

Maud Allan's 1909 Performances in Russia
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Maud Allan (1873-1956) travelled to Russia in November 1909 to dance in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Although she made only a single appearance in each city, her performances attracted wide attention. Her Russian visit raised the same questions about her originality and repertoire which have yet to be satisfactorily answered. Two of Russia's most significant cultural critics, Valerian Svetlov and Nikolai Evreinov, could not agree on her importance to the dance world. The paper endeavours to examine in detail this brief episode in Maud Allan's performance career. Research is based on primary sources in Moscow's Lenin Library and the theatre library of the USSR National Centre of the International Theatre Institute.

Maud Allan's two-week trip to Russia in 1909 epitomized all the ambiguities and questions which surrounded her throughout her career. This Toronto born dancer, who lived from 1873 to 1956, has always been a conundrum. Both Western and Russian critics said she was a cunning imitator with a limited repertoire. She was constantly compared to Isadora Duncan. And yet, she enjoyed a tremendous popularity with audiences and received as many favourable reviews as derogatory ones. This paper endeavours to examine in detail one episode in her performance career and shed some light on these larger issues. My research is based on primary sources in Moscow's Lenin Library and the theatre library of the U.S.S.R. National Centre of the International Theatre Institute.

It's questionable, even with the new policy of "glasnost" or openness, whether a Maud Allan or an Isadora Duncan would be invited to dance in the Soviet Union today. But for a roughly ten year period before the Great October Revolution of 1917, Russian culture was vibrant, experimental and receptive to new ideas. This openness to innovation is most aptly illustrated by the receptivity of Russia's leading cultural personalities to Isadora Duncan's provocative theories of dance movement. She challenged the artifice of classical ballet in the very country where ballet was most revered.

When Maud Allan arrived in Russia, she was already an established dance personality. She had been a sensation at London's Palace Theatre for nearly two years (1908-1909). Several Russian theatrical journals had printed brief reports on her success in 1907 to 1909. It is possible that Russian critics and artists may have seen her perform in London or earlier in Europe.

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Audiences were drawn by voyeuristic reasons as well as by genuine artistic curiosity. Barefoot dancing was still considered very risqué by Russian society. When Stanislavsky first saw Isadora Duncan dance on January 24, 1905, he had to overcome his initial shock at her "near-nudity" before being able to appreciate her art. When Fokine, inspired by Duncan, mounted his ballet, Eunice, in 1907, the corps de ballets wore tights with the toes painted in. (In this ballet Pavlova as Akte performed a Dance of the Seven Veils). Maud Allan's costume consisted of a simple Greek tunic and bare arms, legs and feet. Her Vision of Salome dance, with its elaborate but revealing halter of pearls and jewels and a dark, but transparent skirt, would have raised a few Russian eyebrows. The critic Valerian Svetlov (pseud. Ivchenko Valerian Iakovlevich 1860-1934), writing in Birzhevie vedomosti (Commercial Monitor) on the day preceding her St. Petersburg performance, discussed Maud Allan's place in the Salome craze which had swept Europe.

The biblical subject matter of her signature dance was enough to create controversy. The preceding year, the Imperial censors had banned a production of Oscar Wilde's Salome with the Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein. (This thwarted production combined the awesome talents of Bakst, Meyerhold and Fokine). However Ida Rubinstein did perform her Dance of the Seven Veils, which Fokine had choreographed, in a single recital in the St. Petersburg Conservatoire in 1908. The furor surrounding Salome would have simply added to the intrigue of Maud Allan's performance.

Russian audiences had sampled modern dance from the West. Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) had already made extended tours of Russia. It is impossible to study Maud Allan's brief and only visit without putting it in the context of Isadora Duncan's impact on the country. Duncan's first appearance in 1904-05 had an immense influence on the work of Russian choreographers. She greatly inspired the Russian dancer and choreographer, Mikhail Fokine. It was on her second tour that she met the influential dramatist and director Constantin Stanislavsky. As a result of their discussions in 1908, Stanislavsky tried to persuade Vladimir Telyakovsky, the director of the Imperial Theatres, to accept Duncan's idea to transfer her school from Germany to Russia. She had to wait until after the Revolution to realize this goal. Details are scant on Duncan's 1909 summer tour. From her brief account in her autobiobiography, My Life (1927) she says she visited Moscow and Kiev. The significant fact is that she preceded Maud Allan to Russia by only a few months.

