



“verse-play” or “spoken ballet”? W. H. Auden, Rupert Doone, and a New Poetic Drama

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ABSTRACT: This article draws on previously neglected archival material to reexamine the first poetic drama written for Rupert Doone’s Group Theatre, W. H. Auden’s *The Dance of Death* (1933). I show that Doone, guided by the Ballets Russes’s “marriage of the arts,” worked alongside Auden to craft an innovative form of poetic drama whose meaning was generated not by the script on its own, but rather by the complex interaction of poetic text, visual metaphor, and corporeal rhetoric. Analyzing the choreographic aspects of *The Dance of Death* alongside its textuality thus brings into focus underexplored facets of the work’s notoriously ambiguous politics. Considering these politics within their historical context illuminates the significance of Doone’s dance-informed approach to theater, both for the Lord Chamberlain’s efforts regarding stage censorship and for Auden’s beliefs about the future of English poetic drama.

KEYWORDS: verse drama, London’s Group Theatre, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, theater censorship, interwar British politics

On October 1, 1935, W. H. Auden’s *The Dance of Death* (1933) saw its public première at London’s Westminster Theatre as part of the Group Theatre’s first season open to general audiences. Weeks later, theater critic Harold Hobson declared the production “Mr. W. H. Auden’s brilliant, and, in my opinion, entirely successful, attempt to work out for the theater a new, significant art-form [which] may, in the strictest sense of the term, prove epoch-making.”¹ Although Hobson found the content of *The Dance of Death* a tired reiteration of Marxist orthodoxy that worked merely to prove that “Mr. Auden is a communist,” he lauded the formal innovation of employing “all the instruments

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746 of theatrical expression”—“song and dance, speech and action, mime and decoration and grouping”—in the production of dramatic effect (“Dance,” 12). For Ashley Dukes, too, *The Dance of Death* offered a “correlation of acting, movement and words unlike anything else in today’s theatre experience,” thus warranting an appellation closer to “spoken ballet” than “verse-play.”² *The Dance of Death* constituted a new development in poetic drama, one that embodied Edward Gordon Craig’s ideal of “total theatre” while privileging corporeal expression in such a way as to reveal the balletic underpinning of its dramaturgy. This innovation in form recalled the ballet-oriented *Gesamtkunstwerk* pioneered by Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and originated not with Auden—a dramatist known to make statements such as “I hate all ballet”—but rather with Rupert Doone, founder of the Group Theatre and former dancer with Diaghilev’s company.³ When Diaghilev died and the Ballets Russes disbanded, Doone helped ensure Diaghilev’s theatrical legacy by forming a philosophy of poetic drama that aspired to the “marriage of the arts” offered by “the Russian ballet.”⁴ Doone invited Auden to provide the poetic dramatic text of *The Dance of Death* as an initial vehicle for his theories and together they inaugurated what Dukes would later call the British theater’s “new dramatic poetry.”⁵

The Dance of Death was part of a greater theatrical zeitgeist that saw T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and Gordon Bottomley all experimenting with new kinds of dance-centered verse drama, and Eliot theorizing about what Diaghilev’s company and the performances of Léonide Massine might indicate for the future of poetry on the stage. At the same time there was the specifically expressionist aesthetic of German *Tanztheater*, introduced to London in 1933 through Kurt Jooss’s award-winning work *Der Grüne Tisch* (1932), which was similarly testing the boundaries of theatrical expression through the imbrication of movement, music, and dramatic form. While *The Dance of Death* was shaped by these contexts, and particularly by Jooss, in whose work Doone found a compelling new mode of stage expression, Doone would not have possessed the skills to envision such a production without first having had the experience of Diaghilev’s company. Scholars such as Michael Sidnell, Olga Taxidou, and Claire Warden have appreciated various theatrical influences informing *The Dance of Death*, each acknowledging that the Ballets Russes was in some way significant for Doone.⁶ Yet the pivotal role that Diaghilev’s company played in transforming Doone’s conception of poetic drama has remained elusive. As Warden rightly permits, “decoding Russian ballet’s influence over Group Theatre’s canon of work is tricky” (*Migrating*, 37). In this article, I consider previously neglected archival material relating to Doone, the Group Theatre, and *The Dance of Death* to recover the nuanced role that the Ballets Russes played in catalyzing what came to be hailed as a crucial advance in poetic dramatic form: a work that finds its genesis in Doone’s quest to integrate a poetic dramatic text into the Ballets Russes’s particular confluence of dance, music, and the visual arts.

We tend to view Doone as a minor figure in narratives of modern poetic drama; an eccentric who, as Charles Osborne wrote, had a “number of silly or pretentious ideas about theatre.”⁷ This perception stems partially from the difficulty that Doone faced in articulating his theories. No great wordsmith, he published few articles and

lamented in his notebook that "it is pretty difficult to want to write, to convey in sentences; ideas and to know you write bloody badly."⁸ Yet what Edward Mendelson calls Doone's "woolly fashion" of expressing himself reveals much about Doone's profoundly innovative dramaturgy.⁹ In search of direction when Diaghilev died, Doone first tried his hand at writing short stories. Discovering that he had little literary talent, he then refocused his energy on forming a dramaturgy that harnessed the corporeal expressivity that had drawn him to the Ballets Russes. He held up the Ballets Russes as a theatrical model in which the actor rather than the writer "dominated" in the theater and sought to introduce to the performance of poetic drama a creative intelligence that takes hold in the body: "the actor does not interpret the poet's words," Doone believed, "he recreates them."¹⁰ The moving body of the actor was meant not to supplant, but rather to work in cooperation with the dramatist's words, in a collaborative process that was furnished by Doone's loyalty to a Diaghilevian model. John Piper, a Group Theatre scenographer, remarked on Doone's ideal of theatrical unity as the outcome of a wholly collaborative process, writing that "clearly the origin of the ideal was the Diaghilev ballet."¹¹ With *The Dance of Death* this process allowed Doone to craft a production in which the poetic dramatic text was by no means prioritized but was rather one component of an aesthetic fusion that privileged choreography and corporeal rhetoric of his own design. The Marxist message of *The Dance of Death*, which Hobson and further critics attributed solely to Auden, was thus profoundly dependent on the production's non-textual elements: the music of Herbert Murrill, the sun mask of Henry Moore, the props and costumes of Robert Medley, and, most significantly, the choreography and dancing of Doone.

The Dance of Death was remarkable not only for contesting the notion that poetic drama is the sole demesne of the playwright, but also for demonstrating the implications of political commentary created through the interaction of poetic dramatic text, visual metaphor, and corporeal rhetoric in 1930s Britain. *The Dance of Death* was submitted for licensing in 1935, during a period that saw the Lord Chamberlain's office becoming increasingly sensitive to communist "propaganda" and critiques of the Nazi regime.¹² Yet when the reader G. S. Street recommended *The Dance of Death* for licensing, he listed neither compulsory cuts nor suspect passages. Street concluded that there was "nothing to censor," not because he deemed the politics of *The Dance of Death* innocuous, but rather because he found the play "incomprehensible" and determined that "no meaning emerges from the text."¹³ In performance, the play offered everything from a communal dance that spreads Germanic fascism in a syphilitic manner and ends in a Nazi salute, to Karl Marx and his comrades committing a mass murder of the middle class. *The Dance of Death* centered meaning outside written and spoken language, thereby offering political content of a profoundly elusive nature. By reading the disparate components of Auden's and Doone's production in tandem, we thus discover previously neglected facets of *The Dance of Death's* notoriously ambiguous politics and come to understand the significance of Doone's privileging of corporeal expression. Doone's choreography evaded censorship in a way that neither Doone nor Auden seem to have anticipated, allowing *The Dance of Death* to address the social and

748 political exigencies of pre-war Britain in a remarkably direct manner. Ultimately, this endeavor demonstrated the significance of Doone's Ballets Russes-inspired theories to Auden's quest to create a socially engaged form of theater, providing evidence for Auden's subsequent conviction that Britain's search for a new form of poetic drama would be intimately intertwined with the politics of the day.

