

WHY ARE YOU DANCING?

Exploring Intention as a Foundational Concept in Duncan Dance

Janaea Rose Lyn

Abstract: This paper is an overview of a dance-based workshop which focused on the foundational importance of *intention* in the philosophy, technique and choreography of Isadora Duncan. Pianist Chang Shen was an integral part of this class which included an in-depth exploration of performance intentions for Duncan's choreography to Brahms Waltz Op. 39, #15 (*Petals*) to a range of musical interpretations. The workshop culminated with a performance of this piece by Lyn and Shen.

Keywords: Isadora Duncan, Janaea Rose Lyn, Intention, Chang Shen

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Format: Master Class/Workshop

Supplements: Rose petals used in class. Class photos by Yi-Hsin Lin and description of choreography handout, included.



Frontispiece. Janaea Rose Lyn. Photo by Yi-Hsin Lin

Why Are You Dancing?

Class Introduction

“Hello everyone and please welcome our pianist, Chang Shen. Because I often work with musicians and they are such an integral part of Isadora’s work, it is important that we include him in our class as a collaborator, and not as an accompanist.”

“In this workshop we will focus in depth on the foundational, but broad Duncan dance concepts of *intention*, *waves* and, *musicality* so we can understand and express them in a more nuanced way. Then we will use them to explore different performance approaches to a range of musical interpretations of Duncan’s choreography to Brahms Waltz, Op.39, #15. Since we also call it “Petals” I have brought rose petals for everyone to dance with!”

“What makes Duncan’s work contemporary is what also makes it timeless, and I believe this is found in the largest idea of Intention. We can better understand Duncan’s philosophical underpinnings as three distinct but related smaller Intentions which I define as:

Educational Intention (Class technique): To train the body and soul to move in a harmonious and integrated manner...

Creative Intention (Improvisation, choreography, rehearsal): To develop an instrument that transcends technique so the dancer can create and express from their authentic voice...

Artistic Intention (Performance): To perform onstage in a true present and give physical voice to the (preferably live) music.”

“The combined, overarching intention is to produce a harmoniously moving human being with a sensitive, expressive and creative instrument, who is able to respond as a performer to an intuitive moment when onstage.”

“For dance educators of all styles and levels, consider approaching classes, rehearsals and performances with these distinct intentions, and to incorporate Duncan dance techniques. This will enhance the clarity, creativity and presence of your students in the studio and onstage and once they experience this for themselves, the relevance of Isadora Duncan can be more easily articulated to twenty-first century dancers.”

“As practitioners of Duncan technique, before there is a single movement we know that the dancer consciously begins with an internal desire. This is our foundational approach, and one which initiates an organic and kinesthetic progression. As Irma Duncan says, ‘Remember always to start your movements from within. The desire to make a certain gesture must be there first, you must be strongly conscious of the impulse before you start to move, no matter how small or gentle the gesture.’¹

“Physically, this idea translates as: the breath animates and initiates movement, expanding the torso upward and outward. As the torso moves in the direction of the intention, the eyes then focus on a person or place in space and a gesture completes the movement sequence, which lingers in suspension at the top of the inhalation.”

“Specifically, this movement progression in Duncan dance can be stated as: intention (*purpose*) > breath (*inhalation*) > body (*rises*) > focus (*established*) > gesture (*unfolds*) > resolution (*pause*). Then the same progression takes places in reverse, as the exhalation releases from the pause between breaths, returning back into the body, and then pausing once again to clarify and re-initiate with a new intention.”

¹ Duncan, Irma. *The Technique of Isadora Duncan*, pg 12.

In one of her essays, Isadora describes this as ‘The movement 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.’²

“As we move through this class we will experience this wave concept through different movement sequences, and in three distinct spatial directions: diagonally in place; horizontally while walking and vertically while waltzing. When we understand how to use them individually, these waves can intersect with clarity and with different dynamic qualities. Our dancing energy takes on a power that can radiate fully in all directions.”

