

Freedom in dance

Jean-Georges Noverre was the most prolific choreographer of the eighteenth century, yet only the scenarios of his ballets have survived. Even so, we know a lot about what he thought ballet could and should be, thanks to his correspondence with luminaries such as Voltaire and an influential treatise, the *Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets* (1760). He fretted vagueness and disdained vacuousness. If audiences failed to grasp the plots, didn't relate to the characters, went unmoved by the gestures – then, Noverre believed, ballet would perish. In his own productions, he promised to achieve a harmony of gesture, thought and “the movements of the soul”. He fell short, as he confesses in his later letters, but the ideal endured.

Noverre's criticism and career underpin Daria Khitrova's *Impossible Project: The story of Russian ballet and its survival*, although she has no doubts about her own success. “There is one point of view that explains it all”, she writes about nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian ballet history, “and this viewpoint is mine”. Her take, which comes into focus slowly, is that the art has always been at odds with itself, alternately embracing and rejecting abstraction. Khitrova argues that each time Russian ballet became too virtuosic, each time it moved away from real-world concerns into a realm of pure form, choreographers returned to Noverre for inspiration.

Much of ballet history – French, Russian, elsewhere – is lost. Dance and mime before the nineteenth century go undocumented; the costumes have long since been eaten by moths and the sets discarded. The extant musical scores are generic, the tunes plucked from operas, the rhythms adapted from social dances. Catherine the Great established ballet in Russia, and her Romanov successors lavished huge funds on it in St Petersburg. (Moscow's ballet finances were precarious by comparison.) The history we have of the imported and domestic Russian repertoire comes chiefly from the pens of practitioners, ballet haters and balletomanes, those obsessive devotees of dance who tracked the subtlest changes in decor or costumes. They debated improving their leaps and turns,

and wondered which dancer was positioned “second from the water”, to quote the title of Pyotr Boborykin’s short story from 1888 “about a dancer [*coryphée*] reduced to performing in the rear row of the imperial corps de ballet”.

The haters included the writers Nikolai Nekrasov, Leo Tolstoy and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, who mocked *The Naiad and the Fisherman* (which had its Russian premiere in 1851) for its perverse representation of fisherfolk: “They are dancing because they are mending their nets, they are dancing because they are preparing the boat, they are dancing because they are villagers and, in this capacity, they *must* dance”. Ballet should leave those people alone, he implies. They’ve been working all day, their hands and feet are swollen, they feel lousy. The last thing they want to do is put on a show for the elite. The derision, Khitrova shows, concealed ignorance. True, ballet wasn’t socially progressive, and what happened behind the scenes made a mockery of the chaste drama on stage. Nevertheless, for many Russian viewers, the most valuable freedom achieved by dance was aspirational – the way it reached for the spiritual beyond. The plots might offer stark moral teachings, but the greater lesson for contemporaries was that life should be an improvisation, just like the unscripted moments of the movement itself.

Khitrova ends her book with Michel Fokine, an Imperial Russian dancer who became the first of four choreographers with the Ballets Russes troupe in Paris. She doesn’t discuss Soviet ballet – an unfortunate omission, since the Soviet choreographer Leonid Yakobson was deeply committed to Noverre’s ideas. He included them in his experimental ballet *Spartacus* (1956) and authored a treatise titled *Letters to Noverre*. Fokine, too, was indebted to Noverre, though cagier about the influence. In 1914, three years after his *Petrushka* premiered in Paris, he published an article in *The Times* essentially portraying himself as the new Noverre. He challenged the hierarchy that placed the virtuosic prima ballerina and her partner at the top, with the corps de ballet at the bottom and *coryphées* serving as minor characters. He also argued, like Noverre, in favour of using all parts of the body to tell stories. Though he scripted his dances, he wanted them to look as if they had been conceived on the spot, unpremeditated.

Here Fokine had a modern muse: Isadora Duncan, who was inspired by François Delsarte, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Athenian vase paintings and classical Greek theatre. She shook her head at those who demanded that ballet be dismantled just so it could be reborn. Why not do away with ballet altogether, by returning to that ancient time when, she imagined, dance was an incantational communal enactment? Why not begin movement from the solar plexus, angling the body towards the sun? Why not shed footwear and corsets for the slimmest, most translucent of tunics? Balletomanes considered her vile. She thought the same of them.

Duncan was impressively cosmopolitan. Born in 1877 in San Francisco, she took classes at the Oakland Turnverein before heading to Europe. She travelled extensively, visited Greece, lived in Paris and Berlin. In 1903, Duncan gave a talk on “The Dance of the Future”, a title that evokes Richard Wagner’s “Music of the Future”, but offers an explicitly feminist perspective:

O, she is coming, the dancer of the future: the free spirit, who will inhabit the body of new women; more glorious than any woman that has yet been; more beautiful than the Egyptian, than the Greek, the early Italian, than all woman in past centuries: The highest intelligence in the freest body!

The next year, Fokine saw Duncan perform on tour in St Petersburg and was smitten. So, along with Noverre’s ideas, he borrowed some of hers, dressing the dancers in his ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912) in Greek tunics and posing them like marble statues.

