

T E L E V I S I O N

Agnes de Mille's story leaves us begging for an encore

By Allan Ulrich

EXAMINER DANCE CRITIC

THE NARRATOR and illustrious subject of the latest PBS "Dance in America" production wastes not a moment in letting you know what you're in for during the succeeding hour:

"This is the story of an American dancer," she states at the outset, "a spoiled, egocentric girl who learned with difficulty to become a worker, to set and meet standards, to brace a Victorian sensibility to contemporary roughhousing, and who, with happy good fortune, participated in a renaissance of the most ancient and magical of all the arts."

"Agnes, the Indomitable de Mille," which airs Friday at 9 p.m. on Channel 9 and Saturday at 9 p.m. on Channel 32, is more than just another dance history documentary, or an extended interview. De Mille's saga is a profile in courage and persistence possibly unmatched in the annals of the performing arts in 20th century America.

Veteran television dance director Merrill Brockway decided to pursue a wise path through de Mille's career. He frames the program with an interview with the dancer-choreographer filmed last year at her family's summer home in Merriewold in Upstate New York, and then inserts precious archival footage to accompany her responses.

De Mille has drawn her narrative from the extraordinary series of autobiographical writings ("Dance to the Piper," "And Promenade Home") she started midway through her career. The justly admired clarity and candor of her prose, its utter lack of cant, survive intact, even in oral translation.

It helps that de Mille's story contains enough incidents for any three lifetimes. She derived from cultured, wealthy stock. Her grandfather was the economist Henry George. Her father, William Churchill de Mille, was a popular play-

sel, "Brigadoon," "Bloomer Girl"), which opened Broadway to other major choreographers (what a debt Jerome Robbins must owe de Mille). What she wanted after "Oklahoma" was a raise; \$50 a week would not do.

Then, in 1975, came a cerebral hemorrhage, which might have destroyed a lesser spirit. But, with the help of Dr. Fred Plum, de Mille slowly regained the power of speech and locomotion. Indomitable, indeed.

The PBS show contains its share of frustrating moments. The archival material, drawn primarily from "Omnibus" and CBC kinescopes, is full of rare material, including de Mille; Lucia Chase and Janet Reed in the sly "Three Virgins and A

Devil," and the late Nora Kaye in "Fall River Legend." You simply want more than these brief excerpts. You want more knowledge of how de Mille returned from her devastating illness. And you want more of the Ed Murrow "Small

World" program, in which the choreographer managed to silence Hedda Hopper's jingoistic prattle.

No question about it, "Agnes, the Indomitable de Mille" should have run 90 minutes. PBS, you owe us another show.

everything he touched, moved to Hollywood in 1914 to try his hand at movies, the family followed.

De Mille recalls Cecil as "a great charmer. He always remembered our birthdays." But the choreographer's memory of her own gawky girlhood, of her jealousy of her pretty younger sister is tinged with bittersweet nostalgia. A remark like "I took a terrible revenge. I have forgotten her as a child," aches with a sad poetry.

Only when she saw a performance with Anna Pavlova did de Mille dedicate herself to dance. "I was as clearly marked as though she had looked me in the face and called my name." But Agnes lacked the physical prerequisites for sylphs and swan queens. So, she launched a series of solo concerts, moved to England, where she performed in early Antony Tudor works (a period slighted in the PBS program), moved back, contributed to Ballet Theatre in its early seasons, then convinced Serge Denham of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo that she should both choreograph "Rodeo" and dance the leading cowgirl, too.

The piece made her reputation. It led to creating the dream ballet in "Oklahoma," thence to a series of musical comedy dances ("Carou-