



An Auld Cockle Picker

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A
WELL TRAVELLED MAN

PERCY LOVEGROVE



Abbey Theatre, 25th July, 2006 on the occasion of the launch of "Irish Moves". (L to R) Deirdre Mulrooney, Author, Doreen Lovegrove (nee Cuthbert), myself.

Preface

One day, more than 50 years ago, I had to travel by car from Nairobi in Kenya to Nakuru, 100 miles away, to organise my employers' participation in an agricultural trade show.

On the journey I had a vomiting attack and my driver, Wambua, a trusted colleague, suggested we should return to base.

I decided to carry on and checked into the local hotel for the duration of the show. While arranging the exhibit I was ill again and then decided to seek help.

The local representative of my company told me to go to the hotel, get into bed and he would arrange for a doctor to call.

The doctor at first diagnosed jaundice (I was yellow) and later changed his mind. I had acute appendicitis with peritonitis threatening. An immediate operation was imperative.

No way would I agree to an operation in a small up-country hospital and said I would return to Nairobi. He insisted that I sign a form stating I had disregarded his advice, exonerating him against any subsequent claim.

In the meantime the agent contacted my base to alert them that I was on my way to Nairobi Hospital

for an operation and said my family should be told.

So efficient is the "Bush Telegraph" system that the colleague he contacted found out that they had gone to the cinema. He waited until the film ended, told my wife and son of the situation and accompanied them to the hospital. Their arrival coincided with mine. We embraced, they wished me luck and I headed for pre-op and into theatre.

Next morning I was greeted by a friendly nurse who asked how I was. I replied: "I'm feeling fine." She detected an Irish accent and asked where I was from. "Dublin." "What part of Dublin?" "Clontarf." "Ah. You're an auld cockle picker." I had met a kindred spirit.

My legs have carried me many miles since those days. I hope my travels and experiences will be of interest to you and may even cause a smile or two.

Percy Lovegrove,
December 2008

Foreword

Finding National Treasure

Most auspiciously, on New Year's Eve 2004, I sent a letter out into the universe, via the Irish Times letters page, appealing for images of the "Abbey School of Ballet" (1927 – 1933) for my book "Irish Moves", on the history of dance and physical theatre in Ireland. Ireland's visionary Abbey School of Ballet, dreamed up and founded by none other than WB Yeats and Wicklow-born dance legend Ninette de Valois, who was to become "mother of British Ballet" had been largely overlooked by history. There was scant information available on the ambitious project, and no photographs to be had in any archive. One of the key people involved, and hence name in my letter was Doreen Cuthbert, Abbey ballet original - would any of her family be around with her photo album, perchance?

When my phone rang, and a deep voice at the other end of the line introduced himself as Percy Lovegrove, proud husband of said Doreen Cuthbert, I could hardly believe my ears. To my amazement he handed the phone over to Doreen herself, who assured me that yes, she was indeed *the* Doreen Cuthbert who, according to my photocopy of the

Abbey theatre programme for January 10th, 1928, danced "Pastoral" to music by Schubert, in "The First Performance of the Abbey Theatre Ballets".

Before you could say 'minidisc recorder', I was on the dart out to Sutton, and following Percy's directions to their home, "Four Winds" to meet not only a living piece of history and national treasure, but frankly an absolute scoop. I had tried every archive in Ireland, from the Abbey theatre archive, to the National Photographic Archive, and barely a trace – apart from programme notes – could I find of the Abbey School of Ballet. I couldn't believe my luck, I had struck gold. But I didn't yet realise the extent of my find.

