

Agnes de Mille

(September 18, 1904–October 7, 1993)

Agnes George de Mille, born September 18, 1904 in New York, died on October 7, 1993, in her Greenwich Village apartment of a stroke. The vitality of her mind, her indomitable will, and her quick wit held to the last. In the weeks before her death the dancer, choreographer, writer, lecturer, and director was finishing revisions on a new book, her fourteenth, and planning a hoped-for revival of her 1943 ballet, *Tally-Ho*. De Mille celebrated the American spirit in ballets such as *Rodeo* (1942), and *Fall River Legend* (1947), and on the Broadway stage in the musicals *Oklahoma!*, *Brigadoon*, *Carousel*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and many others. An eloquent and passionate speaker, de Mille advocated dancers' causes and unions, copyright protection for choreographers and Federal support for the arts. She lobbied political parties and congressional committees, explaining the choreographic process and the importance of the arts to society. In 1965 President Johnson appointed de Mille as one of the founding members of the National Advisory Council on the Arts.

De Mille's heritage was that of a storyteller. Her models included her father, William Churchill de Mille, a noted playwright, uncle Cecil B. de Mille, film mogul, and her grandfather Henry George, a writer and single-tax economist. From them she inherited a delight in language, quick precise wit, and the gift of narration—tools she used with ease. Keeping in mind her father's cardinal rule, "Never be a bore," de Mille often took artistic license, manipulating the mundane and occasionally the facts, to weave a better, less tiring tale.

De Mille's father believed, with painter William Hogarth, that "Serious dancing is a contradiction in terms," and discouraged her early ambitions to dance. She did not begin formal dance training until her early teens, and took a break to earn an English honors degree at the University of Southern California (1926). Following her parents' divorce in 1927, de Mille and her mother moved to New York where Agnes began to give solo recitals in her own works. Her dances were dramatic character sketches based on gesture; her idiom, ballet technique. However, movement invention was not her forte. "I who am primarily an actress and not a mover, bleed for every new gesture," she wrote in a rough draft of her chapter on the choreographic process in *Dance to the Piper*. Many of the innovations of her ballets can be traced to these early dances and to her own life. At the core of her choreography are the strong, funny, lyric, romantic American women who reflect her own experience.

Autobiography was at the center of her writing as well. *Dance to the Piper* (1952) describes her struggle to establish herself as a dancer and choreographer, ending with the twin successes of *Oklahoma!* and *Rodeo*; *And Promenade Home* (1956) focuses on the work she did during the years of World War

II, and her courtship and marriage with Walter Prude; *The Russian Journals*, published by *Dance Perspectives* 44, Winter 1970, described her 1966 and 1969 visits to Russia; *To a Young Dancer* (1972) gave advice on entering the dance profession, based on de Mille's own experiences; *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death* (1968) documented de Mille's research in preparing the ballet *Fall River Legend*; *Speak to Me, Dance with Me* (1973) is the story of her years in London (1932–c. 1939), studies with Marie Rambert, friendship with Antony Tudor and Hugh Laing and with a young crippled Englishman, Ramon Reed; *Where the Wings Grow* (1978) describes her childhood in her beloved summer home, Merriewold; and *Reprieve* (1981) concerns her recovery from the massive paralyzing stroke she suffered in 1975.

De Mille's other books are highly personal. In both *The Book of the Dance* (1963) and *America Dances* (1980), de Mille interprets and popularizes history. In *Portrait Gallery* (1990) she brings to life people she knew on the stage, behind the curtain and in private life. Even in *Martha*, (1991) de Mille's powerful tribute to Martha Graham, her friend of sixty years, there is much of de Mille's own life.

In her final years de Mille grew increasingly impatient with her failing body, her confinement, and her helplessness. At times she was abrupt and yet, while seeming short tempered with others, it was her inability to move and to help herself that frustrated her most. In almost constant pain, hampered by a useless right side, she continued to work. In 1992 *Martha* won the de la Torre Bueno Award for the best dance book, and de Mille choreographed *The Other*, a ballet about death, for American Ballet Theatre. "My mother always told me to keep busy," she snapped in an interview. In truth it was her work that kept her going.

Finally Agnes de Mille was a kind and generous benefactor. She helped struggling dancers, sending to many (as she did to me while I was in graduate school) unsolicited checks. She gave encouragement and spiritual sustenance, reading and critiquing papers. Despite physical difficulty and discomfort she rallied to defend causes in which she believed. This involved trips and appearances that took all her energy and often brought her in contact with the public who nibbled and pecked at her "...like a Baked Alaska." In her last years de Mille hungered for original work, fresh discussion, young talent, and the company of good friends and family. She was greatly loved. Agnes de Mille is survived by one son, Jonathan Prude, and by two grandsons.

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