

To dance is to live

BY CAROL PRAYL

"The turning point in my life was in the early 1920s, the day the great American dancer Isadora Duncan had me — the little girl in the red dress — lifted onstage from the audience in Carnegie Hall to help illustrate the fund-raising speech for her Russian school," remembers Sima Borisovna Leake, 83, who recently returned to Moscow, her birthplace, to locate the cultural threads of her past. Isadora Duncan, the early modern dance innovator, who founded a school in the Soviet capital in 1921, was on a promotional tour of the States with her Russian poet husband, Sergei Esenin, and wanted to whisk Leake away to Russia with her, Leake explained. Her parents, who had emigrated to Canada ten years prior as pacifist followers of Leo Tolstoy, were far from willing to send their child to a country in the midst of famine and revolution. So, Isadora went back with only what became a legendary red dress and Sima left for Germany instead on a scholarship Isadora arranged for her to study dance at her sister Elizabeth's school.

"If you said you were studying dance back then," Leake says with a twinkle in her eye, elegantly reclining on a divan in a Moscow apartment, with the unchanging glamour of a silent movie star, "it was tap-dancing or ballet. Nobody was doing 'barefoot' dancing. Nobody even knew what it was!" But Leake, who until her fateful encounter with Duncan had been primarily studying ballet with renowned choreographers Mikhail Fokine and Ivan Tarassov, decided to devote her life to the new budding art of modern movement.

"Our lives were out of a fairy tale at the school, which was located at the

palace in Potsdam," muses Leake, smiling. "In fact, they gave me the nickname of Alice (in Wonderland) because of my wide-eyed American naivete. We recited Greek tragedies while doing gymnastics outdoors, danced on marble floors in the presence of European aristocracy, and heard the world's best musicians, but when it came to practical things like plumbing, well, you just had to discreetly go behind a tree in the garden!"

At eighteen, at the end of her studies, she accepted a job teaching Duncan dance in a girl's school in Santa Barbara and started mingling with Hollywood's jazz age celebrities until 1930, when she was urgently called to New York to join Irma Duncan's dance company (Irma being Isadora's protégée who used "Duncan" as her stage name and who accompanied Isadora to establish the Russian school.) Irma had come to the USA in 1929 with the Moscow Duncan Dancers and when the Soviet government demanded their immediate return in the middle of a highly successful tour, she had to re-form a troupe overnight to fulfill the contract with impresario Sol Hurok. So Leake and three other American girls with sufficient training were put in red tunics and taught Russian revolutionary songs and dances. The show went on, and an extensive on-the-road performing career began which continued from coast-to-coast throughout the thirties. For the next forty years, Leake continued performing, teaching, spending time with the great creators of the time - Dali, Cocteau, dancer Ruth St. Denis, Billy Holiday - and sowing seeds of Duncan dance wherever she lived: India, China and France where she currently resides.



Sima Leake in the late 1920s on the boat back to America from Germany

Invited to Moscow now by the recently established International School of Music and Movement, set up in Russia to revive and promote the Duncan dance tradition which had been banned throughout most of the Soviet years, the former little girl in the red dress has come to teach and help revive a nearly lost tradition. And she's had the lucky chance to meet one of those dancers, Elena Terentieva, whose red tunic she unknowingly filled in the 1930s. "The heritage is one. We're all of the same artistic family, basically," affirms Sima, happy that such a reunion could take place.

"I've come here with a certain goal, to help the school, to share some of the pleasures I had as a child, and to give these Russian children what I know and remember," Leake emphasizes, with a youthful glow. "Dance makes you feel so alive," she adds, reaching her arms out as if to embrace life itself, confirming Isadora's maxim that "to dance is to live."