

'Isadora Duncan':

Exciting, thought-provoking theatre that entertains, stimulates

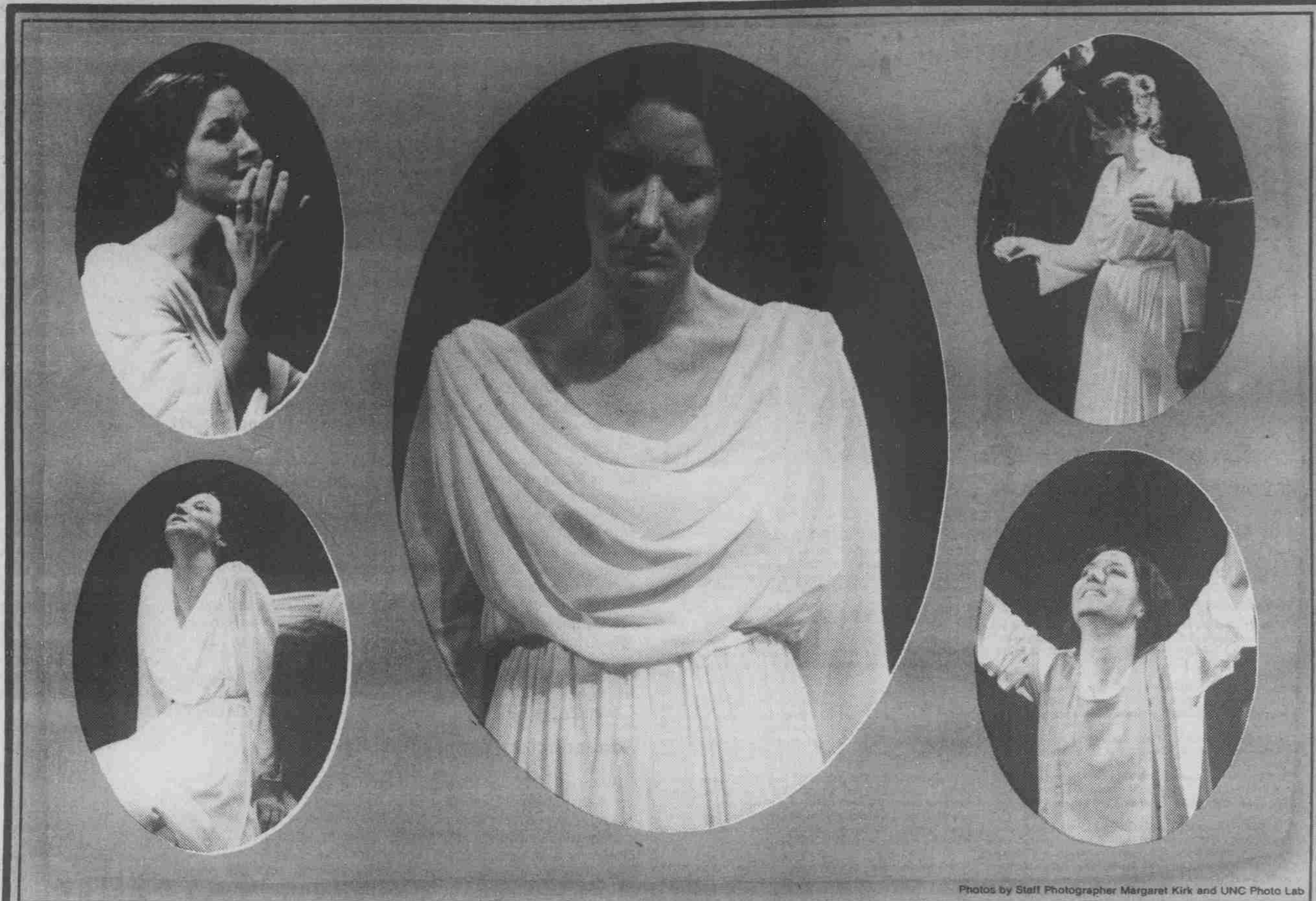
by Rick Sebak
DTH critic

Perhaps the most obvious thing wrong with Jeff Wanshel's new play is its catchpermy title: *Isadora Duncan Sleeps With The Russian Navy*. I realize that there has been a lot of media attention paid to the woman in the past decade, but all the possible reasonable titles have hardly been exhausted, and this long one is unnecessarily pretentious and wittily affected. Besides, his play, currently being presented by the Playmakers Repertory Company as part of the "Second Step" program of the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, distinguishes itself as a viable and exciting theatrical piece which (unlike some of the previous long-titled originals imported from Connecticut by the Department of Dramatic Art) needs no foolishly flashy title to attract attention and respect.

