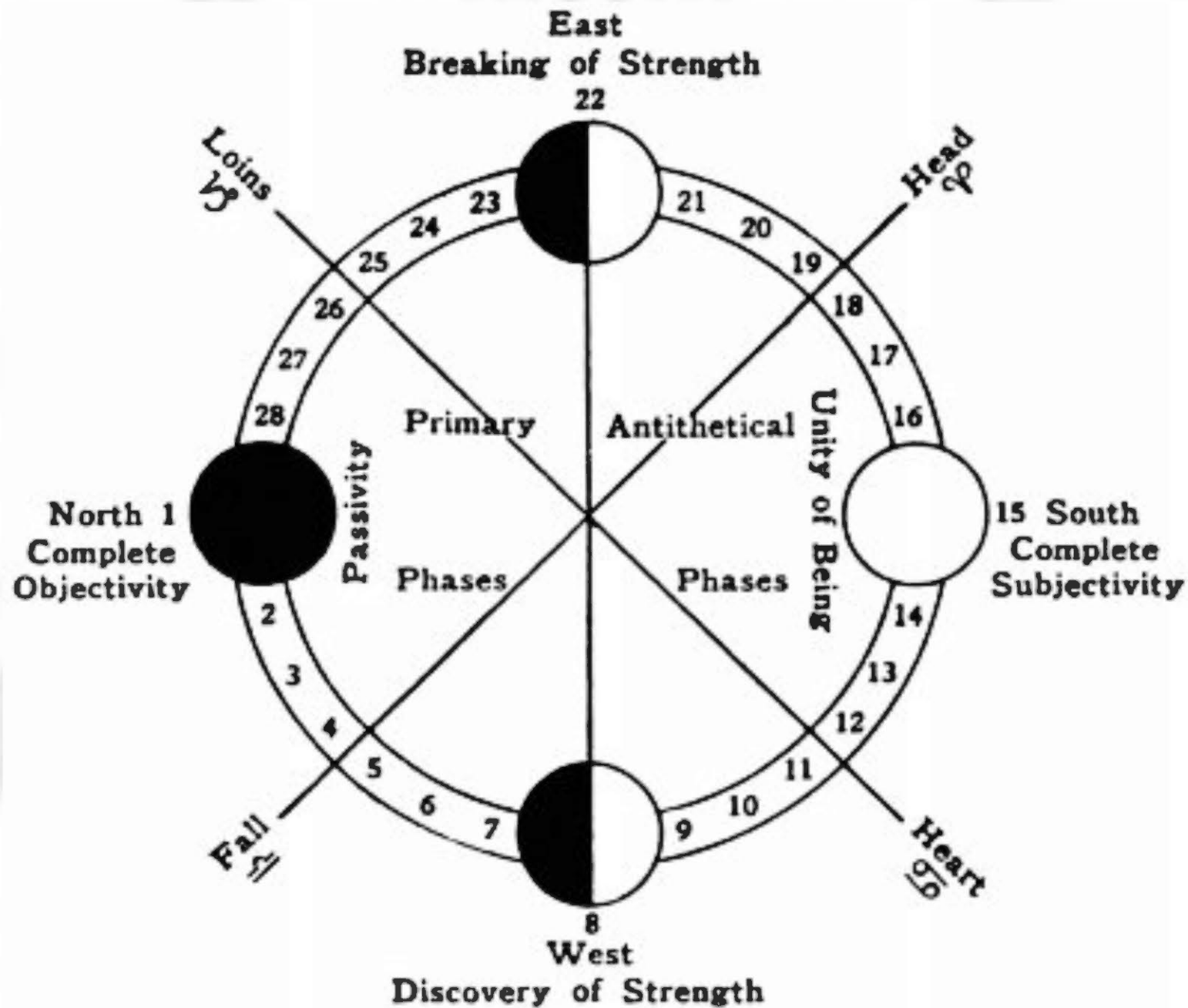


Four Plays for Dancers – Frontispiece of the 1921 edition



II

On the grey rock of Cashel I suddenly
saw
A Sphinx with woman breast and lion paw,
A Buddha, hand at rest,
Hand lifted up that blest;
And right between these two a girl at
play
That, it may be, had danced her life away,
For now being dead it seemed
That she of dancing dreamed.
Although I saw it all in the mind's eye
There can be nothing solidier till I die;
I saw by the moon's light
Now at its fifteenth night.
One lashed her tail; her eyes lit by the
moon
Gazed upon all things known, all things
unknown,
In triumph of intellect
With motionless head erect.
That other's moonlit eyeballs never moved,
Being fixed on all things loved, all things
unloved,