By recovering Doone's choreographic contributions to *The Dance of Death*, this article thus expands understandings of Auden's early years as a dramatist, while providing a new point of reference for critical discussions of modernist theater. For many years, these discussions took their cues from New Criticism, privileging the dramatic text at the expense of its more ephemeral manifestation on the stage. As Kirsten Shepherd-Barr suggested in 2005, due to scholarship's accustomed textual partiality, modernist historiography "barely allowed for the significance of theatrical performances."¹⁴ More recently, scholars such as Taxidou and Warden have demonstrated how breaking away from this theoretical paradigm and placing new emphasis on performance, dramaturgy, and the moving body expands our knowledge of modernist and avant-garde theatre, while extending the parameters of modernist studies more broadly.¹⁵ We might think about this methodological shift in terms of the new modernist studies, which has seen scholars exploring previously neglected cultural practices and aesthetic forms to revise and expand understandings of modernism. Invested in this broader movement, this article continues the project of pushing the field of modernist studies to account more fully for the relationship between the textual and embodied aspects of theatrical performance. It reads the ephemeral, choreographic aspects of *The Dance of Death* alongside its textuality, resituating the work within an interdisciplinary artistic network that reveals links to neglected literary, dramaturgical, and choreographic precedents. In so doing, it builds a more complete picture of the complex influences informing the development of Britain's modern poetic drama.

"a new sort of expression unknown in the English theatre"

Doone's Ballets Russes career lasted only one month. It began in July 1929 and was interrupted in August 1929, when Diaghilev died unexpectedly and the Ballets Russes disbanded.¹⁶ The brevity of Doone's involvement with Diaghilev's company, in conjunction with his full and varied theatre career, suggests that we must take a cautious approach to discussions of a formative relationship. By the time Doone founded the Group Theatre in 1932, he had spent over a decade working with a vast array of the period's theater and dance practitioners, from Nigel Playfair to Max Reinhardt, from Rolf de Maré to Cléo de Mérode. When placed in the context of his greater theatrical career, Doone's month with the Ballets Russes seems a slight source of inspiration for the Group Theatre. Yet the painter Robert Medley, Doone's partner and the Group Theatre's co-founder, indicates the significance of Diaghilev's company, recalling that the dissolution of the Ballets Russes marked a turning point in Doone's career. The Ballets Russes had extended the possibilities of ballet and catalyzed its development

into a truly modern art. As Lynn Garafola has shown, the various expressions of modernism to pass through ballet under Diaghilev included “symbolism, primitivism, cubism, futurism, constructivism, neo-classicism, and any number of other ‘isms’ that flitted across the period’s artistic horizons.”¹⁷ Doone was acutely aware of the lacuna left in the theatrical world in the wake of Diaghilev’s death, feeling sure that “ballet was doomed to become a middle-class diversion;” “no longer a viable form for contemporary use by artists with something new to say” (Medley, *Drawn from the Life*, 132). Yet he reasoned that “[b]allet was not the only form of theatre” and came to the conviction that “[n]ew forms are wanted to express the life of to-day” (*Drawn from the Life*, 107; Doone, “What About the Theatre?,” 10). The new form that Doone ultimately pursued was not strictly ballet, but nor did it leave the advances that the Ballets Russes had made behind. Medley recalls that when Diaghilev died and the “pillar that had sustained [Doone’s] ambition had fallen,” Doone quickly came to the idea that

[n]o other company of comparable artistic and creative standards existed. But there were lessons to be learned from Diaghilev’s vision—a theatre of all the arts—that were generally applicable. Why not open up the field in the straight theatre, and make other opportunities for himself? (Medley, *Drawn from the Life*, 108).

It was with this idea of total theater in mind that Doone chose the name “Group Theatre,” which stemmed from his conception of a “creative theatre, in which collaboration would lead to a new sort of expression unknown in the English theatre at that time” (145).

Doone’s unpublished letters reveal that while Medley is right to emphasize the role that the dissolution of the Ballets Russes played in Doone’s turn to “the straight theatre,” Doone’s path was a bit more serpentine than Medley lets on. In the early months of 1930 Doone was performing at the Casino de Monte-Carlo in a ballet troupe that Serge Grigorieff had assembled of mainly former Diaghilev dancers—a stay for Doone as he figured out what to do in a world without the Ballets Russes. In January 1930, Bloomsbury painter Duncan Grant offered one possibility, suggesting that Doone might try his hand at writing: “you should write a story or book dealing with the true like of Monte Carlo,” Grant proposed, “No one has yet done it properly.”¹⁸ By February, Doone was mentioning “my writing” in letters to Medley, and Doone’s notebook dating from February 1930 attests to a prolific few months for Doone’s writing endeavors (Doone, Notebook).¹⁹ At the same time, Doone embarked on a literary self-education—alluding in his letters to the works of G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Marcel Proust, George Eliot, Anton Chekov, Gertrude Stein, George Moore, Emily Brontë, Scott Moncrieff, Maxim Gorky, and more—that shaped his writing endeavors while making him acutely aware of his want of talent for expressing himself via the written word.²⁰ He was sensitive about his lack of formal education and his ineloquence (“I am a fellow full of doubts, always, I am”) and it seems that his writings were seen by few, if any (Doone to Medley, February 22, 1930). Much of this work is remarkable in its own right, but in the context of the Group Theatre Doone’s writing is most illuminat-

750 ing when it addresses Diaghilev's company, as it then reveals as much about Doone's inability to master the written word as it does about his deep reverence for the mode of corporeal expression that he associated with the Ballets Russes.

An unfinished story that Doone began probably in the early 1930s, titled "How I Became a Russian Ballet Dancer," begins to elucidate Doone's fascination with the corporeal expressivity of Diaghilev's company. Doone opens the story with an anecdote about the first time he saw Anna Pavlova perform, when he came to understand her capacity to "express physically the magical fire that lies in man" (Doone, Notebook). He describes his desire to obtain this same power as unabashedly Faustian—knowing that he was "destined to be different from that which [he] was born," he was willing to abandon his moral compass in the process—and we begin to see that Doone was less concerned with providing the audience with a visual spectacle than he was with manipulating the audience's emotions in the name of creating art. Doone uses "stealing" as an analogy to dancing, yearning "[t]o cheat and burgle the emotions of the watcher" in order to portray mortality: "[t]o convey Death to the onlooker, to create all the horror and pleasure of that ever-present possibility." Yet a dancer who wishes *only* to "steal" from the audience, Doone argues, "betrays his art." For Doone, the superlative example of how one might transform thievery into art lay in Vaslav Nijinsky's performances in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912) and *Le Spectre de la rose* (1911): he "who makes the rape of a scarf or the spirit of a rose a true thrill" is one who "makes art" (Notebook). Although Doone unfortunately abandons his candid story after detailing the early years of his career, he leaves us with the remarkable vestiges of a story about his evolution into a Diaghilev dancer that begins with the disclosure of his desire for an almost superhuman mode of corporeal expression that offers the power to change even somewhat unexpected subject matter into art.