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Maud Allan made the trip to Russia for only two performances - November 21 (Old Style) in St. Petersburg and November 28 in Moscow. Susanna Massie in her study of the social and cultural life of Imperial Russia explains that fast international trains allowed people to reach St. Petersburg from Berlin in twenty-eight hours. Allan relates that the trip was very arduous and once in Russian territory, the train's shaking was unbearable.

The November 20, 1909 front page of the daily St. Petersburg newspaper Birzhevie vedomosti included a small boxed advertisement announcing a single performance by Miss Maud Allan on November 21 at 9 p.m. at the Grand Hall of the Conservatory. In the same issue, amidst ads for mouth freshener, Singer sewing machines and numerous restaurants such as the Jockey Club on Nevsky prospect, there was a brief bulletin from Tolstoy's wife concerning her husband's poor health.

Several St. Petersburg newspapers reviewed her dancing. The consensus was negative. However she was treated as a serious artist and given a lengthy review by the distinguished critic Valerian Svetlov. It was called "Night Performance by Maud Allan" and ran in the November 23 issue of Birzhevie vedomosti. He structured his article on the pluses and minuses of her performance. On the positive side he found her face expressive, her arm movements indicated some training, and most importantly, she displayed great musicality. He called her a proponent of plastique poses rather than a dancer. "There are a number of plastically trained movements of the arms, which produce a somewhat strange and beautiful effect of a kaleidoscopically changed picture."

However the list of negatives was longer. He described her legs as unattractive and as he stressed, this was a serious problem for a barefoot dancer. He accused Maud Allan of borrowing heavily from Isadora Duncan's repertoire and in particular singled out her Spring Song to Mendelssohn. His most damning words were saved for her signature piece, Vision of Salome. He faulted the dance for its lack of a clear narrative and suggested that several members of the audience had not even realized they had just witnessed her famous dance. Svetlov did not know the name of the composer (Marcel Remy) but he dismissed the music as "no good". He was kinder to her dance to Chopin's Funeral March. "Maud Allan doesn't dance it, but expresses it in plastique poses which are enhanced by co-ordinated mimetic expressions." He said that with the aid of good costuming, she looked like a figure stepping out of a sarcophagus.

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In 1912 Svetlov, in collaboration with Leon Bakst, published simultaneously in Russian and French the book Le Ballet Contemporain. In this lavishly illustrated book, he wrote about current trends in the world of dance. One whole chapter was devoted to Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan was included in his chapter on the Salome craze. In the four-page discussion of Allan, he repeated his observations made during her 1909 trip. In general, he faulted her for her lack of proper dance training which lead to awkward or ugly movements and ill-defined choreography.

Another St. Petersburg newspaper, Rech, carried a short review on November 23, (No. 322, pg. 3) The critic, identified only by initials, using a sarcastic tone, gave a negative review. She was compared with Isadora Duncan and incorrectly described as one of her students. The review stressed the great distance between the two dancers, Duncan was "inspired" while Allan had only a "few techniques. Her dance to Chopin's Funeral March was described as "worse than bad", her Peer Gynt Suite dance was "too theatrical" and Vision of Salome was a mere "belly dance".

In one more review by George Lukomskii in the publication Apollon (1909, N.3 p. 40) the response was generally negative. Again Allan was compared to Duncan who was described as "more intelligent and possessing more culture". He described her dances as repeated scenes or poses from the works of Old Masters. In particular he found Vision of Salome to be vulgar. As with Svetlov, Lukomskii noted that her hands and wrists were the most expressive parts of her body. One intriguing comment dealt with her background curtain. He described it as a "risky combination" with the green of the curtain and the pink of her body.

In her newspaper memoirs published in 1921, Maud Allan raises a tendentious issue about her St. Petersburg visit. She relates that the Czar and his party attended one evening's performance and further requested a private performance at the Winter Palace. So far I have not found any evidence to corroborate Allan's claim. It is also suspect, in light of the fact that Nicholas II and his family lived at Tsarkoe Selo, fifteen miles south of St. Petersburg, instead of at the Winter Palace.

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Maud Allan's Moscow appearance was advertised in Theatre magazine (no. 537) Leafing through the pages of Theatre, which contained programs plus reviews, one gets a glimmer of how life must have been for the privileged in Imperial Russia. Amidst Art Nouveau illustrations, there were theatre announcements and attractive advertisements for a variety of services and restaurants complete with telephone numbers. She was to dance at the prestigious Grand Hall of the Conservatory for a single evening performance on November 28. She was described as "The famous English dancer from the London Palace Theatre having grand success in St. Petersburg". The ad further boasted that she was accompanied by her own decorations, lighting and specially equipped stage. This particular promotional claim backfired as critics found her stage effects disappointing.