Much has been written about Duncan, including by Duncan herself, though she avoids events after 1921, which means most of her work in Soviet Russia. These missing years, and the careers of her disciples, are discussed in Elena Yushkova’s *A Revolutionary Dancer in Revolutionary Russia: Isadora Duncan in Russian and Soviet culture* and Irina Sirotkina’s *Dancing Freedom: Modern dance in late Imperial Russia and the early Soviet Union*. Yushkova documents Duncan’s rise and fall as a performer, and the school she set up in Moscow, while Sirotkina focuses on her followers and the studios of free dance that sprang up in Russia after she started to travel there for performances. Together,

these two wonderful books explain her hypnotic effect on Russian and Soviet audiences, and her deep engagement with music – which, in her telling, sounded the unity of nature and the cosmos.

Duncan's promotion of communal dance was a stance that suited the Soviets, who promoted communal existence. She moved dreamily to scores by Beethoven and Wagner while also dancing, along with her students, to marches and choruses of the Revolution. She was drawn to communism, and she and her school needed the income generated by her interpretations of "La Marseillaise", "Varshavyanka" and "Comrades, Let's Bravely March". When her talent faded along with her beauty, Duncan's sorrows fuelled gossip about fickle lovers, alcohol abuse, bad hair dye, unbrushed teeth and weight gain. She died in 1927 in Nice when one of her hand-painted scarves got tangled up in the back wheels of a sports car, snapping her neck.

Yushkova separates fact from fiction in the biographical accounts, playing down the tales of drinking, depression, orgies pretending to be Bacchic revelries and "pornographic tendencies", and exposing the ageism and misogyny that shaped later accounts of Duncan's performances. She unearths little-known assessments of her Russian performances and their programmes. "It's late autumn", Alexander Yablonovsky said of a tired-looking recital in 1924, "but the rooks have yet to fly away." The details are impressive. Yushkova's account of the "school for a thousand children" that Duncan set up in Moscow in 1921 includes menus, nap times, descriptions of the fittings in all the rooms and the diffuse light emanating from the "chandelier covered with a pink scarf". Then there is this malicious description in the newspaper *Segodnya*: "instead of bread, medicine, and hygiene, combinations of movement of ancient dance were given to children exhausted by hunger, worn out by diseases, and eaten by insects. Even the Bolsheviks soon grew tired of this vile comedy and ceased the subsidy they had generously promised at the beginning".

Yushkova's devotion to her subject increases as the misfortunes in Duncan's life accumulate. The feeling she captures is desolation: Duncan's own, especially after the deaths of her three children and her horrible marriage to the poet

Sergei Yesenin, but also Soviet Russia's. Her reversal of fortune in Russia aligns with the collapse of the Revolution's ideals and the conservatism, intolerance and viciousness that followed it.

Sirotkina's account is more compact, less about Duncan herself, and her solo acts, than the Duncan-aligned "studios of free dance" that sprang up after the Revolution. These were as ephemeral as dance itself, no sooner opened than closed, sometimes because the studios had no heat, other times because the women (and these innovative performers were all women) were kicked out by men seeking spaces to create "machine" dances mimicking locomotives, punch pressers and steam threshers. Ballet, which became more gymnastic after the Revolution, began the long and painful search for plots and movements that would represent the triumph of the proletariat. Duncanism didn't stand a chance under Stalin and, as Sirotkina laments, efforts to revive the Moscow Duncan school in the Thaw of the mid-1950s to mid-1960s came to naught. The lament extends to efforts by Duncan's fellow travellers, some of whom made her last name their own, to maintain a "healthy lifestyle, Körperkultur (body culture), moral integrity and spirituality" amid war, cold, hunger and environmental despoliation.

Duncan's afterlife matters to Sirotkina more than her life. This is not the "Hellenic" afterlife, however, full of clichés about barefoot dancing and Socratic garments, which imagine Duncan as an Elgin marble in motion – all that Fokine had borrowed for his ballets on Greek and Egyptian themes while pretending he had barely heard of her. For Sirotkina, Duncan's real and true legacy belongs to the isolated dance communes that continued her work in the USSR. Her case studies include Stefanida Rudneva, founder of a studio in Leningrad called "Heptachor" that taught students to live music through their bodies, moving in chitons to Bach, Mozart and Chopin. The studio was shuttered in 1934, part of a crackdown on the activities of the "Leningrad intelligentsia". Rudneva ended up in Moscow, first as an educator, then as a street sweeper with the city's sanitation department. Despite all "the dangers, hardships and threats she had experienced", her poignant memoir depicts a "happy person".

Khitrova makes clear that Russian ballet's efforts to resemble a language were the salvation but also the scourge of the art, since too often the preoccupation with describing dance obscures its beauty. Duncan's devotees, who built a cult around her, believed that she could access *istina*, or spiritual truth, while the rest of us are stuck with *pravda*: a socially and politically manipulated truth. Yushkova and Sirotkina describe Duncan's body as a site of liberation and resistance, highlighting the paradox of her celebrated return to a mode of natural expression that never existed. The story of her impact on late Imperial and Soviet dance reveals that her modernism was in fact anti-modernist in its rejection of biomechanical movement, constructivism and all the other Sovietisms.

Instead of the infinite expansion of cerebral, rational processes, the insensate boundlessness of the pursuit of abstraction, Duncan sought to restore a natural order. She believed in it, as had the Pythagoreans, and it felt good to stand in the sun.

Simon Morrison's latest book is A Kingdom of a Village: A one-thousand-year history of Moscow, 2026.

