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Nicholas Dromgoole, eminent ballet critic who married a ballet star and entertained Princess Diana – obituary

He dined with Prince Rainier, banqueted in Beijing and appeared in a Nutcracker skit at a famous 1985 Christmas gala at Covent Garden

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Nicholas Dromgoole, who has died aged 96, was The Sunday Telegraph's ballet critic for 33 years, the last survivor of an outstanding generation of critics who chronicled the emergence of the fledgling British ballet from Second World War privations to become a global phenomenon.

A teacher by day and critic by night, Nicholas Dromgoole had a deceptively discreet manner, appearing to be the pattern of a bespectacled old-school English gentleman, but leading a glitzy private life. He acquired an unique connection to the art form he wrote about when at the age of 50 he married the Royal Ballet star Lesley Collier, a love match that necessitated his silence in print on her performances.

However, his wife's stage partnership with Rudolf Nureyev brought Dromgoole such

“fringe benefits”, as he described them, as lunching with Prince Rainier, dining at Number 10 Downing Street, banqueting in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, and being on nodding acquaintance with members of the Royal Family.

He was unique among critics in being invited to take part in one of the famous private Christmas party galas at the Royal Opera House where patrons and dancers let their hair down. At the 1985 gala Princess Diana danced with the ballet star Wayne Sleep, to her husband’s alleged disapproval. Unbeknownst to most of the audience, Dromgoole was the heavily whiskered invalid grandfather in a Nutcracker skit – the only time a journalist was invited to join in the private entertainment, his discretion being trusted.

Nicholas Dromgoole’s writing style was clear and communicative, and, though often amusing, he could also be fierce. He saw the critic as being on the side of the public and felt that choreographers, dancers and directors should take informed criticism on the chin, but he also condemned disrespect towards great talent.



Lesley Collier, Nicholas Dromgoole's wife, dancing with Russian star Mikhail Baryshnikov in the first performance of Frederick Ashton's Rhapsody (1980) | CREDIT: Corbis Historical

He was furious at the behaviour of some audience members and members of the press when the ageing Rudolf Nureyev gave a dreadful last UK tour in 1991, likening them to “jackals and hyenas” tearing at the carcass of a once regal panther.

And he was a staunch supporter of the later productions of the Royal Ballet choreographer Kenneth MacMillan, such as *Isadora*, *Different Drummer* and *Valley of Shadows*, whose psychological, often dark-souled approach was not appreciated by many ballet fans. He considered MacMillan “a true master of theatre”, and felt that even his critical failures were the products of an exceptional creative mind.

In later years, however, Dromgoole took a dislike to much new British dance, which he found slack or not physically rigorous, and whose abstract concepts did not convince him. Many in the burgeoning independent dance sector dreaded his appearances in the front row of the stalls. “If he doesn’t like it, why does he come?” lamented the producer at one independent venue.

On the other hand, a Dromgoole column of the 1990s disparaging the unfit physiques of some contemporary performers prompted more than one choreographer to ask their dancers to shape up.





Nicholas Dromgoole | CREDIT: Picasa

Born in Maranhão, Brazil, on December 3 1927, Nicholas Arthur Dromgoole was the third son of a Civil Service telegraphist, also Nicholas Arthur Dromgoole, who had married Violet Brookes at the end of the First World War and spent some years working in South America. Violet bore two of her four sons abroad, Jolyon in Chile, and Nicholas in Brazil. Nicholas's younger brother, Patrick, is the television and film director, father of former Shakespeare's Globe director Dominic Dromgoole.

The family returned to England when Nicholas junior was a baby. The Dromgoole boys won scholarships to Dulwich College and to Oxford, where Nicholas read history at St Edmund Hall.

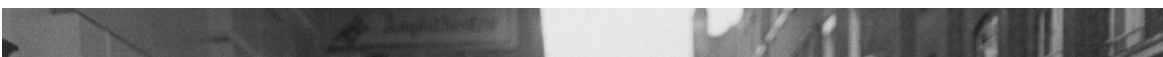
He joined the Oxford University Ballet Club, alongside his contemporaries Clement Crisp, John Percival, Clive Barnes and Oleg Kerensky, all inspired by the postwar success of the Sadler's Wells Ballet. They invited the Ballets Russes star Tamara Karsavina – Nijinsky's partner – to Oxford to educate them about ballet, and between them would provide the Times, Financial Times, Dance and Dancers, the Daily Mail, the New Statesman and, in due course, The Sunday Telegraph (founded in 1961) with an eminent squad of ballet critics.