Doone's dramaturgical ideals for the Group Theatre were profoundly shaped by his veneration of the corporeal expressivity of Ballets Russes dancers and by his faith in this expressivity's power to facilitate artistic creation. In a draft manifesto outlining "what we hope for in the Group Theatre," Doone states his intention of restoring the actor to a central position in the theatre—a field in which the actor has been "neglected" because "the writer has so often dominated the theatre"—and proposes using Diaghilev's company as a model: "if one thinks of the Commedia d'el Arte [*sic*] and of the Russian Ballet, one sees that in the past the actor has often dominated in his theatre" (Doone, Manuscripts about Acting). The first step towards restoring the actor to a central position is training the actors to dance; doing away with "meaningless gestures" and coming to understand that "[m]ovement is the beginning of all things," because "[o]ne cannot speak without moving" (Doone, Manuscripts about Acting). Doone acknowledges that he joins Gordon Craig in suggesting that dance is the wellspring from which drama arises, yet he strives to differentiate himself by underscoring the importance of altering actor training methods in Britain. Doone suggests that Gordon Craig's "disappointed genius" had little influence on actor training, lamenting that in Britain producers have had no choice but to take "realistic actors to play in poetic dramas," to unsatisfactory ends (Doone, Manuscripts about Acting). Doone finds training

actors in movement methods integral to the performance of poetic drama in particular because, ideally, actors do not simply perform a poetic dramatic text, they somehow transform it and create it anew. There is "no such thing as an interpretive art," Doone believed, "the actor does not interpret the poet's words, he recreates them" ("What About the Theatre," 9). Proposing a creative intelligence that takes hold in the body, Doone privileges the ephemerality but also the tangibility of the actor's craft. Because "the body can never be abstracted like the other arts," Doone argues, it offers a "poignancy and directness" that suggests "the theatre must be used for the actor's medium" (Manuscripts about Acting).

Doone advocates a theater in which the moving body of the actor "dominates," as he felt Diaghilev's dancers had done before, but despite the connotations of the word, "dominate" for Doone does not imply any sort of performer autocracy. Diaghilev's prioritization of the artwork as a whole resonated with Doone, and Doone's notebook bears an anecdote that reveals his awareness of how fervent this prioritization could be. This anecdote had been related to Doone by Jean Cocteau and featured Nijinsky, famed for his elevation, going down "on his hands and knees before Diaghilev"—the "high priest" of ballet—to plead for just "one more measure" of music so as to hang in the air à la his final leap in *Le Spectre de la rose* (Doone, Notebook). Diaghilev's answer "was always no," because he was ruthless in his conviction that "everything" must be "sacrificed to the ballet" as a whole (Doone, Notebook). Similarly, at the Group Theatre neither actor nor poetic text governed Doone's theatrical model. He endorsed a collaborative atmosphere in which the poet would act as a "secretary of ideas" for the troupe, and elevated the actor to an integral but single author of the artistic creation ("What about the Theatre," 10). The "most important element in the theatre," he contended,

is not the actor, the producer, the painter, or the poet: it is the dramatic content, that invisible fluid that moves the audience, a chemical compound of the ideas of all who have given their ideas to the production ("What about the Theatre," 9).

Part of the "Art of the Theatre," Doone believed, "was the Art of Preparation and Cooperation," which is "necessary for the unity of effect which is the beauty of a work of art" (Manuscripts about Acting). Piper believed that this ideal of theatrical unity as a product of collaboration was modeled on the Ballets Russes, writing that "clearly the origin of the ideal was the Diaghilev ballet" (quoted in Medley, *Drawn from the Life*, 163). Doone's draft manuscripts attest to Piper's conviction. After raising the Ballets Russes as an example, Doone explains that "why I stress this point is that one may attempt a successful marriage of the arts in the Group Theatre" (Manuscripts about Acting).

On the one hand, Doone's efforts to integrate a poetic dramatic text into a Diaghilevian marriage of the arts were somewhat at odds with Diaghilev's conviction that "the spoken word was entirely out of place in a ballet."²¹ Yet, at the same time these efforts began to align Doone with Cocteau, a decisive figure in Doone's career who had created

752 works with Diaghilev's company that suggested strategies of subsuming the rhythms of a text into the greater work, forming a type of stage aesthetic that Cocteau conceived of as a metaphorical poetry of its own. Doone had become Cocteau's protégé and lover in Paris in 1924, when Doone was engaged by Étienne de Beaumont to dance in Cocteau's *Roméo et Juliette*. Shortly thereafter, the Ballets Russes arrived at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées for a summer season that premiered *Le Train bleu* (1924) and also offered *Parade* (1917), ballets with libretti by Cocteau. Doone probably attended this season's performances, but even had he not he would have found a fascinating account of the collaborative process that led to the groundbreaking aesthetic of *Parade* in his copy of Cocteau's *Cock and Harlequin* (1918). Medley recalls that this copy bore an inscription by the author and was so important to Doone that even after his relationship with Cocteau dissolved, he toted the book across Europe, counting it among his few worldly possessions (Medley, *Drawn from the Life*, 64). Incorporating elements of the circus and musical hall, *Parade* was a daring work by Cocteau, Massine, Pablo Picasso, and Erik Satie that famously prompted Guillaume Apollinaire to coin the word surrealism. In *Cock and Harlequin*, Cocteau elaborates on the collaboration behind *Parade*, describing the way in which his libretto, originally intended as a spoken text, was subsumed into the final work. Cocteau recalls that upon attempting to "wed the scenery, costumes and choreography," he, along with Picasso and Massine, realized that the spoken word would add an undesired level of formal complication and instead "substituted for the voices the rhythm of footsteps in the silence."²² This rhythm greatly pleased Cocteau, not least because it required that Massine "seek his inspiration, not in things that move, but in things round which we move, and which move according to the rhythm of our steps" (*Cock and Harlequin*, 55). Although Cocteau's account emphasizes his own artistic contribution at the expense of those of Satie, Picasso, and Massine—it was in fact Picasso and Diaghilev who rejected Cocteau's spoken text—it is significant that in the account that Doone held dear, Cocteau's text gave shape to *Parade*, transforming into a rhythm that set Massine's choreography in motion and facilitating the creation of what Massine would later call "a totally new form" (*My Life in Ballet*, 105).

What *Parade* and further Ballets Russes works might indicate for the future of poetic theater may well have formed some part of Doone's and Cocteau's discussions, as it was of great interest to both artists. In 1923, the year before he met Doone, Cocteau had mused over this topic in his preface to *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921), a work he had created with de Maré's Ballets Suédois. Conceiving of poetry in a metaphorical sense, Cocteau differentiates between poetry *in* the theater (*poésie au théâtre*), the verbal language of verse, and poetry *of* the theater (*poésie de théâtre*), the symbolic language of music, choreography, and light. He had begun to experiment with the latter in *Parade* and believed that such works exemplified a new "poetic spirit" that was to have immense implications for the greater theatrical realm:

With the advent of people like Serge de Diaghilev and Rolf de Maré, we see developing in France, little by little, a theatrical genre which is not properly speaking ballet, which has

no place in the Opéra, nor at the Opéra-Comique, nor in any of the fashionable theatres. It is there, in this margin, that the future is being sketched. . . .

The new generation will continue its experiments in which the fantastic, the dance, acrobatics, mime, drama, satire, music, and the spoken word combine to produce a new form; they will present, with very small means, plays which the official artists will take for studio farces, and which nonetheless are the plastic expression and the embodiment of poetry itself.²³

Cocteau sees the Ballets Russes as sketching the future for theatrical poetry, broadly defined, and although he replaces poetry *in* with poetry *of*, he locates the genesis of this stage poetic in *Parade*, a work that in his own account grew out of the rhythms of what was intended to be a spoken text. At the Group Theatre Doone would go on to forge a type of stage aesthetic that grew out of that which Cocteau helped create at the Ballets Russes and while for Doone the poetic text would remain audible, it, too, would give shape to the greater production.

Jooss and Tanztheater

The Ballets Russes was by no means Doone’s sole artistic inspiration. He liaised and collaborated with members of the Bloomsbury Group, worked within a theatrical context that saw great interest in the techniques of Jacques Copeau and Michel Saint-Denis, and in 1934 would enter talks with Dukes, Eliot, Yeats, and Tyrone Guthrie to discuss the possibility of creating a home for poetic drama at the Mercury Theatre. While somewhat artificially separating these intertwined strands of artistic stimuli helps us see that Doone’s basis for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was in the Ballets Russes, it is important to acknowledge that in the Group Theatre’s formative years Doone’s dramaturgy shifted to accommodate new modern expression—particularly that which he found in the work of Kurt Jooss.

