

DANCE/MOVEMENT

BY LISA JO SAGOLLA

Isadora's Legacy

Lori Belilove steps forward as one of the last remaining direct links to the legendary dancer and her work.



Any choreographer who has ever taken a movement from outside the strict classical-ballet lexicon and incorporated it into the theatrical dance owes a debt to Isadora Duncan. Isadora (as she is universally

known) showed the world that the art of dance could include movements other than those sanctioned by the ballet academy, that there's a whole universe of personal, physical vocabularies for choreographers to discover and explore through self-expressive journeys. With her revolutionary style of barefoot, naturalistic dancing, Isadora opened the door to a whole new art form—modern dance—out of which sprang numerous permutations of postmodernism, contemporary dance, and fusion forms of combining modern-dance principles with vernacular and social-dance idioms. Since her famous accidental death in 1927—even those who know little about her dancing are aware that she died while riding in an open-air car when her scarf got stuck in one of the wheels—a small group of dance artists has worked to preserve her legacy by documenting and performing her choreographies.

Sadly, within the past 12 months, two of the last direct links to Isadora have passed away: Julia Levien, who studied and performed with Anna and Irma Duncan, died in September 2006, and Hortense Kooluris, who studied with Theresa Duncan as well as Anna and Irma, died in February 2007.

Fortunately, the mantle has been taken up by Lori Belilove, a dancer-choreographer dedicated to the study, physical embodiment, preservation, performance, and teaching of Isadora's work. "These were two women who lived and died in Isadora's great art," says Belilove of her recently deceased mentors. "Throughout their entire lives, even during periods when the popularity of Duncan's work waned—which was because people vastly misunderstood it as a diversion or some 'Greeky' thing—they stuck to it and kept the work alive. They gave younger generations an opportunity to taste the real deal." With their passing, Belilove's lifelong dedication takes on even greater significance. While other dancers have learned and performed some of Isadora's choreography over the years, Belilove remains today's leading exponent of her legacy.

To Create or Re-create?



But Belilove has now begun to wonder what exactly that legacy is and how she can best carry it forth. After a lifetime of research and re-creation efforts, she has decided to move in a different direction in her role as a keeper of Isadora's flame. Is preserving and performing Isadora's work really the best way to continue paying homage to the legendary maverick, or is it now more important to embrace her spirit—her commitment to individual expression—by creating one's own work? This year, as we celebrate the 120th anniversary of her birth (on May 26, 1877), would Isadora be pleased to see us still dutifully re-creating her dances, or might she be happier to see that pioneering efforts have inspired choreographers of all stripes to find and exercise their own original voices?

"Isadora was always challenging artists to go inside themselves and dip into their own creative pool," Belilove says. "But even though I've always felt

I was being very creative when I performed her dances, I decided the time had come for me to take up her challenge and create a full evening-length work of my own work."

Belilove's piece, *The EveryWoman Series: The Red Thread*, is monumental. A suite of dances set to Chopin's 24 preludes (in new arrangements by John Link) and representing the experiences of women at different phases of their lives, the work premiered in New York in June. It is designed, however, to be performed nationwide, in each case with youngsters, adults, and elderly women from the local community participating. Belilove has described it as "my exploration of what women feel, long for, and struggle with. It draws on universal themes in Isadora Duncan's dance movement put into my own voice."

Belilove was born and raised in Berkeley, Calif. Her free-thinking artistic parents took her to Athens for a summer when she was a teenager. There she met a man, Vassos Kanellos, who possessed a lock of Isadora's hair. "He had met Isadora when he was a young boy," Belilove says. "She took him on as a pupil and instructed him to go back to his roots and study historical Greek dances, art, and culture, which he did. He went on to have a great career producing Greek choreodramas—a word he coined. I was fascinated by everything he told me, so when I went home I read Isadora's autobiography and decided right then that that's what I wanted to do: I wanted to know what her dance style was. As soon as I graduated from high school, I wrote to Vassos and said I wanted to take him up on his offer to come and study with him." Belilove's studies with Kanellos included not only Isadora's dancing but also Greek

mythology, classical history, and all other aspects of ancient Greek culture that grounded the development of Isadora's aesthetic.

Upon her return to the United States, Belilove studied with artists from both generations of living Duncan dancers—Irma and Anna Duncan, as well as their protégées Levien, Kooluris, and Mignon Garland. It was through her exposure to all their different teachings that Belilove developed the rich understanding of Isadora's work that underpins her expertise. "Julia Levien gave me the understanding that Isadora's dancing came from a modern place. She gave me a way to look at Isadora's dancing through modern-dance eyes, so we could fit into the picture of dance today. And she really emphasized the power of Duncan dancing. She and Hortense were oppositionally matched. Hortense was as feminine and ethereal as Julia was grounded and horsey."

The approach one takes to executing Isadora's work may depend on which "Isadorable" one studied with. The Isadorables were six young girls between the ages of 6 and 8—Anna, Irma, Theresa, Gretel, Lisa, and Erika—whom Isadora adopted and raised in her boarding schools in Europe. They became her main company of dancers. When touring to America during World War I, to avoid customs complications, she had them made American citizens and gave them all the surname Duncan. "They were her artistic daughters," Belilove says. "She trained and coached them to the nth degree and took them all over the world performing with her—and that's how her legacy came to be so rich. The way I see it, each Isadorable presented a different one of Isadora's aspects, with heightened qualities. Some were more lyrical, some more dramatic,

some were high leapers, while others did more grounded, elaborate footwork. Together they embodied the full component of Isadora's dancing."

Belilove moved to New York in the 1970s and established herself as an expert performer of the Duncan repertory. She began teaching it to children and eventually founded her own company of professional adult Duncan dancers and the affiliated Isadora Duncan Foundation. Following in Isadora's footsteps, about eight years ago Belilove started a children's troupe that she calls the Belilovables.

Ironically, with her recent decision to focus more on her own choreography, Belilove believes she is returning to the real roots of her study of Isadora's work. Whereas the Isadorables and their disciples handed down to Belilove the specifics of Isadora's choreographies and were completely committed to replicating her work, Kanellos, Belilove's first Duncan teacher, had always advised her to use Isadora's adoption of Greek aesthetics as a jumping-off point for her own creative efforts.

So while Belilove is setting performances of her *EveryWoman Series* on communities of women all over the country, perhaps this is a good time for all choreographers to ask themselves what they're doing to carry on Isadora's legacy. Are you really working to create your own uniquely expressive movement vocabulary, or have you gotten stuck in the rut of simply reconfiguring those popular, trendy moves that we've all seen too many times before?