Yet little peace he had,
For those that love are sad.
O little did they care who danced
between,
And little she by whom her dance was
seen
So she had outdanced thought.
Body perfection brought,
For what but eye and ear silence the mind
With the minute particulars of mankind?
Mind moved yet seemed to stop
As 'twere a spinning-top.
In contemplation had those three so
wrought
Upon a moment, and so stretched it out
That they, time overthrown,
Were dead yet flesh and bone.

(W.B. Yeats, "The Double Vision of Michael
Robartes", *The Wild Swans at Coole*, 1919.)

[from W.B. Yeats, *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921) – Preface, 1920]

Two of these plays must be opened by the unfolding and folding of the cloth, a substitute for the rising of the curtain, and all must be closed by it. The others, *The Dreaming of the Bones* and *Calvary* should have the same opening, unless played after plays of the same kind, when it may seem a needless repetition. All must be played to the accompaniment of drum and zither and flute, but on no account must the words be spoken 'through music' in the fashionable way; and the players must move a little stiffly and gravely like marionettes and, I think, to the accompaniment of drum taps. I felt, however, during the performance of *The Hawk's Well*, the only one played up to this, that there was much to discover. Should I make a serious attempt, which I may not, being rather tired of the theatre, to arrange and supervise performances, the dancing will give me most trouble, for I know but vaguely what I want. I do not want any existing form of stage dancing, but something with a smaller gamut of expression, something more reserved, more self-controlled, as befits performers within arm's reach of their audience. The designs by Mr. Dulac represent the masks and costumes used in the first performance of *The Hawk's Well*.

The beautiful mask of Cuchulain may, I think, serve for Dervorgilla, and if I write plays and organize performances on any scale and with any system, I shall hope for a small number of typical masks, each capable of use in several plays. The face of the speaker should be as much a work of art as the lines that he speaks or the costume that he wears, that all may be as artificial as possible. Perhaps in the end one would write plays for certain masks. If some fine sculptor should create for my *Calvary*, for instance, the masks of Judas, of Lazarus, and of Christ, would not this suggest other plays now, or many generations from now, and possess one cannot tell what philosophical virility? The mask, apart from its beauty, may suggest new situations at a moment when the old ones seem exhausted; *The Only Jealousy of Emer* was written to find what dramatic effect one could get out of a mask, changed while the player remains upon the stage to suggest a change of personality. At the end of this book there is some music by Mr. Rummell, which my friends tell me is both difficult and beautiful for *The Dreaming of the Bones*. It will require, I am told, either a number of flutes of which the flute-player will pick now one, now another, or an elaborate modern flute which would not look in keeping. I prefer the first suggestion. I notice that Mr. Rummell has written no music for the dance, and I have some vague memory that when we talked it over in Paris he felt that he could not without the dancer's help. There is also music for *The Hawk's Well* by Mr. Dulac, which is itself an exposition of method, for it was written after a number of rehearsals and for instruments that have great pictorial effect. [...]

At the Hawk's Well (1916)

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

THREE MUSICIANS (*their faces made up to resemble masks*).

THE GUARDIAN OF THE WELL (*with face made up to resemble a mask*).

AN OLD MAN (*wearing a mask*).

A YOUNG MAN (*wearing a mask*).

The Time --- the Irish Heroic Age.