Jooss, a German dancer and choreographer, began his career in the 1920s, studying with and performing in the works of Rudolf Laban, pioneer of the *Ausdruckstanz* movement. Jooss further developed the work of Laban, fusing expressionist dance with music and dramatic form to create *Tanztheater*, a type of movement-based theater that tended to address themes dealing with fear or human conflict; its genesis was greatly informed by the cultural ferment of Weimar Germany and 1920s Vienna. Throughout his career Jooss established several important companies and schools—notably the *Folkwangschule* in Essen, which would go on to produce the famous choreographer and exponent of *Tanztheater* Pina Bausch—and in 1932 he distinguished himself as a choreographer when *Der Grüne Tisch* won first prize at an international competition for new choreography held by the *Archives internationales de la danse* in Paris. A work with a strong anti-war sentiment, *Der Grüne Tisch* premièred one year before Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany.

754 Having met Laban in Berlin in the late 1920s, Doone was enthusiastic about the theatrical possibilities emerging from within the *Ausdruckstanz* movement. In the early 1930s Doone received a letter from Laban and Jooss that presented the possibility of increasing his involvement in the development of *Tanztheater* (Medley, *Drawn from the Life*, 84). Laban and Jooss wanted Doone to come to the newly established Ballets Jooss to train their modern dancers in classical ballet. Doone's acceptance was conditional on the promise that he would be allowed to choreograph new works for Jooss's company—no small request considering that Jooss's company was intended to showcase his own choreography—and the deal predictably fell apart. Medley recalls that there were no hard feelings on either side, and when Jooss's *Der Grüne Tisch* came to London later in 1933 Doone and Jooss met as friends. In viewing this work, a satirical extravaganza that demonstrated the dramatic possibilities inherent in combining a dance-based *Gesamtkunstwerk* with masks, flags, and sparse set design to create a theatrical form alive with political ideology, Doone, Medley recalls, "recognized immediately that Kurt had already succeeded in doing the new kind of work that he envisaged for the Group Theatre" (85).

This statement is remarkable considering the correspondences between *Der Grüne Tisch* and Auden's *The Dance of Death*, which premiered in London the following year. *Der Grüne Tisch*, subtitled "a dance of death in eight scenes," featured mortality personified in the figure of death, a dancer, and offered commentary on the brutality and futility of war. The work begins with diplomats at a conference table covered in green cloth, evoking the peace treaties of the 1930s, but the discussion is abandoned when they pull pistols from their pockets to shoot in the air, symbolizing a declaration of war. The following six scenes portray different aspects of wartime, and the ballet ends as it began: with the "Gentlemen in Black" back around the green table. As in the Group Theatre's production of Auden's play, masks were used to exaggerate facial features and pistol shots were used for moments of emphasis. Both *The Dance of Death* and *Der Grüne Tisch* were politically charged *danses macabres*, and Suzanne Walther's observation that in *Der Grüne Tisch* the "choreography of the ballet is inseparable from its message" resonates with the Group Theatre's aesthetic aims.²⁴ It seems unlikely that the premise of Auden's *The Dance of Death*, a prominent late medieval allegory recently explored by writers such as August Strindberg as well, was derived from Jooss, but the manifest staging similarities lend significance to Doone's admiration of Jooss's work.

Auden and Eliot

Although Doone's Ballets Russes-inspired theories shifted to accommodate the expressionist aesthetics of *Tanztheater*, they nevertheless suggest a conceptualization of poetic drama incongruous with that of Auden, a poetic dramatist known for "absolutely hat[ing] ballet": a form that could claim only to be "a very, very minor art."²⁵ But Doone was not alone in envisioning the Ballets Russes as a progenitor for a new form of poetic drama. T. S. Eliot had long theorized about the impact that the

Ballets Russes was going to have on the poetic theater of the future, and Auden was familiar with Eliot's work. In Sidnell's formulation, as a beginning dramatist Auden "was stimulated by T. S. Eliot's acute interest in dramatic poetry," taking "cues from Eliot's essays in *The Sacred Wood*" (Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, 62, 38). The Eliotian perspective that begins to shade Auden's writings on poetic drama in the 1930s helps elucidate the collaboration between a poetic dramatist and dancer who appear to have few shared artistic sympathies.

Scholars have demonstrated the extent to which Eliot's spectatorship of dance shaped his early poetry, criticism, and theories of poetic drama.²⁶ For my purposes, the relationship that Eliot's critical writings draw between the Ballets Russes, form, and poetic drama are most significant. Eliot first introduced his idea of the relationship between ballet and poetic drama in his review of the Phoenix Society's 1919 production of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, in which he writes that the goal of modern verse dramatists must be "[t]o obtain, with verse, an effect as immediate and direct as that of the best ballet."²⁷ He expands on this theory in "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," a *Sacred Wood* essay, making clear that in light of the modern "death" of poetic drama, dramatists must look to the ballet as an example of how to achieve the intensity poetry seeks: of this aim, "[a] mute theatre is a possibility . . . the ballet is an actuality."²⁸ There is a craving for a *donnée* that draws Eliot "toward the present mirage of poetic drama" and causes him to look to an extant "form of entertainment" that can be simplified into "a form of art" ("The Possibility," 2:279, 2:283). "Form" is one of Eliot's main preoccupations and he would later make the explicit argument that what the Ballets Russes had to offer the burgeoning new poetic drama was a particular form. As a speaker in Eliot's "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" suggests,

A few years ago I . . . was delighted by the Russian ballet. Here seemed to be everything that we wanted in drama, except the poetry. It did not teach any "lesson," but it had form . . . If there is a future for drama, and particularly for poetic drama, will it not be in the direction indicated by the ballet? Is it not a question of form . . . ?²⁹

Form for Eliot is not simply a structure—the division of a play into acts, or its adherence to a particular metrical arrangement—it rather concerns the interaction of a work's component elements. "To create a form," Eliot writes, "is not merely to invent a shape, a rhyme or rhythm. It is also the realization of the whole appropriate content of this rhyme or rhythm" ("The Possibility," 2:280). This rhythm is for Eliot inherently related to feeling—"[t]he human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse"—and both poetry and ballet exploit the relationship between emotion and rhythm to "get at the permanent and universal": the ballet is valuable because it has "concerned itself with a permanent form" ("Dialogue," 3:399–400).

Although Auden was known for his distaste of ballet, he seems to have found value in Eliot's Ballets Russes-inspired theories, less for the concept of "permanence" than for what balletic form might suggest about the future possibilities of developing and staging a poetic dramatic text. In 1934, Auden published a review of Priscilla Thou-

756 less's *Modern Poetic Drama* that begins to hint at this appreciation. Thouless's work outlined the state of twentieth-century poetic drama in Britain and offered for Auden merely an "exhibition in perpetual motion models." The problem with Britain's poetic dramatists, Auden suggests, is

that those who would write poetic drama, refuse to start from the only place where they can start, from the dramatic forms actually in use. These are the variety-show, the pantomime, the musical comedy and revue . . . the thriller, the drama of ideas, the comedy of manners, and, standing somewhat eccentrically to these, the ballet.

If the would-be poetic dramatist demands extremely high-brow music and unfamiliar traditions of dancing, he will, of course, fail; but if he is willing . . . to accept what he finds to his hand and develop its latent possibilities, he may be agreeably surprised to find that after all the public will stand, nay even enjoy, a good deal of poetry.³⁰

That Auden includes ballet in his list of forms that may be developed into poetic drama is remarkable given his declared hatred of the art. This shift is perhaps indebted to Eliot, to whose criticism Auden appears to allude. Eliot wrote that Elizabethan audiences wanted entertainment but would "stand a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art" ("The Possibility," 2:283). The ballet, Eliot concluded, was "an actuality" that attested to the possibility of uniting the stage with literary art (2:282). Although Auden affords ballet a less significant position in his discussion of extant forms, it is important to acknowledge that he seems to engage with some of Eliot's Ballets Russes-centered theories about the poetic theater of the future.

