

## Undertow: Isadora's Waves of Movement & Meaning

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### ABSTRACT

In this workshop we will re-discover the wave as the foundational concept of Duncan's technique, choreography and philosophy. The physical manifestation of the wave motion will be experienced through three key movements and their corresponding spatial planes: the walk (horizontal), the waltz (vertical), and torso/armwork (diagonal) to more clearly articulate their intersection into and out from the solar plexus. Then we will investigate more complex combinations which express the wave pattern in Duncan's choreography. Woven throughout will be references to the philosophical underpinning of Duncan's approach to dance and life - the inspiration of the wave as the quintessential example of perpetual renewal and undertow as the necessary pulling back to a larger source for that renewal.

*"The movements should follow the rhythm of the waves: the rhythm that rises, penetrates, holding in itself the impulse and the after-movement; call and response bound endlessly in one cadence."*

- Isadora Duncan, essay: *Depth* from "The Art of the Dance"

I began the workshop in a circle and read this quote to introduce the philosophical underpinnings of Isadora's technique and choreography. I explained we would explore these ideas through analysis of three key wave motions used in Duncan dance technique and the ways in which they combine to create the iconic movement quality of Duncan's choreography. The first would be torso and arm-work which articulates this idea through a diagonal wave motion; then through walking and its horizontal expression of advance and recede or "undertow"; and finally through waltzing which utilizes a vertical undulation. These concepts would then be integrated and kinesthetically experienced through dancing a phrase of Duncan's choreography. I also explained that the basis for these movements to happen naturally requires always having weight on one leg in a "contra posto" position as evidenced in Greek and Renaissance art where the body is always in a state of readiness for the next movement, as opposed to standing with the weight evenly distributed on two feet in a "first position."

Human beings are continually in relationship to gravity. We calibrate this relationship in every moment through our release into or resistance from gravity in every movement we make. This knowledge is the basis for understanding the physics of the wave motion and how it can be embodied through dance in motions that have freedom yet retain clarity and specificity. To illustrate the role that gravity plays as a constant force, and the body's natural relationship to the earth, I asked everyone stand flush against a wall and then relax and let the weight fall forward from the ankles where it would naturally stop in a gently angle to the earth, not perpendicular. From here we lifted one leg at a time with a relaxed foot and experienced how the ball of the foot strikes the earth first. Once the entire foot was on the ground with weight fully committed on a straight leg, a contra posto position naturally results as the back leg slides in with the heel off the floor and the ankle released to settle behind the front leg with very little weight on it. The weight in the body is now slightly forward in the front hip and lifted up through the shoulder which creates a "C" curve on the side that is not bearing weight. I clarified that this would be our foundational position throughout the class and to reinitiate this stance on both sides of the body we would use a stepping sequence, back, side, front as transitional movement so it occurred naturally and was not posed.

I then assembled the class into a circle and explained that there is an internal energetic reserve or "wellspring" which supports gestures that are elongated but never fully extended. At the moment of "cresting" like a wave the

movement then organically returns to this wellspring, the source, facilitating a continuous cycle of motion. We began with a meditative sequence that focused on the idea of movement that always begins with an internal motivation or intention. This intention, e.g. a desire to reach to another person, or to the earth or heavens is then physically expressed through progressive and unfolding of the first wave, a diagonal arc up and out which follows the breath rhythm – inhalation moving the body, the focus, a gesture and then suspension; and then returns with the exhalation which initiates a return of the body, focus and gesture to neutral. Duncan’s gestures which express universal ideas of gathering and offering, as well as phrases representing Tanagra figures, Bachannal and other Duncan dance studies were used.

The class then focused on the second or lateral wave that occurs in the walk when we articulate the continuous transfer of weight moving through the contra posto moment in the transition. I demonstrated how this creates an undertow effect, as opposed to stepping, stopping and then reinitiating our energy to step again. Instead, as we advance on the first step there is a natural and correspondence shifting back (to a lesser degree than the advancing step) that occurs as the back leg passes by the center line of the torso before it become the new step. This undertow is subtle but clear and I had the class practice by walking in a circle. I often took someone’s hand so they could walk in rhythm with me and experience this is as an action that occurs and not as something that one does. As we progressed, torso and arm gestures used in the first part of class were incorporated with the walk to work on building more complex movements from this foundation.

I divided the class into two groups in lines on opposite sides of the studio with each person having a partner across from them. I talked about the third or vertical wave action and Duncan’s approach to waltzing which allows to occur through the particular use of the spring in the ankle without the heel touching the floor. By calibrating the degree to which the ankle and knee bend and through using the same relaxed sliding in action of the back leg used in the walk, an over curve, under curve arc results. With each waltz step, as the back foot slides in a version of the “C” curve also occurs which allows for plasticity and responsiveness in the upper body and arms resulting in the distinctive Duncan line. Dancers learned a waltz study which moved across the floor as they also danced with their partner who advanced towards them. While the focus was on experiencing the vertical wave in the lower body, once again the addition of torso and gestural movement along with a turning version of the waltz step integrated previously learned material.

Once again assembled in a circle, I taught a phrase of Duncan’s choreography to the Grande Valse Brillante, Op.34 #1 by Frederic Chopin which is quintessentially a representation of the wave and undertow concept. As they danced, the class became a macrocosm of the ideas we had been exploring. The diagonal, horizontal and vertical waves intersected seamlessly within each dancer’s body, and in the pattern creating by the class as a whole as they advanced in towards and then receded out from the center of the circle. To complete the arc of the workshop experience, I concluded with a similar meditative sequence used to begin the class so students could re-experience these slower movements with new depth of meaning.

Images: artwork and photo of Janaea Rose Lyn (McAlee): Laura Higgins Palmer © 2015

