

IN PRAISE OF SOMETHING LOVED: THE DANCE OF MAUD ALLAN

by Margo Dunn



As Simone de Beauvoir has remarked, singers and dancers were almost the only women for three centuries to maintain a concrete independence in the midst of society. Maud Allan, born in Toronto in 1883, used her aristocratic origins and undeniable talent to become known as a dancer and choreographer. She was certainly as strong-willed and innovative as her contemporary, Isadora Duncan.

Like Isadora, Maud wrote an autobiography, *My Life and Dancing*, published in London in 1908. It was typically flamboyant of her to publish a life history at the age of twenty-five.³⁵ However, it is fortunate that she did, because, had she waited, she might never have found another opportunity to explain the roots of her revolutionary approach to dance. In 1918, she became involved in a sensational court case, in which she unsuccessfully challenged a printed insinuation that she was a Lesbian.

After that, her career went downhill, despite the fact that the court case in question was more concerned with the work of Oscar Wilde than with the specific libel against her, and that it took place in an atmosphere of national hysteria, as is shown in the following article.

If women are different in their lifestyle or attitudes, if they're talented or strong enough to make their own images of themselves, there are always critics whose idea of an attack is to accuse them of being "frigid", asexual, or lesbian.

It happened to Maud Allan and it still happens today – and to a certain extent, it happens to men who desert the stereotype of masculinity.

The real point is that, despite the inconclusiveness of the court case, Maud Allan's career disintegrated. Despite her cultural and class advantages, and despite her considerable talent and popularity, Maud Allan lapsed into the relative obscurity of teaching until her death in Los Angeles in 1956.

My Life and Dancing brings to life a talented, self-centred woman's search for a mode of expression. Although she trained as a pianist from her earliest years, Maud Allan finally found her best vehicle to be a kind of interpretive dance that derived its inspiration from the Greeks, and derived its form from sculptured poses, Renaissance paintings and early ballet. Although Maud describes herself as a unique phenomenon without influence other than the muses, she follows in a tradition of women choreographers who defied conventions and pomposity in dance.

In the early eighteenth century, the French Marie Sallé derived her mode of dance from the Greeks. She attempted to replace the mannerisms and showiness of the ballet with simple gracefulness. Jean Georges Noverre said "her dance was full of feeling". Henriette Hendel's career in Germany flourished one hundred years before Maud Allan was inspired by the painting of Botticelli. Like Maud Allan, Hendel mimed classical poses and danced barefoot, dressed in the timeless Greek tunic. Despite her efforts to maintain technical control of the stages she danced on (in one role Hendel devised a machine that would illuminate one side of the stage with 80 candles, casting interesting shadows on the other side), male choreographers' stereotype of ethereal femininity won out. Ballet dancers wore point shoes and yards of white tulle. They looked, as Maud remarked, like "inverted teacups".

Maud Allan writes of her childhood in Canada with the same romanticism that characterizes most of her book. She seems to come from a wealthy background; she speaks of a nurse, a governess, a cook. The nature of her father's occupation is never mentioned. She describes many adventures with her "great pal", her mother, but none in which her father plays a part. Canada is remembered as the land of snow, Santa Claus,

Newfoundland dogs and isinglass windows which reflect the flame from the base heater. She remembers an alleged attempt by an Indian woman to kidnap her while her family is *en train* to California.

In all her early memories she seems a beautiful object to herself: diligent at her lessons, her piano, her art and at physical activities unbecoming to a girl. Her models are always women: her mother, the great pianist, Adele aus der Ohe, and Sarah Bernhardt, whom, like every young girl of her day, she wishes to rival. Her idyllic desire to follow her mother's advice, "if you aim high, you'll hit high", receives a rude jolt when a tutor proposes marriage to her at the age of fifteen. She describes her reaction:

I stamped my foot, dropped my books in the dust, and in a rage tore round the house and, jumping over the back fence, rushed to a friend's house, and refused to come back until he had gone.

So much for childish affections and girlish attachments. This last experience knocked all illusion out of my head. I had lost a friend and found a lover, and was not at all pleased with the change.