There is no evidence of Auden having frequented the ballet prior to his work on poetic drama and whence his avowed hatred came is unclear. Later in his career, Auden would collaborate with and allude to numerous artists whose careers had taken off under the auspices of the Ballets Russes. Auden met Igor Stravinsky in 1947 and then provided libretti for *The Rake's Progress* (1951), *Delia* (1952), and *Elegy for J. F. K.* (1964), and he translated Bertolt Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins* (1933) for George Balanchine's New York City Ballet in 1958. Lincoln Kirstein recalls that Auden came every so often to see New York City Ballet, and even took it upon himself to give Balanchine advice on *The Prodigal Son* (1929).³¹ Auden refers to Diaghilev and Nijinsky in his poem "September 1, 1939," and in 1954 he wrote the article "Ballet's Present Eden," suggesting that Balanchine's *The Nutcracker* was a "festival of joy" and that "only those who have lost their sense of joy and for whom, consequently, ballet is a meaningless art will find that juvenile."³² Medley suggests that in America "Wystan suddenly decid[e] that one of the great people in his life is more or less Balanchine," and a letter from the early 1950s reveals that Auden indeed found Balanchine's ballets "lovely."³³ This *volte face* would reach completion after Auden's move to America, but there were indications of its approach that began around the time of Auden's involvement with the Group Theatre and his first collaboration with the former Ballets Russes dancer Rupert Doone.

The Dance of Death

Auden's *The Dance of Death* was the Group Theatre's first commissioned work and Doone's first opportunity to fashion his collaborative poet's theater, modeled on the Ballets Russes and further honed by his exposure to the work of Cocteau, Jooss, Eliot, and others. Despite Doone's ideals, there was no egalitarian cooperation between choreographer, designer, composer, and poet, but between Auden and Doone the collaborative process was reasonably heterarchical. Although Auden provided the textual framework guiding the production, the play had been commissioned by Doone to suit the Group Theatre's needs and Auden's composition process was informed by observing the Group's training in action. Mendelson suggests that Doone's authority was such that by 1935 Auden would find himself losing patience with Doone's "dictatorial manner," but the composition history of *The Dance of Death*, begun in 1932, reveals a more level meeting of artistic sympathies (Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 244). This may well have been due to Auden's appreciation of the innovations to which Doone's "dictatorship" led. John Allen, a Group Theatre actor, recalls that while "[e]veryone [at the Group Theatre], from W. H. Auden to the newest recruit . . . found [Doone] infuriating, incoherent, [and] tyrannical," they had to admit that he was also, as was "far more important," "inventive, imaginative, productive, [and] convincing," possessing "that natural originality which he shared with Wystan Auden."³⁴ *The Dance of Death* is the product of these two original minds and attests to Doone's conviction that new forms arise when a poet is willing to act as a "secretary of ideas" for an acting troupe committed to the possibilities of a "total theatre" particularly suited to poetic drama.

When *The Dance of Death* was published by Faber & Faber in 1933, it garnered mixed reviews. The text was provocative doggerel that on reading was somewhat abstruse, and the political message, although clearly left leaning, was frustratingly imprecise. In the words of "the Announcer," this one-act play was simply "a picture of the decline of a class"—an unmistakably Marxist premise.³⁵ This moribund middle class is dreaming of a "new life," but, as the Announcer tells us, they "secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them. We show you that death as a dancer" (Auden, *Dance*, 7). This dancer, capitalism incarnate, leads the middle class on a Dantean journey from escapism at a Riviera hotel to nationalistic fervor, from an idealistic attempt to reach "the very heart of Reality" to a New Year's party at the Alma Mater night club (28). Karl Marx then takes a bit part, arriving to Felix Mendelssohn's wedding march only to watch the dancer expire and to pronounce, in what prove to be the closing lines of the play, "[t]he instruments of production have been too much for him. He is liquidated" (38). This ending made it difficult even for leftist critics to extract a clear message from the palpable Marxist inclination of the text. Terence Greenidge of *The Socialist Review* thought that although "[i]t is good that Auden should be on our side," "the *dénouement* is too abrupt, and the leading-up to it is very obscure": in short, "[t]he Marxism seemed to me to miss fire [*sic*]."³⁶ Edwin Berry Burgum, writing in an anthology of proletarian literature, similarly fretted over the fact that in *The Dance of Death* "[t]he death of capitalism is not accompanied and promoted by any conscious

758 and accelerating mass pressure.”³⁷ As the bizarre nature of Auden’s text suggests, *The Dance of Death* is more libretto than script and meaning begins to crystallize when the text is staged. As Auden himself would argue, “*The Dance of Death* is meant for acting not reading. It depends so much on the music and dancing to give it body” (quoted in Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, 125).

The Dance of Death was produced by the Group Theatre at London’s Westminster Theatre in 1934 and 1935. In 1934, Auden’s play was preceded by *The Deluge*, from the Chester Mystery Plays, and was part of private performances for members of the Group held on February 25 and March 4. In 1935, *The Deluge* was replaced by Eliot’s *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926/27): this unusual double bill opened the Group Theatre’s first public season on October 1 and ran for two weeks. For these productions Doone choreographed both the main role of Death, which he danced himself, as well as the chorus, which was rehearsed by Guthrie to save Doone from trying to dance and direct simultaneously. Herbert Murrill, the Group’s composer, wrote, directed, and played the music—predominantly “parodies of popular forms”—while Medley made the costumes and the props (flags, parasols, megaphones) that constituted the sparse stage design (Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, 75). The highly symbolic sun mask worn by Doone was designed by Henry Moore.

The Group Theatre’s promptbook, a heavily annotated copy of the Faber edition of *The Dance of Death*, bears witness to the extent to which dance and movement both supported and subverted textual meaning in performance, while demonstrating the numerous textual emendations that came about through the rehearsal process.³⁸ Many of these emendations appear as manuscript inserts and these, as well as further emendations, are typed up as inserts in the 1935 copy submitted to the Lord Chamberlain.³⁹ The promptbook is marked with the names of the cast from the 1934 production, but Mendelson suggests that it may have been used in 1935 as well, an assertion supported by reviews attesting to the 1935 incorporation of manuscript stage directions.⁴⁰ This promptbook offers elaboration on Doone’s dances, which are cued in the text by Auden’s stage directions, and the movements of the chorus are carefully notated throughout. These notations reveal the extent to which Doone suggests through his choreography that political ideology may be most effectively spread through a message that manifests itself not only in the poetic dramatic text, but also in the rhythmic movements of dance.

The synopsis of *The Dance of Death* that Auden provides in the 1934 program both reveals much about how Auden conceived of his “satire on modern life” and offers a helpful précis of the action:

DEATH appears as a dancer. THE ANNOUNCER is Fate and also Death’s mouthpiece. Death symbolizes that decay which exists within a class of society. Always inspired and always betrayed by the death inside them, this class pursue at first one Utopia and then another without really wanting new life because “secretly they desire the old.”⁴¹

Auden then outlines the three Utopias this class pursues: “DEATH AS THE SUN GOD—CREATOR AND DESTROYER,” which focuses on the “Flash-back to pre-

war arrogance," "DEATH AS DEMAGOGUE," which marks the turn to fascism, and "DEATH AS THE PILOT TO THE HEART OF REALITY."

Disillusioned, the crowd ask for a pilot to the "very heart of reality." Death presents himself. But he collapses through the inanition of the class. Disintegration is complete where they attempt, in the night club, simply to satisfy their individual sensuous desires. The Dancer appears among them in the last stages of senility. He accepts his dissolution and makes his will. While this is declaimed by his attendant nurses, the singers survey the rise and fall of the class through history, until the death blow is given in summary fashion by the economist ("Synopsis").

