

## **A missionary born for love**

*Reviewed by Valerie Lawson Valerie Lawson's most recent book is Out of the Sky She Came: The Life of P.L. Travers, the Creator of Mary Poppins (Hodder, 1999).*

ISADORA

The Sensational Life of  
Isadora Duncan

By Peter Kurth

Little, Brown, 355pp, \$65

Isadora Duncan listened to music with her soul - and danced accordingly.

Isadora Duncan once asked her pupils to name the greatest thing in life. "Dance!" they exclaimed. No, replied the dancer, "the greatest thing in life is love!"

This is a biography about a great and influential dancer, who liberated dance from the clutches of late-19th-century affectation. But in *Isadora: The Sensational Life of Isadora Duncan*, dance plays second fiddle to love.

Peter Kurth's long and beautifully packaged book is the fourth biography of Duncan, whose life, loves and death were as sensational as the subtitle promises. The predatory Duncan, who bedded dozens of men and at least one woman, proclaimed: "I was born for love!"

While standing back from his subject, it is clear that Kurth is passionate himself about this maddening yet enchanting woman. He sees her at war with herself, torn between the ideals of Apollo and the appetites of Dionysus, the first representing everything pure and harmonious, the other wilful abandonment to frenzy, inspiration, passion, destruction and desire.

Like Lola Montez, one of her father's lovers, Isadora Duncan could have been known as La Grande Horizontale. Her life was defined by sensations and appetites for sex, food, wine, freedom from all restrictions, living life to the hilt.

In her mid 20s she drank Moët before dancing and, in mid-life, moved on to Pommery, crates of which were stacked in her dressing room. Her taste, perhaps, was formed in the womb, for her mother could bear only iced champagne and iced oysters during her pregnancy. "When in doubt," said Duncan, "always go to the best hotel." Among the hotels that regretted her stay were Claridge's in London, and the Lutetia and Crillon in Paris. Duncan, who squandered money all her life, did not pay her bills at Claridge's and Lutetia, and her Crillon suite was trashed by her mad husband, Sergei Esenin.

He was the last of her three main lovers. The first was the son of Ellen Terry, the theatre designer Gordon Craig, a selfish, Byronic figure. The second was Paris Singer, dilettante, philanthropist and son of the founder of the Singer sewing-machine company. She met Esenin, the Russian poet, 15 years Duncan's junior, during her flirtation with Bolshevik Russia. He wrecked both their lives in a haze of alcoholic destruction.

Perhaps the most important man in her life, though, was her absent father, a banker, whose career ended in scandal. Duncan's childhood, bound by few rules, passed in the "black shadow of this mysterious father of whom no-one would speak", writes Kurth. Born in bohemian San Francisco, in 1877, she found inspiration for her radically different way of dancing from her mother, a pianist who read Shakespeare, Keats and Shelley to her little girl, and from a copy of Botticelli's Primavera. When Duncan heard her mother playing the piano, she visualised the figures moving in the painting.

Duncan danced on deserted beaches and in the woods, often naked, in bare feet or sandals, or in free-flowing tunics and robes which revealed her legs and often her breasts.

She looked to Greece for inspiration in movement and costume. Her devotion to classical Greece can be traced, says Kurth, to America's search for cultural legitimacy at the time of her adolescence. Victorian America, he writes, believed in "the romantic idea that ancient and beautiful were one and the same". To be Greek then "was to be pure, clean, simple, virtuous, serious of purpose and devoted to humanist principles".

Like her contemporary, Anna Pavlova, Duncan was a dance missionary who toured the world, supported by a network of social connections forged in Newport, Rhode Island, then the salons of London. In Paris, where she began to teach, Duncan said: "Listen to the music with your soul." She taught her students, some of whom performed as the Isadorables, "beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ..."

But how did she look when she danced? Kurth is shaky when it comes to dance description, understandably, as he has no dance background and because there is hardly any photographic record and no film footage of Duncan dancing.

She was influenced by Loie Fuller in Paris, a "skirt dancer," then described as a "fairy of light" and "the queen of Art Nouveau", who rustled and swayed in metres of silk. Duncan's own style was described in The Times as "a sculpture in transition". She ridiculed ballet as "sterile, living death", discarding her slippers while still in her teens. Yet she profoundly influenced the new forms of ballet in the early 20th century, through her impact on Michel Fokine, the first choreographer of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. A good summary of this impact can be found in Lynn Garafola's book Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, but it is only lightly touched on by Kurth.

He does not explain how Duncan influenced the modern-dance choreographers who followed her. A useful appendix could have analysed her artistic legacy, both choreographically and in her choice of music. But Kurth has left all that to dance scholars, preferring to concentrate on the life.

The biography can be seen as a work with two crescendos, the first the deaths of Duncan's three children, and the second, her own death.

Two of her children and their nurse drowned in the Seine in a runaway car. When the Renault stalled, the chauffeur jumped out to crank the engine. He swore that he put the gear in neutral and secured the parking brake. But when the engine turned, the car sprang into life, jumped the pavement and ran down an embankment into the river.

The chapter describing the accident, *One Great Cry*, is so vivid, so heartbreaking, that everything that follows is like a long sigh, leaving the reader with residual grief on Duncan's behalf. The tragedy was compounded by another death, when her next, and last, baby died soon after birth.

Her own death in 1927 was described by Jean Cocteau as "perfect ... a kind of horror that leaves one calm". The story is well known, although Kurth fills in the detail. She was choked by her wide, long-fringed shawl. Made of red batik, it was covered in a giant yellow bird design and blue Chinese asters. When it became trapped in the spokes of the left rear wheel of the low-slung Amilcar Grand Sport, it broke her neck quickly, Kurth writes, but not that cleanly.

Drawing on many sources, Kurth succeeds in analysing how, and why, Duncan came to symbolise "women's freedom, beauty and the birth of a new world of art". She was the perfect representation of the times, a woman untamed in an age when Salome was all the rage. Among those she knew and influenced were Paul Poiret, fashion's first celebrity designer, Konstantin Stanislavsky, director of the Moscow Art Theatre, the impresario Diaghilev and the writers George Bernard Shaw and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

She was highly intelligent as well as passionate. Far from the mute dancer, who speaks only with her body, Duncan made speeches on stage, and Nietzsche was her spiritual mentor. From him, she learned his "superb phrase ... `be hard'". So, "from an early age", she wrote, "some spirit kept whispering to me, `be hard'".

The trouble is, she was not quite tough enough, more the abused than the user. Her last words were prophetic. "I go to glory," she said, as her newest boyfriend drove her to her death.