

Making moves on opera

LI choreographer Doug Varone melds music, story and modern dance

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Special to Newsday

It's 9 o'clock on a mid-April morning, and Doug Varone has been up since 6, after hitting the sack at 3. "I'm on my fifth cup of coffee," he says, sounding groggy and driven. The choreographer is intent on finishing the storyboard for his surreal modern-dance opera, "Dense Terrain," his most ambitious work to date, before his company takes off on tour in four days.

Premiering Wednesday, this commission for the Brooklyn Academy of Music crowns a 20th anniversary season for Doug Varone and Dancers that began last fall at Manhattan's Joyce Theater with two stunning new works. In between, Varone created a dance for Juilliard students and choreographed the Minnesota Opera's much-admired premiere of Ricky Ian Gordon's "The Grapes of Wrath."

The 50-year-old Syosset native isn't just keeping busy, though, he's keeping interested. "It's really possible to stop exploring things at a certain point," Varone worried almost a decade ago. Since his 1993 breakout hit, "Rise," he has changed the parameters and upped the ante with every outing.

In 2000's "Neither," set in the ghostly Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side, he invented a form for himself that he dubbed "danced theater." For last year's "Boats Leaving," about shipwrecked souls, he experimented with what might be called "danced photography."

Varone's work has its constants, of course: physical and emotional gravity; voluptuous, unaffected movement; a cinematic and psychologically charged use of space; a rich poetry of gesture, and a love of people as they are. But his vigilance against complacency is constant,

too. "I need to make a shift," he often says.

Long Island roots

With a childhood as rooted as his, adult restlessness would seem almost a foregone conclusion. Varone grew up in a ranch-style house in Syosset that was only the third in its subdivision, built in the mid-1950s on a potato field near a duck farm. To use the phone, you had to walk to the corner for the first few years. The children rode their bikes to the elementary school, and rode home for lunch.

The Varones -- mother, father, older sister and younger brother -- enjoyed a festive, somewhat goofy home life. "We'd have picnics of leftovers in front of the TV," Doug Varone recalls. His Italian-American grandparents -- one pair from New Hyde Park and the other from Brooklyn -- visited a lot.

By the early '60s, the Long Island Expressway stretched to Suffolk County. With the GI Bill guaranteeing low-cost housing loans to veterans, development exploded. Many Long Islanders moved farther out to larger homes.

The Varones stayed put. When her parents retired to Florida in 1986, Doug's sister, Jackie Ciano, and her husband, Jack, moved in to raise three sons. They have gone to the same public schools their mother and uncle did. They don't travel by bicycle anymore, and the lay of the land has changed: "You have a small, little house, then a big, tall house," Jackie Ciano explains.

Other things remain the same. Varone visits his sister as often as his far-flung dance assignments permit. Her family sees all his New York shows, as do his

parents -- "every premiere," he notes happily.

Ballet was the beginning

Like most boys of his generation who went on to become professional dancers, Varone got his start in the doorway of his sister's ballet class. One winter, he was recruited to play the prince in "The Nutcracker" because he was the only boy around. He never looked back. His intended route to fame and glory was not ballet, though; it was tap dance and Broadway musicals. "I grew up knowing every lyric to every song in every musical," he once claimed.

At Syosset High School, whose later alumni include movie star Natalie Portman and Broadway stars Idina Menzel ("Wicked") and Adam Pascal ("Rent"), Varone played "the character actors, the guys with the funny lines," his sister says. "He could be really sarcastic."

Here comes Twyla Tharp

During his junior year, Twyla Tharp showed up. Most high schools think modern dance means flouncing around in bare feet, wafting scarves through the air. Phys ed teacher Jeanne Levine knew better -- and imported choreographers from the city. (Bucking the national trend, the high school has only grown more committed to the arts. It regularly wins state and national recognition for its programs.) A year before Tharp created the ballet that would make her famous -- "Deuce Coupe" for the Joffrey Ballet -- she and her posse taught a bunch of teenagers "The One Hundreds" in the Syosset High gymnasium.

Tharp's early pieces, unlike the high-voltage numbers from her Billy Joel dancical, "Movin' Out," were slinky, slouchy and nonchalant. They looked like something anyone could do. With "The One Hundreds" anyone could. In that 1970 dance, 100 pedestrians join seven trained dancers to skip, hop, shiver and shake for 20 minutes.

"I got it right away," Varone says. "I was totally turned on by it." Making the switch to modern dance, for college he chose the conservatory at the new SUNY Purchase. In his first class in the earthy, spare

technique of José Limon, "something clicked" again. "The other techniques -- Graham, Horton, jazz -- were very stylized. Limon lacked pretense," he recalls. "It felt very human. It felt like home."

"Dense Terrain" retains Varone's own human touch, but the terrain has grown dense. A mysterious figure on multiple oversize video screens looms over the 14 live performers. The singers use a dream language keyed to a lexicon of gestures that the dancers flesh out.

Varone has invented the language and the gestures. He has directed the video and edited it to align the images on-screen with the action onstage, one occasionally bleeding into the other. He has shaped the dance into a Kafkaesque drama. He has even commissioned the score, which requires translating the elusive images in his head into precise cues for the composer.

The musical collaborator

Composer Nathan Larson is used to supporting other artists' visions: He scored the indie films "Boys Don't Cry," "Lilya 4-ever" and "The Woodsman." The big difference here is that "the parameters are wide open," he says. With film, he doesn't start on the score until late in the editing process. For "Dense Terrain," the music and dance emerged together. "We've cross-pollinated each other," he explains.

Larson composed in bits and pieces as Varone fed him evocative images. For the phrase "insects in a jar," he invented a herky-jerky plucked string number. For "shining reverb," he fashioned a swell of ethereal sound that suddenly evaporates. Computer by his side, he tested the samples at Varone's rehearsals, nipping and tucking to fit them to the dance.

Varone and Larson began the process a year and a half ago. Six months along, they had finished a first draft. "It had a different title and was totally different," Larson says serenely. "It's been fun," he adds, "and it's been trial-and-error all the way."

For Varone, Syosset's ever-seeking native son, that's probably just how he likes it.