Soon after, Maud leaves California and her adored mother to study piano at the Royal High School in Berlin. She remains there five years, living what she calls the *vie de Bohème*. During her mother's summer visits, they travel to Italy, and the moment of her most profound inspiration to pursue dance occurs as she sees Botticelli's dancing Graces, and the *Primavera*, the Birth of Venus. Her most secret desire becomes "to try to express in movement the emotions and thoughts stirred by melody, beautiful pictures and sculpture". She is also inspired by the sight of barefooted Italian peasant women carrying water





up from the banks of the Arno, bearing themselves "like goddesses on springing elastic feet". While pursuing her piano studies in Berlin and Weimar, she "crystallizes" her vision, training her body as an instrument with daily exercises after her bath. Her object is to have body and mind *en rapport*.

In 1901, at the age of eighteen, her ambition to dance becomes her most precious secret. Her inspiration from Botticelli remains steadfast, but the dresses of Greek dancing girls suggest "her draperies". She sews her first costume.

The intensity with which Maud describes her secret suggests her vision of the dance arrived as some kind of personal revelation as well as a desire to associate herself with the avant-garde tradition of women choreographers. She speaks of the first time she broaches the subject to her musical guide, Marcel Remy:

I spoke of my ambition... dancing as an art of poetical and musical expression... but please do not think that I was under the impression that I had given birth to a new idea. There is an Attic vase, probably moulded 600 years or more before the Christian era. The ancient Greek writing upon it says that the vase is to be given as a prize to the dancer who expresses joyousness most vividly.

Maud opens her account of her life with a history of the tradition she claims to embody. She derives from the muses, from the hieratic dances of Egypt, and the earliest dances of Greece. She describes women's dances, sacred to Diana, Spartan dances where women performed the same exercises as men, so that they might "equal men in strength, health, virtue and generosity of soul, and that they might learn to despise the opinion of the vulgar". Maud despises the vulgar, like any true

romantic. The Romans were vulgar in their attempt to outlaw the rite of the cultures they pre-empted. The Christians were vulgar in their attempt to eliminate Greek and Hebrew civilization. It is only in the revival of theatrical dancing and its climax in the ballet of seventeenth century France where, in 1681, women were again permitted to appear on stage, that the people were at one again with the muses, that "the nation dances to the tune of its destiny".

In 1903, two years after making her pivotal decision while viewing Botticelli, Maud Allan made her debut in Vienna. She was a great success. She then toured the continent, dancing in Brussels, Budapest, Berlin, Paris. Her only setback was in Munich, where a public performance was cancelled as "destructive to public morals" and a private show was arranged instead.

Critics saw her dance much as she described it. Carl van Vechten said "she floats from one pose to the next, emphasizing the plastic transition with waving arms and raised legs and sundry poses of the head". The Canadian critic Morgan-Powell described her dance to Chopin's *Marche Funèbre*, later a classic item in Isadora's repertoire, "It is as if the very Spirit of Tragedy herself stood before you, silent, immobile, doomed...".

Maud's chapter about the people she met after her 1903 debut is titled "Stepping Stones". Her favourites are the aristocrats, the literati. She rejoices that she has accepted an invitation to dance at a charity matinee sponsored by Yvette Guilbert, the brilliant singer and monologist, immortalized by Toulouse-Lautrec. Guilbert becomes her "stepping stone" to an invitation to dance for King Edward V. She sees agents as a necessary evil of her profession, and successfully sues one who attempts to defraud her.

It is all a great success. In early 1908, seven months before writing her book, she travels to England. The book is directed at the British audience. She drops the names of those who have patronized her and explains her interpretation of *Salomé* for the "groundlings" who might not understand it. It is this dance and its connection with Oscar Wilde which causes her downfall in 1918.

Until October, 1908, when *My Life and Dancing* was published, Maud Allan described her own life. From there on the record is scanty. She danced extensively in London, in Moscow and St. Petersburg (1909), in the United States (1910). She toured the world, performing in South Africa, India, China, Australia, New Zealand and South America. In 1913 she traveled in Egypt, one of the countries of her chief inspiration. At many times, she must have crossed paths with Isadora Duncan although neither mentions the other in her autobiography. However, they were doing the same thing at the same time, and on some occasions appear to have been in the same city at the same time.

On these tours, Maud Allan danced to Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite* through which she portrayed, in Morgan-Powell's words, "beauties you never dreamed of; emotions you never suspected before". She interpreted Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, Rubenstein's *Melody in F* and *Valse Caprice*, works of Bach, Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann. Her early piano masters, Busoni and Marcel Remy, composed songs for her unique choreography. But her most famous and infamous dance was *Salomé*, which is supposed to have inspired Richard Strauss to compose his opera.