An unforgettable afternoon ensued. Full of old-world charm and impeccable manners, Percy carried in tea, sandwiches and cake on a tray. His delightful Doreen, whose memories of 1927 and WB Yeats, Ninette de Valois, and Lennox Robinson were as vivid as if they had happened yesterday opened up to me and my recorder, in incredible detail as a reddening sun sank spectacularly (dusk falls early on February 8th), into Dublin bay, aptly bathing Doreen's extraordinarily detailed memories in warm nostalgic light. As the energy of this exquisite, dreamy glow filled their south-facing living room, we remarked on a note at the end of the Abbey School of Ballet's 1928 debut programme reading "Ladies sitting in the theatre are requested to remove their hats". How amazing to sit in Doreen and Percy's panoramic living room 77 years later and hear her recall with a chuckle the difficulty she had finding the opening in the curtain to come out on to the stage that Monday night. I had to pinch myself that I was

actually chatting to the star of Ninette de Valois' 1931 choreography, "Fedelma", the very same woman who beat the drum in WB Yeats' original production of "The Dreaming of the Bones", who helped, in fact, to bring all of this "Plays for Dancers" to life. Doreen recounted with relish how Lennox Robinson, who "used to talk as if he was in a dream", came over to the ballet room one day, saying "I'm looking for a vision" (to appear before yet another Abbey legend, FJ McCormack in TC Murray's play "The Pipe in the Fields"). "He pointed at me saying 'you're the very girl'".

While she certainly had a sense of humour, there were no flies on Doreen. Amidst her chuckles and fond reminiscences, she shone light on the real *raison d'être* of the Abbey School of Ballet project, confirming that de Valois intended it to be Ireland's answer to the *Ballets Russes* (with whom de Valois herself had trained and performed), and bemoaned the project's ultimate abandonment and neglect by history.

No slouch when it came to business either, in 1930, at the tender age of 17, this resourceful and entrepreneurial young woman opened her own "Doreen Academy of Dancing" on Dublin's Beresford Place. Naturally, I had to do a double-take on that. What? At the age of 17? But I had made no mathematical error. By the 1940's she had added ballroom dancing to her teaching repertoire, and owned her own car in which she darted around from one teaching venue to another (an asset that would provide the deposit for their first house). That's when, serendipitously, the young Percy Lovegrove turned up for some private tuition. It was a brave

new world to Percy, who had come up to Dublin from County Laois. "He had it in him", recalled Doreen lovingly. "He didn't have two left feet". In no time the couple were giving demonstrations at dances around Dublin. Launching a new adventure, Doreen and Percy married, their son David was born, and in 1952 they moved to Kenya. When he took up a job covering the exciting project that was the ambitious and controversial trans-African Railway system, Percy wasted no time in learning Swahili in order to communicate better with the Kenyans. Journeys are a recurring theme in their life-story, as you will see from Percy's inspiring, adventure-strewn memoir.

As for the photographs – Doreen threw in a funny anecdote about how, in those days when a container full of powder exploded at the top of a long stick to make a flash, half of a photographer's wax moustache blew off, as he tumbled off his makeshift plinth in the Abbey auditorium attempting to photograph Ninette de Valois' dancers while deeming them "too sausagey". Any photos Doreen might have had of the Abbey School of Ballet were misplaced in the 1952 family move to Nairobi, she reckoned. But at least now I had her invaluable word-pictures of the era, the main players, and their dream of a miniature *Ballets Russes* for Ireland.

As Doreen painted them that February afternoon, towering legends that now populate pages of Irish theatre history took on human characteristics and foibles. From Ninette de Valois ("a woman, I'm telling you"), ordering 14 year-old Doreen to pin up her mane of blonde curls; to peering surreptitiously at Lady Gregory in the Green Room presiding over

her famous barm-brack; getting a splinter in her foot from dancing on the brand new dance floor at the opening of Oliver St. John Gogarty's Renvyle House Hotel, and Lennox Robinson ordering a new electric sewing machine to make life easier for Doreen's mother, who made costumes for the Abbey theatre – real human beings emerged. Percy, who came into Doreen's life after the Abbey episode, was just as enrapt in these vivid, animated anecdotes as I was. A superb storyteller, with a telling eye for detail, Doreen would have given Scheherezade a run for her money. But the Abbey School of Ballet episode was merely a prelude to the rest of her life – and its more global Irish Moves.