The stage is any bare space before a wall against which stands a patterned screen. A drum and a gong and a zither have been laid close to the screen before the play begins. If necessary, they can be carried in, after the audience is seated, by the First Musician, who also can attend to the lights if there is any special lighting. We had two lanterns upon posts designed by Mr. Dulac at the outer corners of the stage, but they did not give enough light, and we found it better to play by the light of a large chandelier. Indeed I think, so far as my present experience goes, that the most effective lighting is the lighting we are most accustomed to in our rooms. These masked players seem stranger when there is no mechanical means of separating them from us. The First Musician carries with him a folded black cloth and goes to the centre of the stage towards the front and stands motionless, the folded cloth hanging from between his hands. The two musicians enter and, after standing a moment at either side of the stage, go towards him and slowly unfold the cloth, singing as they do so: [...]

As they unfold the cloth, they go backward a little so that the stretched cloth and the wall make a triangle with the First



Design for Black Cloth used in "At the Hawk's Well."

Musician at the apex supporting the centre of the cloth. On the black cloth is a gold pattern suggesting a hawk. The

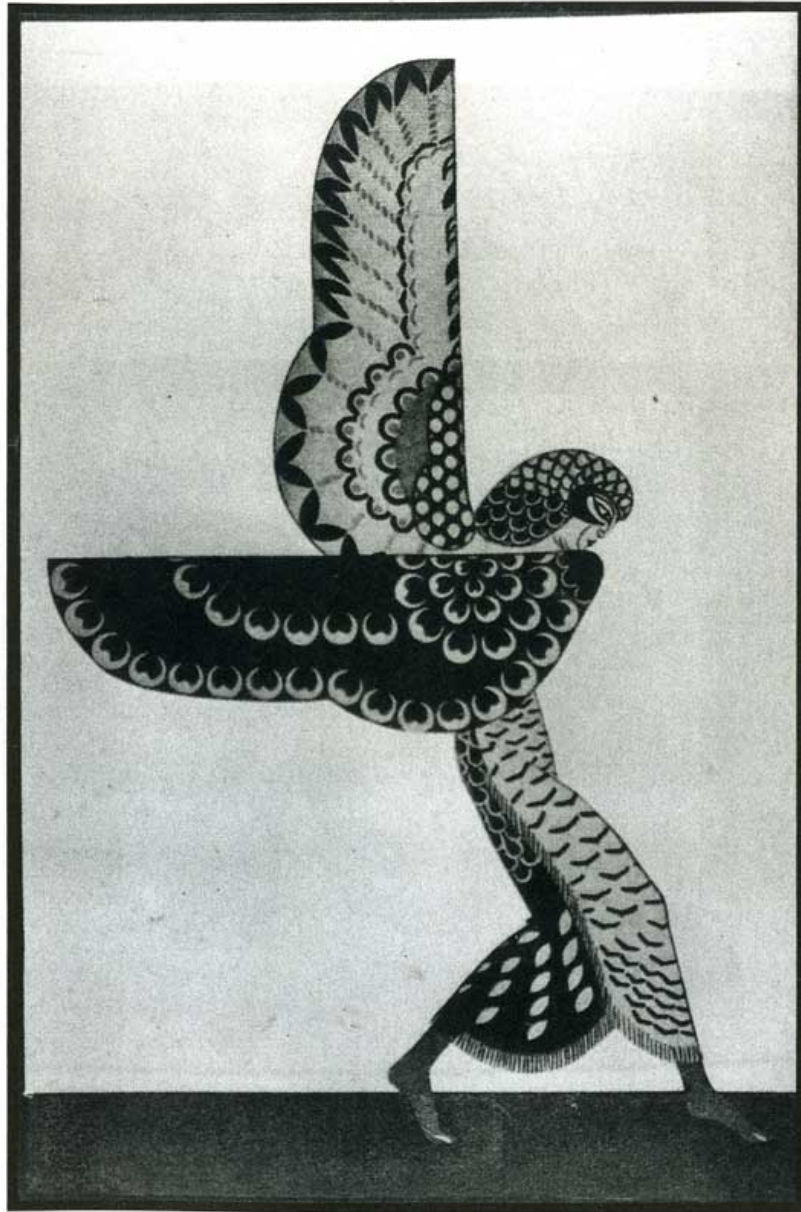


Musician in "At the Hawk's Well." NEW WAVE !