Class Technique- Educational Intention

Opening Sequence: Wave 1 - The Breath Rhythm, Diagonal from Solar Plexus

“Let’s make a circle. In this first opening sequence we will move through a series of movements from the Duncan vocabulary, practicing the intention/ breath/gesture progression. We will approach this as a meditative and physical warm up to connect with our breath, our diagonal wave motion, and to each other.”

“Before we begin, a few other foundational concepts that are an important part of the Educational Intention. Please stand with your heels together and feet pointing diagonally outward in a natural First, or “V” position. This is a good stance for finding and working with your natural turn out, and for understanding that naturally the body is designed to work three dimensionally, at roughly forty-five degree angles. The torso in relationship to the earth is naturally inclined forward and not vertical. The limbs are also inclined in front of the torso, as

² Duncan, Isadora. “Depth.”

we lift them we create sculptural lines. There are no straight lines in nature so while we can choose to create linear shapes in other dance forms, or work in parallel or using full turn, for the Duncan work we want to build from the curves and spirals of form and energy that exist organically.”

“For these reasons, I feel strongly that it is essential to stand at all times when engaged in Duncan work with the weight on one leg, known as our *contrapposto* stance (see Figure 1). This frees the mobility in the torso and allows you to find the range of motion necessary for the “C” and “S” curves that are intrinsic to the classic lines found in the Duncan work (see Figure 6). It also allows for an immediate shift of weight as you are already placed firmly on one leg.”

“Lift your right leg and let your foot land on the floor front of you in a relaxed toe, ball, heel progression. As the heel strikes and you shift forward, commit your weight immediately onto a straight leg, never staying on two legs. Now find the slight forward diagonal in the hip of your right standing leg as you keep your shoulders over your hips. Feel how this action releases the back ankle and it slides in from behind to meet the ankle in the front. Notice you can remain in this position without any weight on the left leg, and your torso and legs can respond fully.”

“We will stay on the right side for a while as we move through our warm up. To transition our weight to the other side we will take three steps: Back on the Left, Side on the Right, and Front onto the Left leg. We will alternate sides using this three step pattern so we are always moving sculpturally and three dimensionally into a *contrapposto* stance.”

“Now, as you are gesturing, whether to the heavens, in a direction, or to a person, establish your focus clearly and really *see* something. As you move through the intention-breath-body-focus-gesture-resolution sequence, clearly articulate your arm work as well.”



Figure 1. Janaea Rose Lyn and class. Photo by Yi-Hsin Lin

“If you keep more energy in reserve than you use, your movements will have more power because you have not expended it fully in the torso, or through your limbs. Aesthetically, Duncan arm work and leg work is rarely fully extended. We call it a “give” in the joint, not bent weakly or overly straightened. This way of moving indicates there is somewhere further the body can go, a continuing state of becoming (see Frontispiece).”

“Finally, listen closely to Chang’s playing of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata as you follow me, as I did not set this sequence, but will evolve it in response to his playing.”

Activity: Opening sequence in a circle as group follows.

The Walk: Wave 2 - Horizontal with Undertow

“The walk builds from the *contrapposto* stance as we now move continually through space a horizontal plane. The key to this particular wave motion is understanding the undertow that counter balances the forward motion as each weight change happens. A continual progression of advance to recede to advance, a more forward action than back, but never a complete stop.”

“As you take a step forward from your *contrapposto* stance, focus initially on the rhythm of the forward surge as your weight transfers through the foot to the heel onto a straight leg as you commit. Notice how your weight recedes back in an undertow motion as the back leg immediately begins moving forward. The back foot stays connected to the floor as it passes by the other ankle through the center line, at which moment the torso is vertical. The back leg continues forward and lifts slightly off the floor for the next step, foot relaxed and not pointed. Once again the wave energy surges forward as the ball of the foot strikes the floor first and the weight shift completes as the heel lands in time with the downbeat of the music.”

