Forward of another letter, would this be a balanced conclusion? Or is Silence golden?

1 A Final Appraisal

Of all the critiques of Maud Allan's performances, that of her debut performance in Toronto on October 1916, is of unusual interest. Published in Saturday Night, Canada's oldest weekly magazine, it is very well placed 'historically,' in that it reviews a performance virtually midway in Maud Allan's career. It places her in clear perspective and, although it baldly specifies monotony as the fatal, familiar, flaw of her performance, it nonetheless recognizes that "For her services in lifting dancing to a higher level of artistic interest and refinement Miss Allan deserves very high praise."

Placed in historical context this comment , rather than reading as faint praise, gives this artist, so misunderstood and virtually forgotten, her minimal due. By her example rather than by the niceties of her inimitable art, she indirectly influenced certain trends in modern dance if only by making it - despite her perceived nudity - eminently respectable - and, as an art, respected. Since, as she so proudly insisted, she had no technique, it stands to reason that she exercised no direct influence on the technical evolution of modern dance movement.

The chief merit of this review is that, although he does not mince his words, the writer nevertheless retains a critical balance. Thus, while in his opening sentence he reports that "most" of Maud's audience was disapppointed with the evening, he argues that the fault was not so much the artist's as with the nature of her art. Whereas in 1908 as an interpretive dancer Maud "came

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into prominence just at the inception of the modern revival of interest in dancing," less than a decade later "The truth is that 'interpretive dancing,' so called, has proven so easy an accomplishment that it has become in some degree commonplace." For Maud, to be associated with 'the commonplace,' would be the ultimate and, more to the point, an unacceptable insult. But whatever her reaction might have been, the bitter truth remained that interpretive dancing, because it was so imitable, within less than a decade had evolved from an 'art' to "a feature not merely of many a vaudeville bill, but of amateur drawing room entertainment also."

Unwilling to recognize this evolution, Maud was unable to appreciate the limitations of an 'art' that she believed was hers alone and therefore inimitable. She persisted in her folly but she never became wise. As the Saturday Night reviewer comments, compared with the artistry of trained dancers such as Pavlova and Adelina Genee, who soon overshadowed her efforts, "interpretive dancing by such a pioneer as Maud Allan seems amateurish. . . like the efforts of an ambitious beginner who, having a fine color sense, tries to paint pictures without learning to draw."

To judge by Maud Allan's critical record, this comparison is apt enough - except that, as a "beginner" she was far more than ambitious; even if she did not know - and never tried learning - to "draw," she had a veritable cornucopia of artistic gifts, some highly trained, others intelligently understood, all subject to the force of her powerful imagination. and intellect.

Undoubtedly, prior to her debut performance of the Vision of Salome in mid December 1906, Maud Allan was perceived as simply an original and interesting young artist, performing for a necessarily limited audience - of "artists, writers, and patrons of the fine arts." No doubt she felt totally at ease with this audience, and either heeded any perceived shortcomings or dismissed them as misguided - the complaints of the unitiated or ill informed. The aesthetic, and primarily positive tone of the few extant reviews of these three years, proves the point.

Mutual admiration societies, however, have one serious drawback; they do not answer the practical needs of daily living. Maud's art was so original, so elemental, that there was no means of providing her with any kind of position, no matter how meagerly paid, that might have met her basic needs. Had she been a performing musician, for example, she might well have found some kind of teaching position to help her make ends meet (she had emotionally abandoned the piano, being able only to play for herself;) had she been more accomodating or, to be more charitable, more fortunate, she might have formed - or joined - a troupe of experimental dancers (as she did in 1907, when she toured briefly with Loie Fuller's company.) Practical necessity, therefore, required that she seek out a paying audience, more responsive to the sensational than to "the wonderful art of expressive rhythm." She sought - and quickly enough found - that paying audience by creating the Vision of Salome dance.

Necessarily, the Vision radically altered Maud's stance as an artist. Her performance was without doubt dazzling (akin to a concerto cadenza) designed to be truly sensational - in theme, treatment, suggestiveness and costume (or lack thereof). The sensational is demonstrated, once again, in the diction of the extant reviews of the period prior to her London debut.

While Maud no doubt struggled and, for some time, suceeded to retain her artistic integrity when performing this work, the success of the Vision upstaged her original repertoire of 'dance interpretations" requiring the most intense concentration as a serious, creative artist. Consequently, while to herself and to those 'intellectuals' who appreciated her dance interpretations she remained an artist, to the general public she provided, in every sense, sensational entertainment With the success of The Vision, therefore, the 'public' Maud Allan acquired, much against her will, a dual reputation - that of an artist acclaimed by a few, that of a sensational entertainer celebrated by the many. The latter reputation led to a considerable fortune.

This duality served her well during her eighteen months of triumph in London, where fortuitously it integrated with the ethos of the day. Yet it proved fatal to her subsequent career, for she never rid herself of her reputation as "The Salome Dancer."

On the Continent, the initial success of The Vision was such that Maud at once became known as "The Salome Dancer," proof enough, surely, that her reputation, her future, lay with the sensational rather than with the aesthetic, with entertainment

rather than with dancing - in fact, in a direction very opposite to that which, as a profound musician, a woman of limitless sensibility, Maud aspired to. Artistic as her performance of the Vision may have been, its daring suggestiveness, evident in so many ways yet always controlled (therein lay much of the art) lay at the heart of its success. Ambition, necessity and, indeed, blind confidence that she could control the future course of her career led Maud to promote the sensational Vision. In fact, she had no choice; as the reviewer in the Munchen Neueste Nachrichten of April 25 1907 commented; "in the conventional theatre, amid cardboard scenery, she is ridiculous . . . . Miss Allan's dancing is still restricted to an extraordinarily small circle, and has something rather of the essence of the violin sonata."

Maud's conquest of London may be attributed to a number of fortuitous factors, previously discussed in the Introduction to the record of those heady eighteen months. The most remarkable aspects of her conquest were its duality and its absoluteness as an artist offering her 'interpretive dances' and, in her performance of The Vision, as an entertainer - no matter whether the artistry of her entertainment was appreciated or not. By acclaiming her performance of The Vision as a work of art (rather than as a tour de force) on a par with her 'dance interpretaions' the intellectuals, the aesthetes, the critics of London no doubt entranced by her personal charm, worshipped Maud Allan as if she were an icon. That the underlying concept and premises of The Vision were the antitheses of all that Maud - and, supposedly, "that extraordinarily small circle" of influential admirers - held dear, was conveniently forgotten.

For the public at large - as well as for London society - praise of that kind and from such a circle sufficed to make The Vision a respectable and fashionable sensation. For the general public Maud's "interpretive dances" were little more than magical preludes to the daring eroticism, the mesmerizing intensity of The Vision. For her culturally sophisticated admirers the interpretive dances represented the essence of her greatness as an artist, while The Vision demonstrated her ultimate virtuosity, which the gullible public happily mistook for art.

For as long as that duality and the ethos in which it took place held, Maud's conquest was secure. But because it was fortuitous, as soon as one or more of the various factors in the ethos of the times that together had helped produce the phenomenon weakened, irrevocable decline set in, causing the duality - the illusion - to dissipate. It dissipated because her appeal as an interpretive dancer was limited, and The Vision was finally recognized for what it was - a cheap, artificial, and exploitive vehicle albeit ideally suited (for reasons unkown to the public) to Maud Allan's troubled personality. Maud herself never understood the fortuitous nature of her conquest.

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