Once established in Nairobi, it didn't take long before the Doreen Lovegrove Academy of Ballet was born, introducing the Royal Academy of Dance syllabus to Kenya. While Percy thrived at the Department of Transport, Doreen's ballet school also flourished. She taught in the Valley Road Loreto Convent; the Goanese Convent; in a Nairobi suburb called "Karen", after its former resident Karen Blixen (played by Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa*), and drove to far-flung schools up-country across the Rift Valley to Nakuru – until Percy deemed it too dangerous with the Mau Mau uprising. So, through Doreen, the influence of the Abbey School of Ballet spread across the globe.

This formidable woman staged ballets at the National Theatre in Nairobi and broadcast radio series like "Ballets I have Seen" – scripted by Percy in the kind of perfect teamwork that seemed to characterise their 61-year marriage. Did I mention by the way how obviously besotted they were with each

other?. It was refreshing to see how they revelled in each other's company.

The 13 years they spent in Kenya through the 50's and early 60's were one of the most fascinating times in African history, leading up to independence for many African countries. When it got to the unexpected African part of their journey, if it was possible to be even more on the edge of my seat in their sun-drenched living room – I was now about to fall off it. Having spent time in South Africa (and subsequently co-producing "South Africa Week" at the Helix theatre in 2002); Rwanda, Kenya and briefly in Congo, where I reported on the work of NGO Christian Blind Mission in 2004; and soon to set off for Ethiopia, to report on Irish Aid there, I was rivetted – and not just by the dancing. I was now officially in awe of this wonderful couple and the fantastic, adventurous and open-spirited international life they had led. This bright spark, Doreen Cuthbert, a name on Abbey School of Ballet programmes was much, much more than I had bargained for.

Over 3 years later, I'm thrilled to be reminded of their story through Percy's extraordinary and characteristically eloquent memoir. Their life-story makes page-turning reading.

The heights they reached of unity and worldly adventure – aesthetically, creatively, in the daily living of their lives, and their exemplary marriage is a real gift to the reader. "We were always a team", offered Doreen happily, alluding to the solid foundation of their rich and enduring relationship. "We work together, don't we?" That's just one of many heartening lessons to be learned from Percy's entertaining, historically important, and multi-

layered memoir.

I was thrilled, and blessed to have Doreen, Percy, and David Lovegrove at the launch of "Irish Moves" in the Abbey theatre in 2006, giving my project enormous street cred, bearing testament to and helping reclaim that visionary if shortlived endeavour The Abbey School of Ballet. It was an immense privilege to have met Doreen, let alone to be graced with her presence at the launch. While a celebration of Doreen's contribution to the history of the Abbey theatre, their presence at an event which was so important for me, embodied the altruistic sense of community that they have brought with them wherever they have gone throughout the globe.

Percy has laid out their remarkable contribution to Irish cultural life, and inspiring worldly life-journey in the intriguing pages that follow. His own life story makes better reading than any *bildungsroman*. Truth is stranger and more wonderful than fiction – and as you will see, nothing could compare to Percy and Doreen's fabulous and heartwarming journey. We are all indebted to Percy for immortalising it here.

Deirdre Mulrooney, PhD.

November, 2008

Author of "Irish Moves", Cultural Journalist,
Lecturer in Drama, Theatre Director

Elephant below Mt. Kilimanjaro by Doreen Lovegrove



*Overflowing with reminiscences of a life
lived to the full and of travels worldwide.*

Percy Lovegrove, now in his 88th year, was orphaned at two years of age and raised by an uncle and aunt in Mountmellick, Co. Laois.

His vivid description of growing up in a rural environment in the 1930s captures an image of an Ireland barely recognisable today.

Boarding school, a first job as a junior railway clerk, followed by many years living in the heart of Kikuyu land in Kenya during the Mau Mau rebellion, makes fascinating reading.

Back home and a host of intriguing and humorous stories associated with the country's early efforts to gain markets abroad while employed by Córas Tráchtála/ Irish Export Board.

This life story is closely interwoven with the author's immediate family and, in particular, with his wife, who was multi-talented artistically. Four generations; who could ask for more?