

CONSTRUCTING THE NATURAL

A critical appraisal of selected forms of British theatre dance in the early 20th Century

For me the dance is not only the art that gives expression to the human soul through movement, but also the foundation of a complete conception of life, more free, more harmonious, more 'natural'.

Duncan 1903 in Rosemont 1981: 33

The work of Isadora Duncan and her contemporaries in the first quarter of the twentieth century is intimately connected with the idea of dancing the 'natural', both as philosophical concept and bodily activity. Rosemont, for example, summarises Duncan's aims in that 'she scorned the restrictive garb and other artifices of the stage and developed free and natural movements' (1981: x). But as Daly notes, 'far from being a tabula rasa ... this "Natural" body was an artistic invention as well as a rhetorical strategy ... "nature" was Duncan's metaphorical shorthand for a loose package of aesthetic and social ideals' (1995: 89). Franko points to the tensions between Duncan's desire for inner (and therefore natural) sources of inspiration for movement and her choreographic craft (1995:4) END 1. Even Duncan herself admits it is 'not enough to wave the arms and legs in order to have a natural dance' (in Cheney 1969: 103). Although this concept of the natural, therefore, has been revealed as misconstrued, it was dominant in its time and still colours our perception of that period.

It is not my purpose here to revisit Duncan, who has already played hostess to a plethora of popular and scholarly scrutiny, but to consider how those whose work arose from a similar, near-contemporaneous climate made manifest the notion of the natural in the performance principles of their dance forms and in their choreography. As case studies, I focus specifically on two British artists, Madge Atkinson and Ruby Ginner, whose legacy is now being enhanced by the preservation and cataloguing of substantial archive collections at the National Resource Centre for Dance, University of Surrey (2). This does not in any way negate the work of their contemporaries, but it is the research arising from this particular project which forms the basis for this examination of the 'natural' in British theatre dance in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As such, the aims are to (i) situate the work of British artists during this period as part of international cultural trends (ii) explore how one of these key trends – the 'return' to 'nature' – is constructed, and contested, in their work.

In the Art Nouveau period of the *fin de siècle*, the overt association of nature with women had reached a pitch in artistic representation. Women were not just situated in nature, but they became synonymous with it; they were not just symbolic of flowers, they became them (Dijkstra 1986). However, moving in to the twentieth century the association with nature takes a different course, as both men and women actively aspire not to the loss of their humanity but to the enhancement of it through a return to an idealized view of the 'natural' human being. This can be summarized in the words of the writer and social reformer Edward Carpenter, who specifically referenced dance when he dreamed that humankind 'on the high tops once more gathering he will celebrate with naked dances the glory of the human form' (Carpenter 1906 in Delany 1987: 39). Dance tended to be used as a symbol of bodily and political freedom. It was a vehicle for the expression of the fifth century BCE Hellenic Greece culture, as depicted on art works and artefacts, which was seen as embodying harmony, balance and order in relation to the social world and to the human psyche. (We must remember, of course, that as Lawler points out, 'Greek art is deliberately unrealistic, and is concerned with ideal beauty, ... stylization, rather than an exact portrayal of what the artist saw in life' (1964:17)). Professional artists such as Loie Fuller, despite her highly sophisticated use of technology and colour science, evolved her own system which she called 'natural dancing' (Current 1997: 194) (END 3). Duncan and Maud Allan based their whole philosophy on these ideas, filtered through the Greek connection. There were also many 'amateurs', 'lithe young men and beautiful girls, showing in their attitudes and movements all the exquisite grace and charm of the Greek sculptures and vase paintings, but natural and spontaneous in every gesture. ... (who have)... arisen all over Europe and America' (Urlin, n.d.: 154).

