



OBITUARY

AGNES de MILLE

A look at the legendary dance master and her many works.

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Agnes de Mille, Dance Icon

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Agnes de Mille, a pre-eminent figure in the history of dance whose choreography changed the face of the American musical, died Wednesday night in the Greenwich Village apartment where she lived for many years. She was 88.

Dr. Fred Plum, chief neurologist at New York Hospital, said she probably died peacefully in her sleep, presumably of a stroke. He had talked to her Wednesday and she was in good spirits. Funeral arrangements were pending.

Ms. de Mille, whose brilliant career was securely rooted both in the world of ballet and the world of Broadway, choreographed the musicals "Oklahoma," "Carousel," "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," "Paint Your Wagon," "Brigadoon" and many others. For American Ballet Theater, which she helped found in 1940, she choreographed "Fall River Legend," "The Informer," "Three Virgins and a Devil," and her masterwork, "Rodeo," which would lead to her groundbreaking choreography for "Oklahoma" in 1943.

American Ballet Theater artistic director Kevin McKenzie said yesterday, "She possessed a choreographic genius, an awe-inspiring literacy and a potency of character that was mesmerizing."

Ms. de Mille could make dances, but she could also write, 14 volumes in all. Some, beginning with "Dance to the Piper," were autobiographies, others biographies, still others histories of the art form. All are filled with her wonderfully opinionated views on dance and performance, and storehouses of inside information.

In 1975, as Ms. de Mille was preparing to take her own show, "Conversations About the Dance," on the road, she was felled by a stroke that left her almost totally paralyzed and aphasic. She fought her way back, learning to walk, talk and choreograph again, and she wrote "Reprieve" about her experiences.

The daughter of playwright William de Mille and Anna George de Mille, granddaughter of the unconventional economist Henry George and niece of Hollywood director Cecil B. De Mille, Agnes George de Mille was born Sept. 18, 1905, in

New York City, according to the book "The De Milles: An American Family." The family moved shortly thereafter to the then-rural Hollywood Hills.

Seeking more support for her work, she moved to London, becoming friends with choreographer Antony Tudor and Hugh Laing, gave recitals, staged revues and choreographed "Nymph Errant," an English musical starring Gertrude Lawrence.

She returned to the United States and in 1942 got her break: "Rodeo," set to the new score by Aaron Copland, the story of a tomboy who finds love and femininity on the open plain. Ms. de Mille conveyed the feeling of the West by using the vernacular rather than a strict ballet vocabulary. Some of the gestures, she said, were not from horseback riding or from the rodeo, but from tennis.

The success of "Rodeo" — 22 curtain calls at its premiere — led to an invitation from Rodgers and Hammerstein to choreograph "Oklahoma," which opened in 1943.

During World War II, she married a Texan, Walter Prude, who became a vice president for ICM, an international talent agency. Her husband died in 1988. Their son, Jonathan, is a history professor.

In later years, Ms. de Mille remained a showstopper as she continued to revive her ballets, premiere new works and be honored for her creativity; she remained, articulately, in the spotlight.

Using the vivid imagery that only she could muster, Ms. de Mille spoke of wartime London during the blitz. The Londoners had been bombed out of their homes and were sleeping in the subways. They had nothing, she said, but nonetheless, "every day at 12 noon, in the National Gallery, where the pictures had been taken off the walls and sent away for safekeeping, they sat on the ground and Myra Hess played on the piano. Bach, Liszt, Chopin, Brahms. This gave them the strength to see where the verities are: What are we trying to live for, what do we need, what do we hope for?"

All the dance world can hope for now is another Agnes de Mille.