It was in England, in 1918, that Maud Allan, like Oscar Wilde, became the victim of a "monstrous martyrdom". She had

the reputation of being a Lesbian, and she was to dance *Salomé* at a private theatre society. Pemberton Billing printed this item in his paper, *The Vigilante*, on February 16, 1918.

The Cult of the Clitoris

To be a member of Maud Allan's private performance in Oscar Wilde's Salomé, one has to apply to a Miss Valetta, of 9, Duke Street, Adelphi, W.C. If Scotland Yard were to seize the list of these members, I have no doubt they would secure the names of several thousand of the first 47,000.

Maud Allan sued Pemberton Billing for libel. She lost.

This eccentric Pemberton Billing used a maniacal hatred of homosexuals to win a seat in Parliament. It was wartime, and he campaigned as an Independent on the platform that British homosexuals and Lesbians would cause Britain to lose the war. The "47,000" were alleged British homosexuals named in an alleged little "Black Book", allegedly held by the Germans. Billing claimed that, through blackmail, homosexuals were divulging British military secrets. He also said wives of prominent men were entangled: "While in Lesbian ecstasy, the most sacred secrets of State are betrayed".

The hysterical mood of wartime prompted many Britons to believe in the existence of the book, which, incidentally, Billing could not produce in court, and in the potential treason of any or all of Britain's homosexuals.

Some remarkable events characterized Maud Allan's case. One witness claimed that the trial judge's own name appeared in the "Black Book"! A witness for Billing's defense was Lord Alfred Douglas who had translated *Salomé* into English from Wilde's schoolboy French, and to whom the play had originally been dedicated. Now Douglas called *Salomé* "an abominable piece of work".



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Sympathetic writers point out that the trial was more concerned with the scandal of the "Black Book" and the demerits of Wilde's work than with the actual libel upon Maud Allan. However, Judge Darling made it clear he disapproved of Maud Allan, her style of dancing, Oscar Wilde, and Maud's opinion that Wilde was a great artist. The jury deliberated less than one hour upon the evidence presented in six days of trial before they acquitted Pemberton Billing, the national hero. The verdict meant that the court deemed what was printed by Billing about Maud Allan was true and it was in the public interest that he should have printed it.

Even ten years earlier, in 1908, Maud spent much time defending her interpretation of *Salomé*. She had been criticized for her use of a stage prop of the head of John the Baptist. Being extremely sensitive to criticism, she sought to clarify her artistic objectives. In *My Life and Dancing*, she reprints a letter from a clergyman who has seen the dance and says,

You seem to interpret it as the triumph of the wildest passion, the intoxication of the power of beauty, revulsion at the crime and fascination for the ghastly evidence of it...

Maud declares that the nexus of her *Salomé* is the love of a daughter for her mother. She demands the head of John the Baptist in order to protect her mother's position in Herod's court. The erotic dance she performs derives from Salomé's Egyptian heritage. The second part, "The Vision of Salomé", where Salomé becomes erotically fascinated with the severed head, depicts her search for truth which will carry her from girlhood to womanhood and allow her to atone for the sin of her mother.

After the trial, Maud Allan's life remains obscure. Dictionaries of the dance graciously omit reference to her scandal and mention only that she spent many years teaching in London, and died in Los Angeles in 1956. She did not marry or have any children. Like so many women who led very public lives, much of the detail of her private life is lost. Maud Allan speaks of no relationships of any emotional intensity, except of that with her mother. The dedication to her book epitomises this intense relationship, shared by many women who broke through the conventions of early twentieth century society. It reads,

Darling Mother,

At the last moment I am told that my book requires a dedication. Of course it does.

This is it.

*Your devoted,
Maud*

Maud Allan, like Isadora Duncan, seems to have succeeded a little in her attempt to overcome the perpetual problem of being regarded as the woman-dancer-object who shed more clothing than was deemed proper rather than as a dynamic choreographer who created a more natural and evocative kind of dance. Perhaps this led her to write *My Life and Dancing*, since the book emphasizes the intellectual and spiritual roots of her art, and avoids any mention of the personal, other than this one poignant paragraph:

I have had many sorrows in my short life, sorrows too great and deep to mention in this little volume, and they, I feel, have been the keynote to stirring my soul from its childish sleep and making my every fibre quiver in the softest wind of sentiment, and my soul and spirit sigh for the truth of existence...