Despite their rhetoric and the popularity of these dance forms – variously called natural, free, expressive, interpretative and such like - what they generally lacked was a publicly communicable, codified system which would ensure the longevity of the work. Maud Allan notes that she exercised every morning before her bath, 'not set, one-two-three-four, hands-above-your-head ... kind of exercise, but just as the spirit

moved me' (1908: 63) (END 4). What is significant is that as the century moved on, practitioners no longer cited their recourse to 'inner' inspiration – the mood of the moment which moves them – but acknowledged their craft. This was evident in pedagogical practice and in sophisticated systems of training. In an over-simplified summary, what we see is a move from the neo-Romantic fantasies about nature in the late nineteenth century to its organisation and taming as it met, and contributed to the modern age. It is in the work of practitioners such as Atkinson and Ginner that we see how the inherited threads of the natural are woven in to considered and crafted form.

Madge Atkinson (1885 - 1970) studied with Annea Spong in London from where she obtained a diploma in Natural Movement. Spong herself had studied with Raymond Duncan though there is no evidence as yet for how long. The terminology which Atkinson deployed for her work in her home town of Manchester and later in London was thus inherited. (END 5) Working in conventional theatres and a large variety of other venues, she presented performances of historical and national dances and, increasingly, her own choreography based on Natural Movement. She maintained a school and worked in the education and health sectors. Her performances tailed off in the 1930s but her work was incorporated in to the private sector of dance education, predominantly through London College of Dance and Drama and under the auspices of the syllabi of Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD).

Ruby Ginner's (1886 – 1978) career followed a similar pattern. Her interest in movement arose from her research in to the Greek chorus for the theatre. In 1913 she founded The Grecian Dancers and soon after the Ruby Ginner School of Dance. Joined by mime expert Irene Mawer, this became the Ginner-Mawer School of Dance and Drama. As the theatre performances declined the education work expanded in physical training colleges and schools. In 1923 Ginner founded the Association of Teachers of Revived Greek Dance, from which evolved the Greek Dance Association. Her methods were absorbed in to the ISTD and some in to the Royal Academy of Dance Free Movement syllabus. Ginner was an advocate of classical Greek dance in

her writing as well as in the theatre and education, producing two books (1933 and 1960) plus articles for journals such as the *Dancing Times*.

Both Atkinson and Ginner presented a wide variety of dance forms, but the focus in this paper is on those which became synonymous with their names. What is clear from the trajectory of their careers is the very clear strategy of devising developmental syllabi for the acquisition of performance skills and the recurring performances of dance works which signify the repeatability of choreographic construction. (END 6) How did these two artists, then, deal with notions of the natural within which their work was embedded but which also, if the term is taken literally, it contested?

It must be stated, of course, that the notion of executing any art 'naturally' can never be taken literally for there is an inherent contradiction in terms. Despite all efforts across the arts at chance procedures, happenings, pedestrian movement, vernacular artefacts and improvisation, no art is made without an element of skill, experience and knowledge. This was certainly evident after watching evidently technical classes in Classical Greek Dance as it became known and Natural Movement Study Days which were presented as part of the *Pioneer Women* project. I asked the tutors of the latter, Jacky Ferguson and Jean Kelly, what was 'natural' about the form. They smiled in acknowledgement of this seeming paradox but agreed that it is all a development of basic steps and travelling: walking, running, skipping, jumping and leaping. From an article written by Atkinson (1926) further key principles can be extrapolated as (i) the feet are placed in the direction of the movement, not turned out (END 7) (ii) oppositional movement, thus extending the bodily alignment of the walk (iii) performed in bare feet, thus letting articulate feet relate to the ground (iv) a central point of balance and (v) co-ordination, all resulting in, as described by Jean Kelly, 'the nice natural easy stance of the body' (interview 21.10.08). These are the roots of the form upon which are layered levels of complexity.

Ruby Ginner acknowledged that 'the new dance cannot grow except from a firm sound technique, a technique which must evolve from a thorough understanding of the

science of movement' (*Dancing Times*, 1929: 434). She fully acknowledges that 'no form of art can arrive at expressive completion, or have any lasting effect, which has not a sound technical basis' (1929: 434). She linked Greek dance with the natural through the concept of rhythm as 'the basis of all existence' (1960:4), and connected human physiology, movement and the expression of emotion in movement. In modern life, she says, 'the covering up of natural feelings by convention and sophistication have crushed the instinct to express the inner life through the movements of the body' (p.5). Here, as in the writings of many of these artists and educators, the flow between inner experience and its 'outer' manifestation is rendered unproblematic (END 9)