Auden plays with the *danse macabre* to create a political statement out of death's universality: is it communism that unites humanity across classes, or simply death itself? Political ideology and death are intimately intertwined, and both are spread through the figure of the dancer, Doone.

The inextricability of death, dance, and political ideology is most evident in the transition from the first to the second utopia, in the move from communism to fascism. As the "audience"—actors spread throughout the theater—sing "Red front, red front/ Red united, fighting front" and encourage the chorus to "Rise and make a worker's state" while a red flag is hoisted, the German "manager," whose accent causes him to ask things like "Vy make so a trobble in my theatre," implores the dancer to "Prevent such behaviour / And be our saviour" (copy of *The Dance of Death* submitted to the Lord Chamberlain; Promptbook). Doone begins to dance "as the demagogue" and the chorus "lose their menacing attitude and become fascinated" (Promptbook). As Doone dances, the crowd "follows his movements with their arms held loosely in the air," swaying forwards and backwards to the dancer's ever-present drumbeat—the rhythm that announces his entrances and guides his movements—as though hypnotized. The Announcer reinforces this rhythm with his chants of "English justice, English morals, England for the English," narrating the dancer's corporeal attempts to stir up an English revolution with a xenophobic tirade whilst keeping his "eyes shut" tight, as though to prevent himself from being drawn into the mesmeric dance. In the midst of this political conversion, an "audience member" shouts "Don't you listen to him, he's talking bloody facism [*sic*]!" but his warning is no match for the power of the dance (copy of *The Dance of Death* submitted to the Lord Chamberlain). This dance ends abruptly when the chorus moves their arms upwards in fascist salutes (the manuscript stage direction reads "arms up and forward: 'fascist!'"") that echo the sentiment of the stage decorations (Promptbook). A photograph of this scene shows the chorus grouped together and saluting Doone, who is surrounded by flags bearing large "N"s that suggest the word "Nazi" along with a German military emblem, the Iron Cross (fig. 1). The chorus then turns to beat up the stage manager who has been singled out as "[a] dirty Jew" (Promptbook). The transition to fascism is complete and the chorus form a corporeal "ship of England" to cross the ocean and "save the Anglo-Saxon race," hoisting their "gallant captain" up onto their shoulders to lead the way.



Fig. 1. The Group Theatre's production of W. H. Auden's *The Dance of Death*, Westminster Theatre, 1934 (photo by Pollard Crowther). Doone poses center as Death, while the chorus salutes. Photo: Tate Gallery Archive, London, UK.

In this “ship” the chorus begins singing of their racial purity, evoking, in their chants of “We are all of one blood, we are thoroughbred,” the Nuremberg Laws that had been enacted in Germany just weeks before *The Dance of Death*'s 1935 public première (Promptbook). The “ship” then hits a storm and the chorus's formation becomes increasingly disintegrated as Doone whirls around the stage before collapsing in an epileptic fit. A doctor is called in from the “audience,” and the chorus breaks up all over the stage while “whispering ‘S’-y diseases with concerned glances at Dancer” (Promptbook). ‘S’-y” seems to code syphilis, particularly when combined with the covert whispers of the chorus and the dancer's epileptic fit; disease and fascist ideology prove of the same communicable nature, stemming from and spreading through the figure of the dancer. Death, however, will not hit yet. The dancer is given an injection and a warning to stay away from politics, and the scene moves through a country colony and onto the third utopia, in which the dancer becomes the pilot to “the heart of reality” (Promptbook). This “flight” is expressed through dance—accompanied by the dancer's ever-present drums—and culminates in the dancer's paralysis. The chorus then retires to a night club that the German theater manager has opened—“A cosy little night-club just like home”—as do members of the “audience,” who climb onto the stage and begin to speak in an English approximation of the German language (“Wie geht

es denn? Es geht mir gut. Kommst du mit?” becomes “How goes it then? It goes me well. Comest thou with?”; Promptbook). The dancer is wheeled in to write his will, in which he offers some semblance of repentance: he has decided to leave his worldly possessions to the working class. He buys a round of drinks for the chorus for a New Year’s toast and as the clock strikes twelve, the entire chorus adopts the Germanic manner of speaking (“Neues Jahr. Neues Jahr. Wir haben Durst” becomes “New Year. New Year. We have thirst”; Promptbook). In the context of their earlier embrace of fascist ideology, the middle class’s linguistic switch gains a sinister trace. Yet for this *The Dance of Death* has a new solution. Whereas in Auden’s published text Karl Marx enters as Mendelssohn’s wedding march plays, in performance the march is cut—the marriage between Marx and the middle class is withdrawn—and Marx and two young communists enter no longer after the dancer has passed away from vigorous dancing, but rather after two revolver shots are heard from off stage, and before three more revolver shots occur on stage. A review attests to the repetition of this stage direction in the 1935 production and suggests that it was not only the dancer who dies. Ivor Brown writes: “In [Auden’s] piece the futile middle-class people at one period put on black shirts and maul a Jew. Disgusting; agreed. Then the noble red-shirts come along and ‘liquidate’ the middle-class. I gathered that a little mass-murder was supposed to be a happy ending.”⁴² Marx eliminates the middle class, causing the final line of the play, Marx’s “[t]he instruments of production have been too much for him. He is liquidated,” to become heavily ironic. Yet there is a patriotism to this act: it is followed by the corpse of the dancer being wrapped in the union jack and carried off stage. Frédéric Chopin’s funeral march replaces Mendelssohn’s wedding march, and as the play closes, in A. V. Cookman’s words, “the stage was left to Mr. Karl Marx, who, with a hopeful air, waved the Red Flag over the smoke of his escort’s revolvers.”⁴³

The critical reception of this production of *The Dance of Death* was somewhat mixed, particularly in terms of its presentation of dramatic verse. Whereas a *Times* critic suggested that the Group Theatre’s staging brought out the “liveliness and modernity” of Auden’s verse, contending that this form of “expression . . . gives more than a hint of how poetry . . . may regain its old place in the theatre,” Derek Verschoyle of *The Spectator* criticized the production, arguing that “Auden’s verse is much too loose.”⁴⁴ The work that shared a bill with *The Dance of Death* in 1935, Eliot’s *Sweeney Agonistes*, Verschoyle felt, was “much more impressive,” as there “[t]he rhythms employed are rhythms genuinely new to the theatre and admirably suited for dramatic speech” (“Stage and Screen,” 547). Despite the overarching heterogeneity of the critical responses, the choreographic aspects of the production garnered a multiplicity of appreciative reviews. “If this is an example of spoken ballet—which may be as good a description of it as any other,” Dukes wrote upon seeing *The Dance of Death* in 1935, “then in expressiveness it stands far above the silent form employed by Jooss or for that matter Massine” (Dukes, “The English Scene,” 906–7). Dukes was not the only critic to think about *The Dance of Death* in terms of ballet rather than in terms of text-based drama. In an article entitled “New Ballets,” W. J. Turner suggested that along with the new ballets of Massine *The Dance of Death* was “a herald of a renaissance” of the art



▲
 Fig. 2. The Group Theatre's production of W. H. Auden's *The Dance of Death*, Westminster Theatre, 1934 (photo by Pollard Crowther). 'Karl Marx' waves his red flag as Death, played by Doone, is carried off stage. Photo: Tate Gallery Archive, London, UK.

of the theater, and for Michael Sayers the production suggested that "Rupert Doone will agree with me, that the resolution of the Ballet's difficulties, lies in the action of dramatic theatre."⁴⁵ It is possible that the palpable balletic nature of *The Dance of Death* stemmed partially from the very presence of Doone, as *The Dance of Death* is a highly metatheatrical work and the 1935 program highlighted Doone's career as a Ballets Russes dancer.⁴⁶ Yet the balletic underpinnings of Doone's dramaturgy, in conjunction with the choreography evidenced by the promptbook, suggests that we should read these reviews as an acknowledgement of the significance of movement and corporeal rhetoric to the understanding of the very content of *The Dance of Death*. Doone replaced what might have been illustrative props or sets with corporeal architecture, his choreography was accompanied by a drumbeat whose pulse aided in the expression of the rhythms of Auden's text, and in Doone's chorus the individuality of the dancers is subsumed into a fascist group identity in a sort of Nietzschean frenzy so powerful that the Announcer has to keep his eyes closed to avoid being drawn in. The meta-theatricality of the work suggests that the audience, too, might do better to avert their gazes to avoid the power of this political draw.