“This rhythmic stepping on the downbeat is essential for developing musicality, both individually and collectively so listen for it in the music when Chang is playing. After we are walking together well, I will some add arm work as a melody line to counterpoint the rhythm of the walk. Feel free not to add the arm work and just focus the horizontal wave motion of the walk as that is more important.”

Activity: Walking in a circle as a group with arm work.

The Waltz: Wave 3 - Vertical with Over and Undercurves

“The waltz step will build on the same type of weight shift and sliding action of the back leg as we did in the walk, but in three-quarter time and using another wave motion. This one is vertical with over and under curves.”

“Rise to the ball of the feet with arms to the side, slightly in front of you. The heels never touch the floor; it is the spring and use of a rebound in the ankle which produces the lightness and liling quality. To begin: *Step* Forward on Right leg on count 1. *Slide* Left leg back behind it and shift weight onto it on count 2. *Shift* back to the Right leg (front) partially releasing the ankle

on count 3. Then rebound back up on that same leg on the eighth note (“and” count) to begin the sequence starting in the other side, the Left. Feel the waves from under and over the ground as we waltz in continual rhythm, moving *down, up, down up*, and then beginning on the other side.”

“Once you have that, on count 2 as you slide the back ankle in let both knees have some “give” so you can lean your body towards your back leg in a “C” curve as you look over that shoulder. Think of someone holding your wrists in place so the action releases the shoulder socket down and back in body, but the arms stay level (see Figure 2).”



Figure 2. Janaea Rose Lyn teaching at Xavier Colleg Prep. From the Collection of Janaea Rose Lyn.

Activity: Waltzing across the floor with simple arm work.

Process - Creative Intention

“Now we have a deeper understanding of, and access to, these three distinct diagonal, horizontal and vertical wave motions. We can use them individually with different dynamics to have more nuanced expressiveness in our dancing; and we can also intersect them to *radiate* fully in all directions, whether standing still or moving through space.”

“Isadora was interested in ‘...the truly creative dancer, natural but not imitative, speaking in movement out of himself and out of something greater than all selves.’³ So to cultivate this ability as we move into Creative Intention, we will improvise to Brahms Waltz Op.39 #15. Regardless of if you know a version of choreography to “Petals” or not, forget it and really listen to Chang’s playing and respond freely to the music as if you never heard it before.”

Activity: Group improvisation to Brahms Waltz Op. 39 #15.

“Now everyone who knows a version of Duncan’s choreography will dance it at the same time. Dance it your way while being aware of, and responding to what is going on around you artistically, spatially and musically as Chang plays another interpretation of the piece. The other dancers who don’t know it will observe and then give feedback.”

Activity: Different versions danced at same time and then feedback given from observers.

“All of the comments from the observers spoke to seeing strong focus in each dancer combined with a heightened sensitivity to both the other dancers onstage and the music, which is exactly the direction we are going!”

“So that we have a shared structure to work with, first I will teach everyone the version I dance (see Figure 3). Then we will spend time experimenting with several different intentions and musical interpretation. After that we will learn how to use and integrate the rose petals to enhance the performance of the piece as we move to our Artistic Intention.”

³ Duncan, Isadora. “Philosopher’s Stone of Dancing.”



Figure 3. Janaea Rose Lyn and class. Photo by Yi-Hsin Lin

Activity: Taught choreography outlined in handout.

“Now that the form and movements have been learned, you will make dynamic and phrasing choices to interpret specific intentions which I will give you. Chang will interpret them musically and we did not pre-arrange tempi or phrasing so this would be a fresh experience for everyone. Listen closely and respond to his interpretations as well as expressing your own.”

“I chose this dance specifically because it builds from foundational Duncan Dance language: standing, walking and waltzing and the wave motions which accompany them; and because within its seeming simplicity can be found a range of valid performance interpretations.”