The Russians at this time were on the leading edge in their staging techniques. In Stanislavsky's war with conventionality in the theatre, he had opted for authenticity of both costumes and sets. The Moscow Art Theatre had a state-of-the-art revolving stage and an advanced lighting system operated from an electrical keyboard. In dance, artists such as Bakst and Benois were designing innovative sets and costumes for a variety of companies including the Mariinsky Theatre and by 1909 for Diaghilev's newly formed Ballet Russe. According to Susanna Massie, "On stage, there was a synthesis of all the arts - music, dancing, painting. By 1904, Russian set designers were the finest in the world". Only incredible naivete or ignorance would have prompted Maud Allan to boast about her relatively simple stage dressing.

Maud Allan also claims to have brought her own orchestra from England. "I travelled with a very numerous company, as it was decided that we should bring our own orchestra." But the advertisement in the magazine, Theatre, states that the orchestra was being formed by the Moscow Society for Help of Orchestra Musicians. Since she also claimed to have travelled with an orchestra on her Far East trip in 1913-14 and we know she was accompanied by a trio, one can justifiably be sceptical of her claim. One wonders why Maud Allan felt compelled to distort the truth about her musical arrangements. She originally trained as a classical pianist and had been of sufficient talent to become a member of an elite group studying in the master classes of Ferruccio Busoni in 1901. Perhaps she felt her dances which were interpretations of great classical pieces of music deserved a full orchestral accompaniment.

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Her Moscow performance was also reviewed by several newspapers. I will concentrate on the review in the journal Theatre and Art (1909, No. 48) by the dramatist Nikolai Nikolaivich Evreinov (1879-1953). Evreinov, along with his fellow students of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Vakhtangov, rejected their teacher's naturalistic acting method to pursue their own vision of modern theatre. Evreinov was a proponent of symbolism and founded two theatre companies: The Antique Theatre to restore the methods and forms of European middle age drama and also the extremely popular Crooked Mirror Theatre which focussed on social, political and literary satire. Therefore, he was a critic obviously receptive to experimentation in all the traditional art forms.

The title of his review was very suggestive: "The language of the body written in connection with the performance of Miss Maud Allan." It was generally a positive review with some reservations about her technique and the inevitable reference to Isadora Duncan. He said that although the newspapers had criticized her performance, the public should pay no attention. In particular, Evreinov took issue with the newspaper critic who made reference to Allan's veined legs. He said that personally he had not noticed that her legs were not beautiful. He commented, "she is very expressive in her girlish nakedness" and "she may be called beautiful". He reported that the public loved her and demanded encores for several of her numbers. He quoted from her 1908 autobiography, My Life and Dancing, and faulted her for not mentioning her predecessor Isadora Duncan.

A less favourable opinion was published in the November 29/30 issue of Theatre, in an unsigned review from "our correspondent" entitled "The Tour of Maud Allan". The piece began, "Yesterday in the Grand Hall, Maud Allan, a barefoot dancer, showed her art." The reviewer went on to say that the audience was charmed and concurred with Evreinov that the particular favourite was Vision of Salome. The reviewer complimented her dances in waltz and allegro times. However, fault was found with her mimetic ability which was described as "dull and weak." This critic was disappointed with the promised light effects and decorations brought from London. These turned out to be very simple coloured glass lanterns and a used, green curtain.

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After her single performance in Moscow, she appears to have abruptly left for England. She says that she cut short her visit due to "impending troubles" in Russian. While the period 1905 to 1917 was a turbulent time in Russian history, December 1909 was not a time of specific unrest. Surely a more plausible reason for her departure was the fact that she was leaving for North American on January 10, 1910. Considering the length of time required for travelling in those days and the preparations for an extended tour, it would have been reasonable for her to return directly to London.

The Russian visit was only a few days in Maud Allan's lengthy career which spanned three decades. And yet it raised the same questions about her originality and repertoire which have not yet been satisfactorily answered. Two of Russia's most significant cultural critics could not agree on her importance in the dance world. This one episode in her performance career is illustrative of the issue of her validity as a serious dancer--a debate which continues today.

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NOTES

1. Birzhevie vedomosti, November 23, 1909 (N. 11430) pg.6
2. Ibid
3. Suzanne Massie, Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia
(New York; Simon and Schuster, 1980) pg. 428
4. San Francisco Call and Post, December 21, 1921

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