



# Rite of spring

Asked who taught her to dance, Isadora Duncan replied, "Terpsichore." The goddess had been tutored by a muse. Born into the last quarter of the 19th century, Isadora led the charge into the 20th barefoot, bare-legged, the contours of her body draped and thinly veiled — Athena incarnate, dancing. "This nudity is ancient," one critic wrote, "and, as such, natural." Her temple was the stage, the province at the time of dainty fairies and lovestruck swans. She claimed it for her own, arms gesturing skyward, palms up, head tilted back in rapture, thighs churning, swept along by a gust of melody. Across the bridge she built from high Romanticism came the early Modernists, close behind. Her performances, a kind of Dionysian paroxysm, introduced audiences to the more cerebral pleasures of abstraction. "In her opinion, the only thing that matters is beauty," the Russian artist Alexandre Benois recorded, "the pursuit of beauty in order to make all life beautiful." She was not beautiful herself. While other deities captivate by means of their appearance, Isadora's authority emanated from the depth of her convictions about art and the force of her emotions. Her letters teem with passionate longing, joy, jealousy, obsession and dejection. Lovers lived off her money, leaving her poor. She was, it seems, 100 percent human. An advocate of free love and an avid opponent of marriage, an intelligent and inquisitive artist who charted her own course, Isadora arrogated to herself many of the rights that other women would spend the better part of the new century fighting for. The tragedies that befell her were on a mythic scale. Two children, drowned. A husband, insane and institutionalized. And finally, death at the age of 50, strangled by her own scarf caught in the spokes of a convertible's rear wheel — a gruesome and suitably extravagant apotheosis. Though the record has been revised by subsequent evidence, her purported last words before getting into the car have gone down in legend: "*Adieu, mes amis. Je vais à la gloire.*" Her glory has not dimmed, and the flame of her inspiration burns eternal. — *Holly Brubach*