The Lord Chamberlain

For the Lord Chamberlain's office, the Group Theatre's new form of poetic drama posed something of a censoring conundrum. When the Group Theatre submitted *The Dance of Death* for licensing in July 1935, it was in the midst of a period that saw the Lord Chamberlain's office become increasingly sensitive to communist propaganda and critiques of the Nazi regime.⁴⁷ Despite *The Dance of Death's* presentation of syphilitic, Germanic fascism that is ultimately stamped out by communism incarnate, the reader G. S. Street had no objections to *The Dance of Death*—apart from finding it “[t]he most incomprehensible play I have had the misfortune to read”:

It is fair to say that the Announcer describes the play as a “picture of the decline of a class” and so on, and that the Dancer is Death. But I decline to believe that I have lost my wits and therefore I assert that no meaning emerges from the text. I see nothing to censor. (*Dance*, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence Files).

The ambiguity of the politics of *The Dance of Death*, created not by the text on its own, but by the interaction of poetic dramatic text, visual metaphor, and corporeal rhetoric, worked in the Group Theatre's favor. The reader's report is brief and perfunctory, and the Lord Chamberlain's commentary is limited to a manuscript addition at the bottom of Street's letter that reads: “I agree this is a most incomprehensible play, but I suppose some people will say they understand it!” (*Dance*, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence Files).

By October 1935, during the run of *The Dance of Death*, Street had a realization about the Group Theatre: “[t]he Group Theatre seems destined to give the censorship more trouble than all the other theatres put together” (quoted in Nicholson, *Censorship*, 2:115). This comment forms part of a report that Street wrote on the Group Theatre's submission of *The Infernal Machine* (1932)—Cocteau's version of the Oedipus myth, ultimately not recommended for license because it staged the “lovemaking of Mother and son”—but it reveals much about Street's evolving understanding of the Group Theatre (quoted in Nicholson, *Censorship*, 2:115). Whether Street was disapproving of the politics of *The Dance of Death* in performance is unclear, but his reports reveal a new awareness of the close eye with which Group Theatre works must be examined. In October 1935, the Group Theatre additionally submitted Auden's and Isherwood's *The Dog Beneath the Skin* for licensing and Street's report begins with the happy realization that this play is “less incoherent than *The Dance of Death*,” although “its satire is equally difficult to follow.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Street discerned that the play was an “obvious attack on Germany” and assumed that “[m]any people will object to the whole play as Communist propaganda.” He realized that the play “cannot be wisely banned on that score” and instead provided a lengthy list of pieces that could not be approved and must be excised, assuming that “if the Lord Chamberlain requires all these excisions the author will withdraw the play. It would not be a great loss.” The Group Theatre did not withdraw the play and instead embarked on the extensive process of emendation and approval that concluded with H. C. Game, a representative of

764 the Lord Chamberlain, attending a rehearsal of *The Dog Beneath the Skin* to ensure that the suspect scenes were appropriate in performance. Game had to confess in his report that he “liked this high-brow frolic,” which he found “reminiscent of a satirical Joos [*sic*] ballet” (*The Dog*, Lord Chamberlain’s Correspondence Files). He did note, however, that “[o]ne of the characters carries a swastika flag which wont [*sic*] do” and another “marches up and down giving the Nazi salute.” With the omission of both *The Dog Beneath the Skin* finally earned its license, just days prior to its public première.

We can only speculate as to precisely what Street may have censored in *The Dance of Death* if given the opportunity—the Nazi salutes and “N” flags bearing the German Iron Cross are likely candidates—but it is telling that in his report he highlights the incomprehensibility of the text, offers no discussion of politics, suspect or otherwise, and thereafter comes to view the Group Theatre as the bane of his censorial existence. It does not seem as though either Auden or Doone had intended to evade censorship in this way. Their later works such as *The Dog Beneath the Skin* certainly suggest that there was no concerted effort to avoid endorsements of communism or overt critiques of Germanic fascist regimes. But Auden may have been pleasantly surprised by the way in which Doone’s Ballets Russes-inspired theories proved significant for his own quest of creating politically engaged theater. Auden, known for his leftwing sympathies, had picked up an interest in political theater, probably during the nine months he spent in Berlin in the late 1920s, experiencing the politics of late Weimar. Auden arrived in time to see Brecht’s and Kurt Weill’s *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), which Brecht followed with a series of *Lehrstücke* that emphasized issues of class-consciousness. Like Brecht, Erwin Piscator was developing epic theater emphasizing the sociopolitical content of drama and with his Proletarian Theatre was making bold advances across the German stage. The Group Theatre, although it would take on something of a leftwing coloring, was less explicitly political than many of its German, or British, contemporaries. The Worker’s Theatre Movement, for example, was distinguished by its revolutionary, communist politics and by its commitment to agitprop theater, which was developing as a vehicle for political agitation and engagement with working class audiences. What Doone and the Group Theatre offered Auden, and indeed what he helped create, was not a platform for propaganda theater, but rather a place to explore the possibilities generated in blurring the boundary between the poetic and the political.

In light of *The Dance of Death*’s ephemeral politics, dependent as they were on the poetic stage language of Doone, it is important to note that as Auden’s work with the Group Theatre progressed, so, too, did his conviction that poetic dramatic form and politics were intimately intertwined. In 1938 he would give a lecture at the Sorbonne entitled “The Future of English Poetic Drama,” in which he suggests that the “drama of the future” will probably deal with themes “which one may call partly political and partly psychological.”⁴⁹ Although Auden acknowledges that this statement may be more reflective of his own personal interests than of any particular prescience—the statement could certainly apply to *The Dance of Death*—he goes on to indicate that there is something inherently political in Britain’s search for a new poetic dramatic form. Auden sees “a struggle between destiny and free will” taking place in the outer world

that is “bound, whether we like it or not, to affect our field as artists”; the dramatist of today must show the relationship between the individual and society and “this struggle is taking place in the political field” (“The Future,” 1:723–24). Although Auden concludes with the modest assertion that he does not know what the poetic drama of the future will look like, he is steadfast in his conviction that this “search for a dramatic form is very closely bound up with something much wider and much more important, which is the search for a society which is both free and unified” (1:725). Auden makes no mention of ballet in this lecture, yet his focus on the “future” of poetic drama has an Eliotian trace and he may well be using Eliot’s theories as a point of departure. We must remember, then, that in his theories of the poetic theater of the future, Eliot himself is drawing on his spectatorship of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes.

In 1948, Ashley Dukes would reflect on the origins of the British theater’s “new dramatic poetry” and contend that while many suppose that the Mercury Theatre’s 1935 production of Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) marked the beginning of this new poetic drama, it can in fact be traced to “around 1930,” with the establishment of Rupert Doone’s Group Theatre (“T. S. Eliot in the Theatre,” 111). Those who had considered the poet’s theater “solely a dramatist’s creation,” Dukes recalls, were probably “repelled” by the “atmosphere of youthful experimentation that surrounded [the Group Theatre’s] work” (111). *The Dance of Death* marked the emergence of this new poetic drama, contesting the hierarchy of a theater in which the poetic dramatic text reigned while revealing the political potential of a message created by interaction of poetic dramatic text, visual metaphor, and corporeal rhetoric. Hobson, the critic with whom I began this article, had anticipated that the formal innovation of *The Dance of Death* would render it “epoch-making,” appreciating it less for its intrinsic merits than for what it indicated for verse drama. Although Hobson joined a host of further critics in tracing the innovation of this “new, significant art-form” directly to Auden, this new form was conceived of and brought into existence by Doone. Recognizing a connection between corporeal creative intelligence and an expansion of the boundaries of poetic expression, Doone began to introduce new choreographic possibilities into the realm of poetic drama.