Dromgoole hoped to be a teacher and writer and went on to the Sorbonne to study French theatre. There he fell in love with a young Frenchwoman, but their plans to settle together were abruptly ended when she died of tuberculosis.

Returning to England, he founded his own educational establishment and was so successful that in 1955, aged only 27, he was appointed headmaster of Pierrepoint School, Frensham, an independent boys' boarding school. Among his scholarship pupils was Robert North, the future choreographer and artistic director of Ballet Rambert and Scottish Ballet, who credited Dromgoole with supporting his ambitions.

In 1962 Dromgoole moved to London where he became chairman of the new Institute of Choreology, or Benesh Institute – which organised the recording of choreography for posterity – and inaugurated a humanities department at the then Sir John Cass College (subsequently London Guildhall University), where he taught arts and media to degree students for 40 years.

A good boxer and rugby player in his youth, Dromgoole ran the college rugby team and managed the students' hostel alongside his teaching, spending his evenings at the ballet for The Sunday Telegraph, where he had succeeded Ted Nathan in 1965.





Lesley Collier, principal dancer at the Royal Ballet, photographed in 1973; she married Nicholas Dromgoole in 1977

Over three decades, Nicholas Dromgoole charted the explosion of world interest in the Royal Ballet of the Nureyev era, the emergence of many new ballet and dance companies around Britain, and – less to his taste – the influence on British contemporary dance of the American modernists.

Reviewing Royal Ballet School performances, he had noticed the teenaged Lesley Collier, and they married in 1977 when she was 30 and he 50. By then she was a leading

star and would dance with both the Russian superstars Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov at Covent Garden.

They remained close even after divorcing, and Collier told the Telegraph years later that though the marriage had meant that his criticisms of other Royal Ballet performers or policies often rebounded painfully on her, “it would have been very much worse not to have married him.”

Another early “spot” was the young Anthony Dowell. Dromgoole wrote the first book about his famous partnership with Antoinette Sibley, *Sibley and Dowell* (1976), but later, in the 1990s, took issue in his columns with Dowell as Royal Ballet director. When the idea of closing the Royal Ballet was floated, due to the cost overrun for the opera house’s refurbishment, Dromgoole supported the dancers as they forced the management to back down.

Increasingly sceptical about Covent Garden’s dominance of the ballet landscape, he paid enthusiastic attention to former Royal Ballet alumni now in other locations – David Bintley at Birmingham Royal Ballet, Christopher Gable at Northern Ballet and Wayne Eagling at Dutch National Ballet – and to Harold King’s pint-sized touring company London City Ballet, where he felt new creative talents and new audiences were being given a better chance of developing.

However he was aware of becoming out of step with modern developments, and in his retiring column on October 18 1998 Dromgoole declared gracefully that “I have had my hour.”

Nicholas Dromgoole was a member of the British Council’s Drama Advisory Committee and the Southern Arts Dance Panel and lectured on dance and classical drama into his eighties.

Performance Style and Gesture in Western Theatre





by Nicholas Dromgoole

Nicholas Dromgoole's survey of the language of gesture

In latter years he produced several books for Bloomsbury's Oberon Press, including a 2000 play about Molière's sex life, *Marriage in Disguise*, a 2012 book *The Role of the Critic*, and a 2016 survey of the language of gesture, *Performance, Style and Gesture in Western Theatre*. He also wrote introductions to editions of plays by Racine, Molière, Lope de Vega, Schiller and Euripides.

He would frequently be seen at performances squiring glamorous friends such as the Oscar-winning actress Luise Rainer and the jazz singer Elisabeth Welch, and would host generous lunches with dancers at the Garrick Club where he was a member for more than 50 years.

His former wife, Lesley Collier, survives him.

Nicholas Dromgoole, born December 3 1927, died September 20 2023

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