“Our first approach will be Celebratory so explore the playful exuberance and lightness in the dance (see Figure 4). Our next intention will be Prayerful, taking a more solemn, profound and heavy approach. Thirdly, in different sections of the music, Chang will play a combination of these two ideas.”



Figure 4. Janaea Rose Lyn and class. Photo by Yi-Hsin Lin

Activity: Several interpretations were danced by the group.

“Now we will learn techniques for using rose petals and integrating them with the choreography for enhanced effect. I will show you when and how to use them, but the most important thing is to keep some in both hands for the final release at the end of the dance.”

Activity: Technique for using rose petals in the dance.

Performance - Artistic Intention

“Now we have completed our creative process and are ready for our Artistic Intention, to approach the piece as performers. This is the moment to integrate all the work we have done today as a receptive and expressive artist, interpreting a clear concept in relationship with your craft, your musician and your audience. You will dance in two groups so you can experience being onstage, and as audience members. ”

“So, the final intention for all of you is to interpret this music and the dance as a metaphor for human existence and mortality: the days of your life, scattered like so many petals and which fully release in the final moment of death.”

Activity: Two groups- each perform with rose petals and observe.

“You were all so moving and did a beautiful job. To end class, Chang and I will perform this piece for you (see Figure 5).”



Figure 5. Janaea Rose Lyn performing Petals. Photo by Yi-Hsin Lin

Activity: Janaea and Chang performed “Petals” for the class, followed by a brief discussion.

Brahms Waltz Op. 39 # 15 (Petals) by Isadora Duncan as taught by Janaea Rose Lyn

This dance can be performed as a solo or with any equal number of dancers entering from both sides of the stage, each side beginning on the DS leg. Reverse all directions for Left Side. If a large group is performing, adjust the spacing as they enter to make a phalanx (reverse V formation). Connect the focus when gesturing to each other.

Music bars are in three quarter time.

Right Side: Begin Up Stage Right (USR) facing Profile to audience.

First Eight bars: Gather Rose Petals with cupped hands, and rise on balls of feet on last two bars

Next Eight bars: Waltz onto stage along back curtain with focus on hands, RLR, LRL, RLR, LRL, then turn and continue waltzing RLR, LRL, Down Stage (DS), towards audience, looking out and reaching hands forward then walk R, L, R, as you open arms to the sides and pause on the last bar.

Next Six bars: Waltz LRL as you reach right hand to left, RLR as you open and scatter petals, repeat reach LRL, open scatter RLR, step L one bar and bend down and rise back up on the last bar with a gathering gesture (you can also pick up petals) ending with arms out stretched to the sides.

Next Eight bars: Waltzes, forward RLR, with focus L, and back LRL with focus Center, forward RLR, with focus R, and back LRL with focus Center, forward RLR, with focus L and back LRL with focus Center, then walk forward R, L, R, as you gesture with each step -Heart, Lips, Eyes and pause on the last bar as you reach and focus up.

Next Six bars: Waltz LRL as you reach right hand to left, RLR as you open and scatter petals, repeat reach LRL, open scatter RLR, step L one bar and bend down and rise back up on the last bar with a gathering gesture (you can also pick up petals) ending with arms out stretched to the sides.

Last Eight bars: Waltz turns US -Accent Jump/land on R, quick turn LRL, Accent Jump/land on R, quick turn LRL accent up Jump/land on R, quick turn L only, Balance hold on R, arm up, [Note: Can also be done a simple walk US – step R, cross L 4x] Spiral DS onto L leg with curved “basket” shape in L arm and throw imaginary petals to left with R arm, step R and throw R,

Final three steps L,R,L as you gesture with each step –Eyes, Lips, Heart, arms melt down to sides with body in S curve on last bar and release final petals you have saved on the last note...