Old Man in "At the Hawk's Well."

[...] His movements, like those of the other persons of the play, suggest a marionette.)



Edmund Dulac: La Guardiania del Pozzo in
At the Hawk's Well, 1921,
Dublino, Abbey Theatre Collection

*[...] the Girl has begun
to dance moving like a
hawk. The Old man
sleeps. The dance goes
on for some time.)*



Young Man in "At the Hawk's Well."

"He who drinks, they say,
Of that miraculous water
lives for ever."

I have found my first model - and in literature if we would not be parvenus we must have a model - in the "Noh" stage of aristocratic Japan. [...] I do not think of my discovery as mere economy, for it has been a great gain to get rid of scenery, to substitute for a crude landscape painted upon canvas three performers who, sitting before the wall or a patterned screen, describe landscape or event, and accompany movement with drum and gong, or deepen the emotion of the words with zither or flute. Painted scenery after all is unnecessary to my friends and to myself, for our imagination kept living by the arts can imagine a mountain covered with thorn-trees in a drawing-room without any great trouble, and we have many quarrels with even good scene-painting. Then too the masks forced upon us by the absence of any special lighting, or by the nearness of the audience who surround the players upon three sides, do not seem to us eccentric.

[from W.B. Yeats, "A Note to *At the Hawk's Well*", 1916]

A NOTE ON THE INSTRUMENTS

IN order to apply to the music the idea of great simplicity of execution underlying the whole spirit of the performance, it was necessary to use instruments that any one with a fair idea of music could learn in a few days. The following offer hardly any difficulty, while they provide a sufficient background of simple sounds which the performer can, after a very little amount of practice, elaborate at will. A plain bamboo flute giving the appropriate scale.

A harp, a drum and a gong. For these last two, any instruments on oriental lines with a good shape and a deep mellow sound.

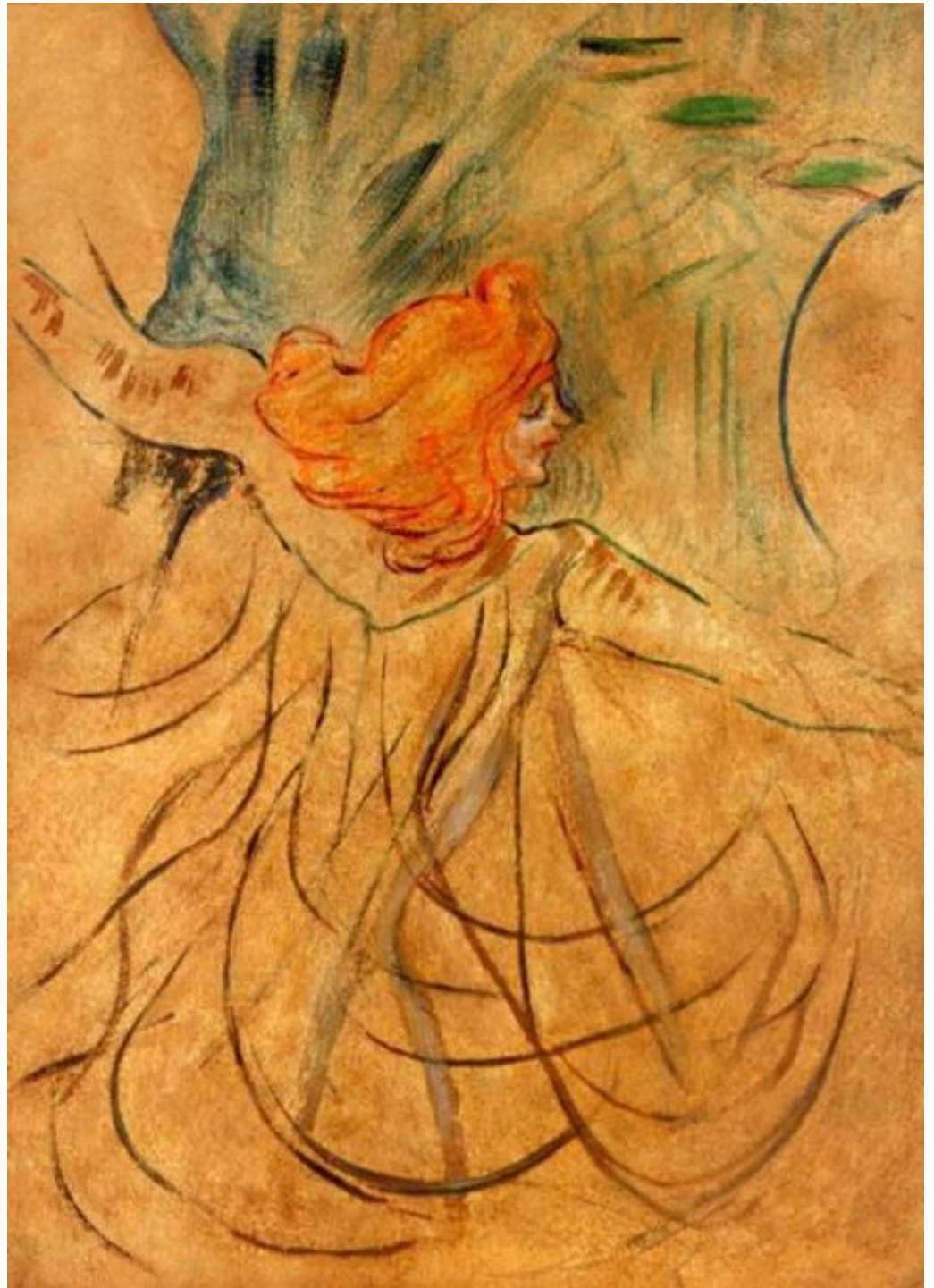
For the harp an ordinary zither, such as shown in the design of the musician, can be used. The strings, beginning by the lower ones, are grouped in nine or ten chords of four notes consisting of the key-note, two strings in unison giving the fifth above, and the octave of the key-note.