The play presents an attempt by a screenwriter (Hal Scott) to quickly rewrite for an unseen movie mogul the life of Isadora Duncan, famous dancer and American expatriate who startled the artistic world of the dance around the turn of the century with her free-form movements and barefoot interpretations of music. This screenwriter is on stage constantly during both acts, and one sees his conceptualization and visualization of the script as performed by a small troupe of the actors of his mind.

Isadora Duncan's life would probably not be believed as fiction, but accepted as fact, it provides an astounding base for experimentation and theatrical extravagance. I think the play would be an interesting introduction to the story of her life if one had never encountered it before, but I wonder if the world really needed another rehash of the details so soon after Ken Russell's TV biography, the movie with Vanessa Redgrave and the reprinting of Isadora's autobiography. Is there really no one else in the history of American art who deserves attention?

The script, as directed here by Tom



Photos by Staff Photographer Margaret Kirk and UNC Photo Lab

Donna Davis plays the lead in the Playmakers Repertory Company production of Jeff Wanshel's *'Isadora Duncan Sleeps with the Russian Navy,'* which continues Nov. 13-16 and 20-23 at the Graham Memorial

Lounge Theatre. Tickets are available at 102 Graham Memorial or at Ledbetter-Pickard downtown.

meant to turn the script around and attack its creator?

The chorus members seemed to be laughing at themselves as they split up a wide variety of minor character roles which made up an ensemble backdrop of performances for Isadora to play against. The engaging actors and actresses making up this versatile set of players include Richard Ussery, Maggie Tucker, Mark Phialas, Dallas Greer, Deborah Dunthorn, Randy Ball and Henry Arnold.

(Judging from the enthusiastic response and apparently uncontrollable laughter of a small group of drama students and their professor in the sparse audience Sunday night, one can assume that Randy Ball is the new "darling" of the department. For some unknown reason, his every action, costume change and line of dialogue sent this little congregation of Playmakers into hysterics.)

Bobbi Owen and Rick Pike are credited with the design of the show, and, as usual, their work is appropriately clever and decidedly first-rate. The various nationalities which make up Isadora's audiences are imaginatively stereotyped with props and costumes, and the subtle transformation of the Lounge Theatre into a seemingly limitless playing area in the round is quite successful. I only questioned the Author's costume which seemed unusually chic and too casually bourgeois for me to believe him as a struggling and starving artist.

Lighting was handled by Devon Query, and the off-stage musical direction of Carol Strickland was a definite asset of the production. The mystical and mysterious off-stage voice of Melanie Myers beautifully accompanied several of Isadora's dances.

This is the first production of the Playmakers Repertory Company which I've seen since their premier production of *The Peer Gynt Show* last spring, and I can't say they've disappointed me even though I don't find this show to be as strong as that first display of their collected talents. Tom Haas is obviously a master of this modern ensemble-style acting.

The consummate theatricality of the script, the direction, the performances and the design make *Isadora Duncan Sleeps With the Russian Navy* worth everyone's attention even if certain attitudes within are somewhat baffling, and even if its title is too long. At last, the Department of Dramatic Art is producing exciting thought-provoking theatre which manages simultaneously to entertain and stimulate. It deserves your enthusiastic support.

Haas, zips through her life with an amazing speed, admirable energy and a generous amount of comic characterization. The theatrics, smoothly and ingeniously incorporated into the show, include a wide variety of conventions culled from various world

theatre styles: from a chorus of dancing commentators to Kibuki-style representations and symbolisms to overhead electronic voices. The hodgepodge of styles coalesce into a definite unity which attempts to make a double point about artistic integrity and the mundane forces which a true artist must fight. Both the screenwriter and Isadora battle producers and promoters in their quests for self-expression.

What bothered me most about the production was the confusing lack of sincerity. I couldn't figure out who was

sincere.

The only cast member who appeared resolved in her attitude toward her character was Donna Davis, who played Isadora with the conviction, integrity and intelligence which always make her performances outstanding in Playmaker productions. Costumed in a simple white robe, she effectively became Isadora for me, and I believed her even when she spouted what-now-seem platitudes about communism and free love and her vision of a free school. She alone seemed to be able to operate totally free of sarcasm and self-

mockery.

It's hard to pinpoint an origin of the insincerity which plagued the rest of the cast. I'm not convinced that any definite decisions were made about the author's intentions which were somewhat confusing. Did Wanshel mean to be sincere when he gave the Author lines like "I'm falling in love with my own character," or did he intend for the role to be enacted with the kind of self-consciousness and self-mockery which pervaded Hal Scott's performance? And if the Author was really in love with this strong-willed and daring woman, would he envision her bared breast as a popsicle-like prop gag? Was Wanshel trying to ridicule or rationalize his own efforts to write this play, or has Haas

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