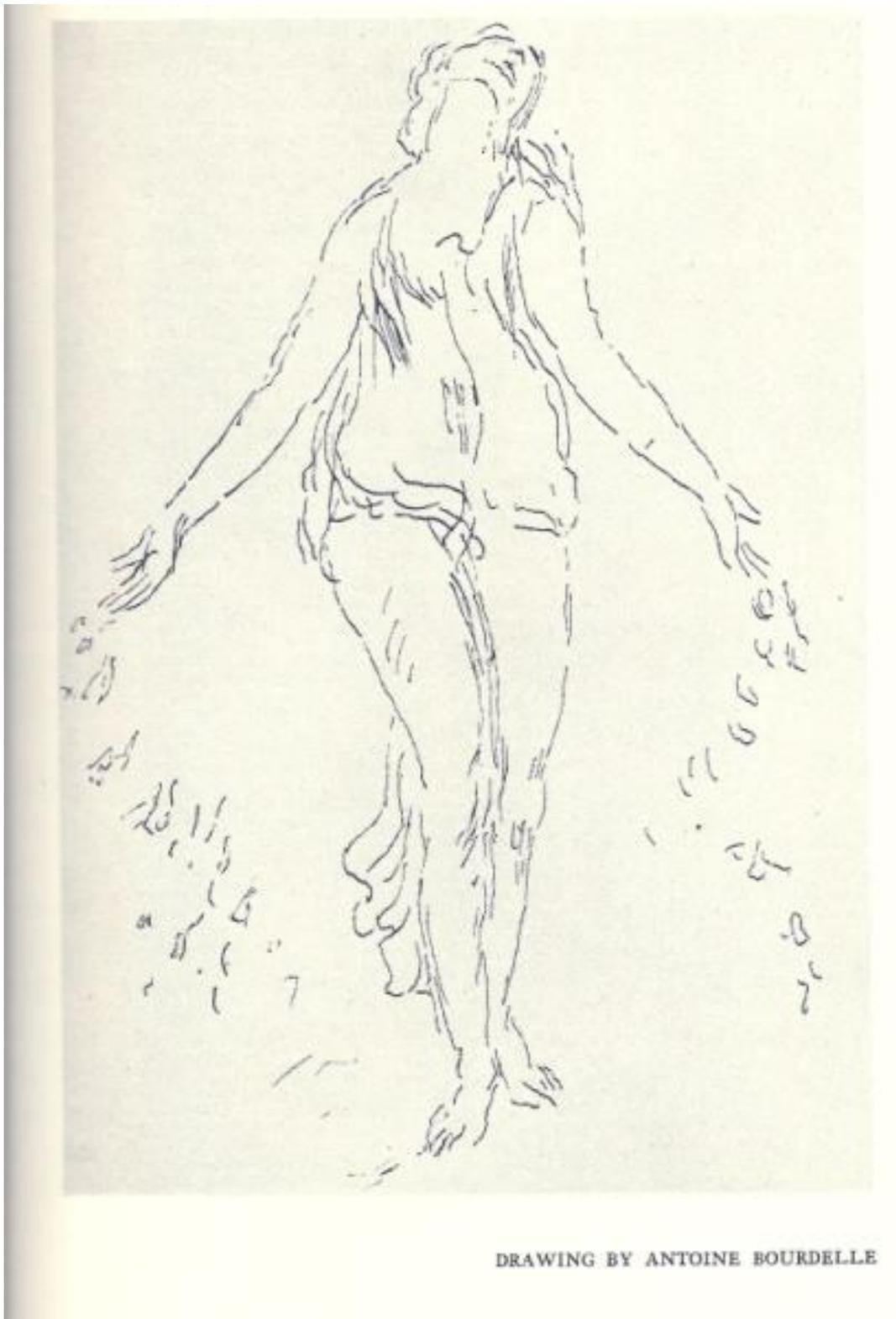


Figure 6. Isadora Duncan performing "Petals" by Antoine Bourdelle. From the collection of Janaea Rose Lyn.