I have written a little play that can be played in a room for so little money that forty or fifty readers of poetry can pay the price. There will be no scenery, for three musicians, whose seeming sun-burned faces will I hope suggest that they have wandered from village to village in some country of our dreams, can describe place and weather, and at moment action, and accompany it all by drum and gong or flute and dulcimer. [...] I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way an aristocratic form. [...] My play is made possible by a Japanese dancer whom I have seen dance in a studio and in a drawing-room and on a very small stage lit by an excellent stage-light. [...] The white and purple curtain was no doubt to hang upon a wall behind the players or over their entrance door for the Noh stage is a platform surrounded upon three sides by the audience. No naturalistic effect is sought. The players wear masks and found their movements upon those of puppets [...]

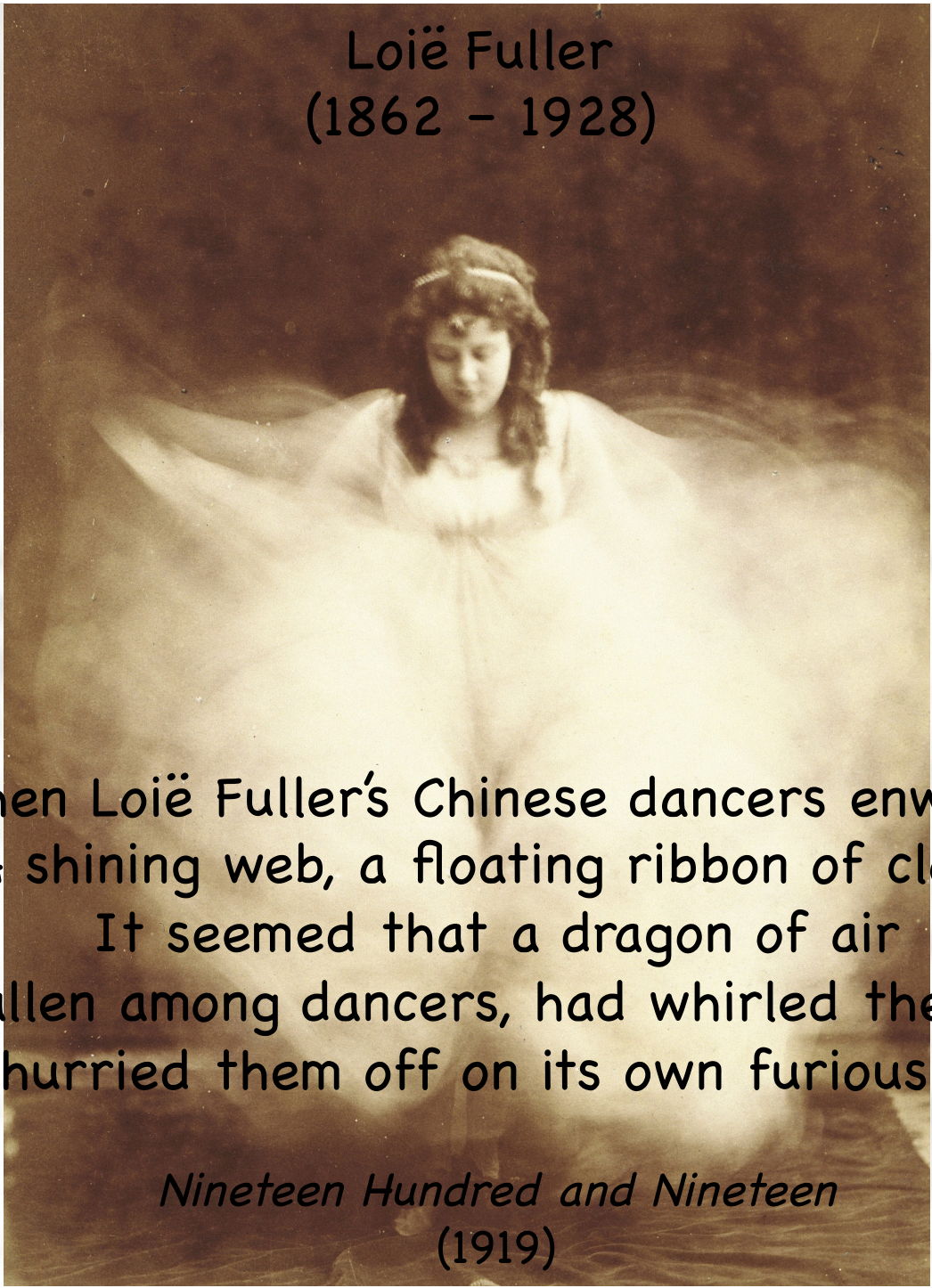
They sing as much as they speak, and there is a chorus which describes the scene and interprets their thought and never becomes as in the Greek theatre a part of the action. At the climax instead of the disordered passion of nature there is a dance, a series of positions & movements which may represent a battle, or a marriage, or the pain of a ghost in the Buddhist purgatory. I have lately studied certain of these dances, with Japanese players, and I notice that their ideal of beauty, unlike that of Greece and like that of pictures from Japan and China, makes them pause at moments of muscular tension. The interest is not in the human form but in the rhythm to which it moves, and the triumph of their art is to express that rhythm into intensity. There are few swaying movements of arms or body such as make the beauty of our dancing.

(W.B. Yeats, "Introduction" to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, from the manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa, chosen and finished by Ezra Pound)

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
At Music Hall
Loïe Fuller (1892)



Loië Fuller
(1862 – 1928)



When Loië Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
It seemed that a dragon of air
Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
Or hurried them off on its own furious path;

Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen
(1919)



Loie Fuller – “Danse serpentine”

see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIrnFrDXjlk>

Isadora Duncan
(1878 - 1927)





Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1912)

see

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=Vxs8MrPZUIg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vxs8MrPZUIg)

Vaslav Nijinsky
(1889 –1950)



A faint, stylized background illustration. On the left, a woman's face is shown in profile, looking downwards. On the right, there is a plant with large, pointed leaves. The entire background is a light beige color.

Petruška (1911)

see

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzMBhtEOX_k





Noh Theatre (Dance of the Ghost)

see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu5Vn1vQ5i4>