Notes

1. Harold Hobson, “The Dance of Death,” *The Christian Science Monitor* 277, no. 27 (1935): 12.
2. Ashley Dukes, “The English Scene,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* 19, no. 12 (1935): 906–8.
3. Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920–1940* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979), 124.
4. Rupert Doone, Manuscripts about Acting, Papers of Robert Medley, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA), 894/13/2, London, UK.
5. Ashley Dukes, “T. S. Eliot in the Theatre,” in *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium*, ed. Richard March and Tambimuttu (London: Frank & Cass, 1948), 111–18, 111.
6. See Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 62–90; Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 102–3; Claire Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 162–68; and Claire Warden, *Migrating Modernist Performance: British Theatrical Travels Through Russia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 37–38.

7. Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1980), 97.
8. Rupert Doone, Notebook of Prose Writings, 1930–37, Additional Papers of Robert Medley, TGA, 953/1/25, London, UK.
9. Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden: A Critical Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 244.
10. See Doone, Manuscripts about Acting; Rupert Doone, “What About the Theatre?,” *New Verse* 18 (1935): 9.
11. Quoted in Robert Medley, *Drawn from the Life: A Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 163.
12. Steve Nicholson reminds that “[n]o appraisal of [British] theatre in the 1930s can . . . fail to acknowledge the role of official censorship in determining what audiences could see and what playwrights could write.” See Steve Nicholson, “1930s British Drama,” in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 217–27, 221.
13. *The Dance of Death*, Lord Chamberlain’s Correspondence Files, 1900–1968, British Library, LCP CORR 1935/14176, London, UK.
14. Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, “Modernism and Theatrical Performance,” *Modernist Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2005): 59.
15. See Olga Taxidou, *Greek Tragedy and Modernist Performance: Hellenism as Theatricality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance*; Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre*; and Warden, *Migrating Modernist Performance*.
16. Although Sidnell suggests that it is a “common misapprehension” that Doone danced with Diaghilev’s company, programs bearing Doone’s name attest to his Ballets Russes career. See Michael J. Sidnell, “Group Theatre of London,” *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, May 26, 2016, doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/107544, and, for instance, the program for a Ballets Russes performance occurring on August 3, 1929 in Vichy (Bibliothèque nationale de France AID-931, 6,435–439, Paris, France).
17. Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), viii.
18. Duncan Grant to Rupert Doone, January, 1930, Papers of Robert Medley, TGA, 894/3/8/5, London, UK.
19. Rupert Doone to Robert Medley, February 22, 1930, Additional Papers of Robert Medley, TGA, 953/1/8/2, London, UK.
20. Rupert Doone to Robert Medley, dates listed run from February 14, 1930–March 17, 1930, Additional Papers of Robert Medley, TGA, 953/1/8/1–19, London, UK. Further letters are undated.
21. Quoted in Léonide Massine, *My Life in Ballet*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll and Robert Rubens (London: Macmillan, 1968), 102.
22. Jean Cocteau, *Cock and Harlequin*, trans. Rollo H. Meyers (London: The Egoist Press, 1921), 55.
23. Jean Cocteau, “The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower,” trans. Michael Benedikt, in *Modern French Theatre: The Avant-Garde, Dada and Surrealism*, ed. Michael Benedikt and George E. Wellwarth (New York: Dutton, 1966), 94–115, 98.
24. Suzanne K. Walthers, “The Dance of Death: Description and Analysis of *The Green Table*,” *Choreography and Dance* 3 (1993): 53.
25. Robert Medley, “Interview with Andrew Lambirth,” May 4, 1994, British Library, C466/19/01–10, London, UK; Nicolas Nabokov, “Excerpts from Memories,” in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), 133–48, 145.
26. See, for instance, Susan Jones, “‘At the still point’: T. S. Eliot, Dance, and Modernism,” *Dance Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2009): 31–51; Susan Jones, “Eliot and Dance,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Eliot and the Arts*, ed. Frances Dickey and John D. Morgenstern (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 225–42; Jones, *Literature, Modernism and Dance*, 223–49; Nancy Hargrove, “T. S. Eliot and the Dance,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 21, no. 1 (1997): 62–5; and Terri Mester, *Movement and Modernism: Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Williams, and Early Twentieth-Century Dance* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 67–89.
27. T. S. Eliot, “*The Duchess of Malfi* at the Lyric: and Poetic Drama,” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 2, *The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 170–75, 173.

28. T. S. Eliot, “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 2:278–85, 2:282. As Irene Morra has demonstrated, poetic drama was in fact far from moribund at this time. See Irene Morra, *Verse Drama in England, 1900–2015: Art, Modernity and the National Stage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

29. T. S. Eliot, “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,” *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 3, *Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 396–412, 399.

30. W. H. Auden, review of *Modern Poetic Drama*, by Priscilla Thouless, *The Listener*, May 9, 1934, 808.

31. Nicholas Jenkins, “A Conversation with Lincoln Kirstein,” *The W. H. Auden Society Newsletter*, October 1991, audensociety.org/07newsletter.html#P13_3295.

32. W. H. Auden, “Ballet’s Present Eden,” in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden, Prose*, ed. Edward Mendelson, vol. 3, 1949–1955, (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), 393–96, 396.

33. See Medley, “Interview with Lambirth”; W. H. Auden to Rupert Doone, March 7, probably 1951, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, New York, NY.

34. John Allen, foreword to Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, 17–21, 20.

35. W. H. Auden, *The Dance of Death* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), 7.

36. Terence Greenidge, “The Dance of Death,” *The Socialist Review* 5, no. 10 (1934): 58–59.

37. Edwin Berry Burgum, “Three English Radical Poets,” *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, ed. Granville Hicks, Michael Gold, Isidor Schneider, Joseph North, Paul Peters, and Alan Calmer (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), 330–39, 336.

38. Promptbook for the Group Theatre’s productions of W. H. Auden’s *The Dance of Death*, Group Theatre Collection, Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archives, THM/118/6/2, London, UK.

39. W. H. Auden, *The Dance of Death*, submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for licensing, Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, British Library, LCP 1935/29, London, UK.

40. Edward Mendelson, “*The Dance of Death*: History, Editions, and Text,” in *W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood: Plays and Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden 1928–1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 534–42, 535.

41. W. H. Auden, “Synopsis,” program for *The Deluge* and *The Dance of Death*, February 25 and March 4, 1934, Group Theatre Collection, Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archives THM/118/2/9, London, UK.

42. Ivor Brown, “The Dance of Death,” *The Observer*, October 6, 1935.

43. A. V. Cookman, “The Theatre,” *The London Mercury*, November 1935, 56.

44. “Westminster Theatre: The Dance of Death,” *The Times*, October 2, 1935; Derek Verschoyle, “Stage and Screen: The Theatre,” *The Spectator*, October 11, 1935, 547.

45. W. J. Turner, “New Ballets,” *The New Statesman and Nation*, July 21, 1934, 90; Michael Sayers, “Drama: Theatre at Last!,” *The New English Weekly*, October 10, 1935, 436.

46. Program for the Group Theatre’s production of *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Dance of Death*, October 1935, Group Theatre Collection, Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archives THM/118/2/16, London, UK.

47. See Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900–1968*, vol. 2, 1933–1952 (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2005).

48. *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, Lord Chamberlain’s Correspondence Files, 1900–1968, British Library, LCP CORR 1935/14254, London, UK.

49. W. H. Auden, “The Future of English Poetic Drama,” in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden, Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, ed. Edward Mendelson, vol. 1, 1926–1938, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 716–25, 718.