Nevertheless, although there is a huge gap in the argument, there is acknowledgment that the Greeks cultivated 'the art of dance' (p.5). Throughout her 1960s book, Ginner refers to 'the choreographer' who arranges the dances. It would be extremely odd, in fact, if, given the strong technical foundation of both Atkinson's and Ginner's movement language, the theatre work was improvised. Although it is difficult to find any descriptions of the rehearsal process, improvisation was a key feature of class work for both children and adults when themes from nature, known as 'nature rhythms', were offered as inspiration. In CGD, the class often ended with a the improvisational freedom of the 'glory heap' (Cornford, interview, ...), Despite these activities, the actual theatre works were formally constructed. There are clear structural devices of repetition and development; spatial design of groups (also very particularly arranged in the photographs) and pathways are paramount and, in accordance with the founding principles of both forms, there is a very close relationship to music in structural and expressive terms. In what ways, then, did the choreography embrace notions of the natural? It did so in three ways. First, by utilizing the technical principles based on physiologically 'natural' ways of moving, as discussed. Second, by privileging a performance interpretation of the choreography that was authentic; if not self expressive, at least artistically expressive and third, in the most obvious way of presenting subject matter drawn from nature.

Across the arts, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century nature provided source material for inspiration, representation and metaphor. Luminaries from Duncan,

Fuller and Maud Allan to Doris Humphrey in the 1930s drew on the seasons; the elements; flora and fauna and the living world. This was often overt, as in Atkinson's *Autumn* (to Brahms in 1916; to Delius in 1934) or where nature provided a setting or general theme, as in the *Legend of Daphne and Apollo* (1933) and *Trina and the Leaf Fairies* (1936). Ginner presented works such as *Fire Ballet* (c.1920s), *The Sea Ballet* (c.1924) and *Armies of the Earth and Air* (1929). Her myth-inspired work had sylvan settings which, when presented in London's parks were actual as well as thematic. As Ginner summarised, 'for inspiration of rhythm and expression we turn to nature, the rhythms of the sea, the river, the scudding clouds, the trees tossing in the wind, the flight of birds and the raging of fire'. (1926: 452) (How often do we see that these days?)

Whatever the subject matter of the works, their expressive moods were enhanced by recourse to the music of Romanticism: composers such as Chopin, Brahms, and Grieg provided inspiration though it must be stressed that newly composed music was also used. Furthermore, and central to the tenets of the neo-classical/natural movement practitioners, was the simplicity of costumes worn in the studio and often – but not always – on stage. Although some of the latter were complex in decorative features the basic garments of tunics and longer, chiton-style dresses, belted around the waist and simply hung from neck and shoulder, are synonymous with this period. Their construction was simple, due perhaps to economic stringencies as well as aesthetic imperatives; suffice to say that their main effect was to facilitate movement whilst preserving bodily dignity. Thus, in the sense of it being unrestrained by corseting, with loose fabric and uncovered limbs, the female body was unencumbered and in a comparatively 'natural' state.

The environment of both the classes and the performances enhanced the naturalism of the work. Although the majority of performances were presented in theatres and indoor venues, dancing in the open air is synonymous with the period. As mentioned, Ginner presented performances in London parks; Atkinson at garden parties and fetes. In photographs, this was often a cultivated image; some NM pictures show dancers

posed in studied fashion against the sea, rocks and waves. In these, the artifice of the design of the bodies in space draws the natural landscape into a complete, artistic picture. Other more informal photographs show dancers in class or rehearsing in large gardens; this continued in the educational work in the 1940/50s and later. Such a trend was also significant in the European dance of the 1930s/40s, all part of the link between dance, health, fitness and fresh air (END 10).

