



Doone, Rupert (1903-1966)

by Linda Rapp

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English dancer, choreographer, producer, and teacher of drama Rupert Doone had a varied and distinguished artistic career. He danced the ballet with strength, energy, and originality. His choreography was inventive and often challenging for the performers. With his partner, Robert Medley, he founded the Group Theatre, which in the 1930s produced plays by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, among others.

In his work with the Group Theatre and at the Morley College School of Drama, where he taught and produced plays, he was known for his imagination and artistic integrity, and for his ability to surround himself with gifted people and nurture their talents.

Doone was born Reginald Ernest Woodfield on August 14, 1903, in Redditch, Worcestershire, where his father was a skilled worker in a needle factory. His mother came from a farming family.

Doone ran away from home to become a dancer. Arriving in London at age sixteen with no money, he led a precarious existence, scraping by on what he earned modeling at the Royal Academy and the Slade in order to afford lessons at Madame Serafina Astafieva's School of Ballet. He also studied with Margaret Craske, with whom he would perform in 1927 in the Nemchinova-Dolin Ballet in pieces that he choreographed.

Despite a late start in dance, Doone made rapid progress. After only a few years of study, he gave his first professional performance in Basil Dean's production of James Elroy Fleck's play *Hassan*, on which occasion he changed his name to Rupert Doone.

At age nineteen Doone went to Paris, where he partnered the legendary dancer Cléo de Mérode, who described him as having an "astonishing allure."

Doone was the featured soloist of the Ballet Suédois during the 1923 Paris season but left the company after its American tour as a result of a dispute about costumes.

Soon after arriving in Paris, Doone met and became the lover of Jean Cocteau. In 1924 Doone collaborated with Cocteau on the production of his *Romeo and Juliet* and also danced in the piece.

Through Cocteau, Doone met Serge Diaghilev, who offered him the opportunity to dance in the *corps de ballet* of the Ballets Russes. Doone declined, feeling that he deserved a more important place in the company.

In 1924 Doone returned to London, where he worked in variety and revue. He understudied Léonide Massine in C.B. Cochran's *Keep on Dancing*. In 1925 he staged and performed in the dances in Nigel Playfair's production of Sheridan's *The Duenna*.

In November 1925 Doone met and fell in love with painter Robert Medley, with whom he would spend the rest of his life. The following spring the two went to Paris. Doone, better known there than in England,

hoped for more rewarding professional opportunities. Medley continued his study of painting.

Doone worked with Vera Trefilova and partnered her in her last performances on a tour in Berlin. On his return to Paris, Doone joined Ida Rubinstein's company for the 1928 season. He worked with choreographer Bronislava Nijinska and danced in Ravel's *Boléro*, among other pieces.

Diaghilev, impressed by Doone's performances, again offered him a place in the Ballets Russes--this time as a soloist--and Doone accepted. In July 1930 at Covent Garden he had solo roles in two ballets: *Cimarosiana*, a work excerpted from Domenico Cimarosa's *L'Astuzie femminili*; and *Aurora's Wedding (Le Mariage d'Aurore)*, a ballet created by Nijinska from the first and last acts of Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* with reorchestration by Igor Stravinsky.

Doone was looking forward to more principal roles and possible opportunities to choreograph for the Ballets Russes, but when Diaghilev died in August 1930, the company lacked direction, and the quality of its work declined. Doone left it after a tour in Monte Carlo, and he and Medley returned to England.

Doone's departure from the Ballets Russes was a turning point in his career. He did not give up dance entirely, but, believing that he would never again have as important a professional opportunity and fearing that rheumatism might shorten his career, he decided to concentrate his efforts on choreography and theater. His wish was to create "a theatre of all the arts."

In 1930 Doone joined the Festival Theatre in Cambridge, under the direction of Tyrone Guthrie. His first acting role, in Lion Feuchtwanger's *Warren Hastings*, was an important supporting one, but he proved a slow study when it came to memorizing lines, and so Guthrie subsequently used him mostly in walk-on parts.

He did, however, have a dancing role in James Bridie's *Tobias and the Angel*. Medley recalled the dance as a "brief but spectacular moment" that earned Doone the enthusiastic approval of audiences and the respect of the other members of the company for his ideas and theatrical discipline.

In 1932 Doone was invited to choreograph a ballet for the recently-formed Vic-Wells Ballet. To the music of Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, he created *The Enchanted Grove*, a work of great originality. Dame Ninette de Valois, one of the principal dancers along with Anton Dolin and Alicia Markova, recalled that she "adored" her role in the ballet and found Doone brilliant but demanding to work with.

Also in 1932, Doone and Medley formed the Group Theatre. Medley described Doone's vision for it as "a creative theatre, in which collaboration [among directors, actors, designers, musicians and others] would lead to a new sort of expression unknown in English theatre at that time."

They approached young poet W. H. Auden about providing an original work, and in 1933 he wrote a multi-media piece, *The Dance of Death*. In the 1934 production of the work, Doone appeared as "Death the Dancer." The production was enthusiastically received by audiences and recognized, as Medley put it, as "something quite new and vital to the English stage."

Auden subsequently wrote several plays with Christopher Isherwood that were produced at the Group Theatre. Doone directed and produced these works--*The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1936), *The Ascent of F6* (1937), and *On the Frontier* (1939)--and Medley served as the principal set designer.

The Group Theatre also featured the earliest works of Benjamin Britten, T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* (1935), and plays by Stephen Spender and Louis MacNiece. Other contributors to the Group Theatre included William Butler Yeats, Duncan Grant, Havelock Ellis, Richard Masefield, Harold Nicolson, Anton Dolin, and Mary Skeaping.

The beginning of World War II in 1939 brought an end to the heyday of the Group Theatre, which closed down for the duration of the war. Doone stayed in London, contributing to the development of a theater school at Morley College, while Medley volunteered for service in the armed forces, first as an official war artist and later as a member of the Royal Engineers working on camouflage.

The Group Theatre was revived in 1946 and continued productions until 1951 but never regained its former prominence.

Doone continued working at Morley College until 1962. He began suffering from a loss of motor control, which proved to be due to multiple sclerosis. He underwent electrical treatments to try to alleviate the condition, but to no avail.

Medley was frustrated in his efforts to care for Doone by a doctor who "saw no reason to discuss his patient's medical affairs with a person who had no legal rights to information." He was subsequently able to find another doctor, Bevan Pritchard, who respected their relationship.

In 1965 Medley retired from the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, where he had taught since 1958, to care for Doone. In the fall of 1965, however, Doone required hospitalization. He died on March 3, 1966.

In his memoir *Drawn from Life* (1983), Medley wrote of Doone, "To all things, personal and professional, Rupert brought an irrepressible enthusiasm for life, and a sense of humour that was positively bucolic, and sometimes rumbustious; for those who knew and loved him best it is the sheer fun of his company that is most immediately remembered. He was the wind that stirred and ruffled the waters."

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