

Re-creating Beauty

*At Skidmore,
Bresciani teaches
students the dances
of Isadora Duncan*

By WENDY LIBERATORE
For The Daily Gazette

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Isadora Duncan is the mother of modern dance. But watching Skidmore College students perform reconstructions of Duncan's dances, one can see how far the art form has strayed from its origins.

The Duncan foot is not sharply pointed, but soft. The arms, neck and head are rounded, too. The dancers tiptoe as if moving with the beat of their breath. But, most striking, these dancers seem to be gaining momentum from above. With their arms outstretched, palms opened and fingers curved, they appear to be summoning Duncan herself to inspire their steps.

This is not surprising when one considers their mentor — the ethereal Jeanne Bresciani. The 1972 Skidmore alumna is the world's foremost interpreter of Duncan. And for the past two weeks, she has shared her knowledge of the matriarch with these young dancers.

"Isadora wanted the freest bodies and the highest intelligence," Bresciani said.

She should know. Her link to Duncan is unimpeded and longstanding. The devotee has been imbued with the Duncan philosophy since she was a child, studying with Anita Zahn, the dance partner of Duncan's sister Elizabeth.

As an adult, she learned countless Duncan dances — with hardly a word spoken — from Maria Theresa Duncan. Maria Theresa was one of the Isadorables, a group of girls whom Duncan adopted, taught and danced with. She further studied with Julia Levien

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Photo by Lois Greenfield

Jeanne
Bresciani
breathes life
into the
historic
dances
of Isadora
Duncan.



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Works by Isadora Duncan to be performed at Skidmore

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and Hortense Kooluris, disciples of another Isadorable, Irma Duncan.

And now, as the artistic director of the Isadora Duncan International Institute, Bresciani has made it her life's work to share the knowledge — teaching Duncan's technique and reconstructing hundreds of her dances.

Her work at Skidmore will culminate with two showings of 15 short Duncan works on Wednesday and Thursday in the campus dance theater. But it is not the performance that matters, says Bresciani. It's the experience.

Seeking essence

"It's about being," she said. "It's not about the body as a machine, or being perfect or breaking your body into distorted or isolated parts. The mind and body are integrated. It's divine, sensate. It's about fullness, embodiment, essence."

The essence of Duncan is ephemeral and not easy for

these student dancers — who are used to the strict regimen of ballet and modern dance — to grasp.

"It's more than teaching a technique," said Rebecca Pristoop, a student dancer. "She is teaching us about embodying a spirit and freeing that spirit to the world around you. ... It's about rediscovering why we started to dance in the first place."

Christine Luigi agreed. "It's less about structure and more about feeling."

Bresciani says Duncan's dances are poems — odes to nature and humanity. She herself moves with the rhythm of a well-composed sonnet. When Bresciani sweeps into the studio, her feet are silent. But with her silk rehearsal skirt and long dark hair trailing behind, her presence looms large.

Her silent students stand politely at the ready. First, she rehearses those who will portray the Graces. She reminds them, "You are the concept of grace. You are graceful. And you are grace brought from above."

"It's less about moving than being moved."

Jeanne Bresciani
Dancer

Next, she leads a quartet to spin like a pinwheel as the four winds, thrashing the air with their limbs and head.

"Move like your life depends on it," Bresciani urges.

And then she beckons eight to dance to "Ave Maria." They are angels who bless Mary and her child. Bresciani asks them to honor the music — not look in the mirror — and think angels, think Renaissance.

Though out of sync, the dancers appear celestial. But none is more so than the shimmering Bresciani. She leads them, looking delicate. Her arms are crossed, her elbows raised and her hands are gently bent. She moves slowly, deliberately, by crossing one leg in front of the other, and then unfurls her arms skyward.

The beauty of Duncan's dances has the power to capti-

vate. Yet in her day, the early part of the 20th century, she was revolutionary. The dances were set to serious concert music — Beethoven, Schubert, Scriabin, Mendelssohn, Wagner, Chopin — which was considered a sacrilege.

Controversial figure

More offensive to the society of the day was Duncan herself. She danced in bare feet, with her throat and ankles exposed. She also shed her corset, wearing only a silk tunic.

Duncan was considered a harlot by some. "The hussy doesn't wear enough clothes to pad a crutch," railed one evangelist.

And seen as a goddess by others. "Isadora was dancing God right in front of you," said Ruth St. Denis.

But Duncan was simply following her natural instinct — to free the body from the era's



HELEN GRIGORIADU

Jeanne Bresciani is artistic director of the Isadora Duncan International Institute.

stiffness and transform dance as a means of expressing the deepest emotions.

"It's less about moving than being moved," said Bresciani.

Though she was a towering figure in art, one who ushered in

modernism while acknowledging the need for beauty, few today have experienced her dances. That is why Bresciani is compelled to spread what Duncan called "the religion of the feet" to all willing parts of the world. Just before coming to Skidmore, she taught in London. Prior to that, she danced in Athens.

"Isadora's work is futuristic. Her dance is forever," said Bresciani. "Isadora is a mythic figure, but there is room for everyone to dance, to express beauty. I have committed myself unswervingly."

Jeanne Bresciani and dance students from Skidmore College will perform the works of Isadora Duncan at 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday at Dance Theater, on the campus, North Broadway, Saratoga Springs. Tickets are \$5; \$3 for students. More information is available at 580-5392.

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