In summary, the work of Atkinson, Ginner and others both evolved from and contested notions of the natural. Their systems of training were based on movements that theoretically anyone can execute, but were developed in to forms that necessitated advanced skills. If not articulated, the choreographic craft was paramount. It is important to stress, however, that when works were revived for later dancers, it was not unusual to change them to accommodate their skills. (END 11) It was, as such, a living repertoire. Subject matter, in class and in production, drew on the natural world for inspiration but it was a world transformed by artistic and pedagogical values.¹² Similarly, although privileging the expressive aspect of performance as fundamental, they did not accept the notion of an unmediated flowing of 'inner' emotion to 'outer' bodily movement. They did not seek 'sequences developed from the unconscious' (Franko 1995: 5) but paved the way for a more rational approach to expressivity in dancing and dance making.

For all these reasons, these women artists have played a key role in the development of dance as art but their contribution, as recorded in historiography, has been diluted or misrepresented. They demonstrate Corfield's (2007) claim that as periods in history have been shaped by their radical disjunctures, the micro changes – those which embrace both continuity and difference - have been overlooked, rendered invisible, not given value (END 12). I would contend that these women were on the cusp of the neo-Romanticism of the late nineteenth century and the modern age. Arguably, they had more of a footing in modernity than Duncan did: a heretical notion but one which contests Duncan's place as sole primogeniture of modern dance.

Like others who went on to work in pedagogy (see Alter 1994 for an account of these in the US) their work facilitated the coherent transmission of dance in education. Their forms have lived on, of course, albeit in the more limited context of the private sector. Dance in public education came to be dominated by Laban's Modern Educational Dance which, although systematised on a conceptual basis, still relied in practice on notions of the natural in its assumptions that the child will dance spontaneously. From the 1960s, the natural became submerged under the US-imported codified modern dance techniques. It is now re-emerging, at least in higher education, in the guise of 'softer' or somatic dance techniques. What these, NM and Classical Greek Dance have in common is the privileging of the physiological/organic functions of the body and their structural relationships as the foundation for dance. They all assume, however, that, whether in performance or choreography, a prepared and knowledgeable mind and body are essential. These were the basic assumptions underlying the work of the British protagonists in the first quarter of the twentieth century; those artists who, literally, constructed the natural for the art of dance.

NOTES

1. There is a seeming tension between Duncan's disingenuousness about her craft and her acknowledgment that 'natural dancing should mean only that the dance never goes against nature, not that anything is left to chance ...the dancer's movement will always be separate from any movement in nature' (Duncan probably 1904 in Cheney 1969: 79). In terms of her choreography, Franko notes that 'Duncan sought not only natural movement, but syntactically natural movement, sequences developed from the unconscious' (1995: 5). However, he asks, 'how can 'entire choreographic sequences be rendered wholly natural...?' (p.6).

2. This work is funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Resource Enhancement award for the *Pioneer Women: early British modern dancers* project, 2007 – 2010.

3. quote from Ewing p.196)

4. Duncan herself believed in a loosely systematic regimen of exercises in order to develop strength, flexibility and musicality as a means to an end, for 'these daily exercises make the body as perfect an instrument as possible so that harmony of self-discovered natural dancing can permeate it completely' (Alter 1994: 57)
5. Theatre programme indicate how she described her early work as 'descriptive mood dances' which were 'arranged on the Spong Method of Natural Movement by Madge Atkinson'. Then, as her own style developed, she omitted the attribution.
6. Jean Kelly comments that Atkinson resisted the notion of 'choreography', saying that what she did was 'composition' and only 'great people do choreography' (interview 2008)
7. The criticism of ballet's 'turn out' is slightly undermined if one accepts that it is a natural human inclination to turn out the feet slightly for balance, and ballet is based on an extension of this strategy.
8. For Atkinson, the work was transformed over-much by pedagogical values; she did not like the examination system necessary for the ISTD; she did not like anything too 'set'. (Kelly, interview, 21.10.08).
9. See Redfern (1973) for a rigorous unpacking of these problems.
10. Margaret Morris' book (1925) is replete with photographs taken out of doors.
11. For example Jean Kelly relates how Atkinson taught her a work originally created for Anita Heyworth small adjustments were made to the choreography. (Discussion 6/8/09)
12. See Carter 2010 for further discussion of periodisation in relation to dance.

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Interviews

Jean Kelly, teacher in natural Movement. Studied with