Isadora's art form needs to honor beauty and believe in its regenerative powers. Isadora dancers need to be able to see the beauty in movement and nature, and, as Isadora did, return to the ancient Greek ideals of beauty of the human form, architecture, art, as well as the beauty of authentic expression of emotion as in the ancient Greek tragedies.

#### **What was different about Isadora's dance and her way of teaching?**

Turning away from traditional ballet, Isadora revolutionized dance. The essence of her technique lies in the use of the torso (or solar plexus, chest, heart chakra) as the basis from which the movements begin. It is like starting at the center with the arms and head radiating out from that center. The pelvis





follows and the beat is kept in the legs and feet in locomotion. Radiating from the center is radically different from most other dance forms, which are driven from the attack of the limbs. Isadora celebrates the torso, making her style especially emotionally expressive with the rhythms driven more from the breath and the music than from performing one technical feat after another, as seen so often even in ballet today. She said, "I want a school of life, not a mere charm school for graceful girls." She wanted everyone to embrace art and beauty in their daily lives.

#### **Was Isadora an original feminist?**

Isadora was a feminine feminist in that she honored motherhood and womanliness as supreme – a divine expression of womankind. Certainly she fought for the freedoms to live and travel, to own property, and to command her own life. She lived freely in an era

where people were shocked by her unconventional morals and values. She had children by two different men and did not marry them. We know she was not a militant feminist, but a woman who loved being a woman. She loved being beautiful, simply and naturally.

**What is Isadora Duncan's legacy?**

I think Isadora represents freedom, including the freedom to choose grace, beauty, womanliness, and strength, determination, willfulness, and challenges. I think she would love how women are in sports today; but I don't think she would like them to act like men in order to enjoy sportsmanship, athletics, and competition. Her works – over one hundred choreographies have survived – are timeless jewels. I teach and perform them with my Company (Lori Belilove & Company, resident performing company of the Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation) and people are ever amazed at how contemporary they look and feel. Isadora's ideal to live life fully, both passionately and compassionately, lives on and on and on.

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