

de Mille

Goldie Hawn works the
'Swing Shift' in
a new movie
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At left, Agnes de Mille, in 1941, dancing 'Rodeo,' which she choreographed; below, de Mille in a recent picture.



Agnes de Mille

DANCE, AMERICAN STYLE

By PATRICIA O'HARE

BALLET IN THIS COUNTRY was for many years regarded as an esoteric art, appealing only to a fanatical group of devotees. Americans seemed to want something flashier than the ethereal Russian stylings that seemed to have been frozen in place sometime during the Ice Age, or the eccentric movements of the so-called modern dance purists. Eventually they found something. It was ballet, all right, but it was a different kind.

In the early '40s, ballet began to be modernized, made more human, easier to watch. Humor, as well as flesh and some red blood were poured into the formal, delicate structure that had been classical dance. Significantly, ballet was brought to the theater and incorporated into the new musical productions. When it sold there, it moved on to the movies and gained even wider audiences.

One person deserves considerable credit for Americanizing dance movement and bringing ballet to Broadway. She is a small, courageous, fiercely determined and completely American woman named Agnes de Mille. Now 73, she was a dancer in her time, but mostly a choreographer, who infused the ballet with her non-Russian,

non-European ideas and background. Her approach was similar to the way America characterized itself—a healthy blend of many influences, classical and modern, of times old and new, with an optimistic look to the future and a nostalgic view of the past.

Tomorrow night, de Mille is being honored at the Shubert Theater in a gala dance program to benefit the Friends of the Theater Collection of the Museum of the City of New York. It's being given by her "friends."

What friends! They include some of the theater's most illustrious names as well as those from the world of dance. Natalia Makarova, using her night off from Broadway's "On Your Toes," will perform. So will Cynthia Gregory and Sean Lav-
ery, Chita Rivera, Christine Epp, members of the Dance Theater of Harlem and the American Dancemachine. On hand will be Tommy Tune, Jerome Robbins, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Isaac Stern, Sally Willson, James Mitchell, Mel Tomlinson, Kitty Carlisle Hart, Betty Conden and Adolph Green.

While different choreographers will be represented, de Mille's work will be preeminent. From the 1936 movie, "Romeo and Juliet," her "Pavane" (which failed to make it to the screen intact) is

being danced, as are "The Horn Pipe" from "Carousel," "Come to Me, Bend to Me" and "The Funeral Dance" from "Brigadoon," and "Mamie Is Mine" from "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes."

Actress Celeste Holm worked with de Mille on her first Broadway show, "Oklahoma!" in 1943, playing the part of Ado Annie—a singer, not a dancer. Still, Holm well remembers the day when she first saw what de Mille and her dancers were doing.

"We were rehearsing on the stage," she recalls. "And Reuben Mamoulian, the director, had the dancer's rehearsal in the basement. There wasn't much room there and the ceilings were low, so every time the dancers were lofted, they had to be careful not to hit their heads."

"Finally they were invited to come up and show what they'd been doing all that time. I remember sitting in the audience that day with Alfred (Drake, who had the leading role of Curly in the musical). We watched that fantastic dream sequence, and I remember saying to him, 'You know, if we can get one-tenth as much realism and emotion into our roles as she has in that dance, we'll be a hit!'"

They were, "Oklahoma!" by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein went on to become one of

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De Mille's Americanized dance

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the great musicals in theater history, a turning point. And every reviewer of the time pointed out that its success was due in part to the dances, which, instead of the usual musical chorus line doing a one-two-three kick, were more in a ballet tradition, and were not only integrated into the story, but helped to advance the plot as well.

"When I was asked to do the dances for 'Oklahoma,'" de Mille recalled the other afternoon in the memory-filled Greenwich Village apartment she and her husband, Walter Prude, have occupied for years, "I never suspected they would change the way things were. I didn't plan to change things. I just did some dances for a play I admired. I wanted to serve the script properly. The music was wonderful, and I had no opposition at all from either Rodgers or Hammerstein. They were both highly trained men, educated men. They had seen 'Rodeo,' which I did for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, and they thought it had the feel of what they wanted for their musical, so they asked me to work with them. But I think they were afraid that I didn't have enough stage knowledge at that time.

"They were probably right. I had been fired as choreographer from a couple of shows before 'Oklahoma,' but I attribute that to the fact that I wasn't very well organized. If I had been better organized, I could have had other shows. But it was a question of learning how to work in commercial theater. It all came together then."

De Mille was born in New York City and raised in California; her father was playwright William Churchill de Mille, brother of the early movie director, Cecil B. De Mille. Her mother, Anna George, was the daughter of economist and author Henry George.

"From the moment I heard music, from the time I was a child," she explained when asked what brought her to dance, "I was up, up and away. Dancing. I was more or less encouraged by my mother; my father didn't really care. Later, I saw Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, two early modern dance performers, and when they came to visit, I danced for them in our garden. It was all very informal, I made up my own steps, made up my own



Robert Fagent and Bambi Linn dancing a number from 'Carousel' in 1945

dance because my mother was determined I would not be classically trained.

"I remember going to see Pavlova in California once when I was very young and that was when I really caught the virus, and it took. I cried and cried, watching her. We went backstage to meet her after the performance, and I couldn't stop crying even then. But it didn't do all that much good, because I still wasn't allowed to take lessons."

It was her sister, Margaret, who had no inclination at all to dance, who was, in the end, the reason Agnes de Mille is in ballet today. "Margaret's arches fell, and it was thought the exercises for ballet would help her. But not me, even though I wanted them much more than she did. I got to take them only because Margaret hated to go alone. I was sent to keep her company."

That was the beginning. De Mille gave up dancing when she went to college (UCLA); there, she became a star on the tennis courts and was graduated cum laude at the age of 19, the youngest in her class. Moving back to New York, she took up dancing again. In 1940, Ballet Theater (now the American Ballet Theater) was forming, and de Mille became a charter member, creating several unsuccessful ballets and then, finally, "Three Virgins and the Devil," first mounted in 1941 and still performed today.

The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, which was in need of a spectacular dance to keep its audience interested, asked her to fashion one on an American theme. The American West was unique to this country, so she decided on that, working out the theme of cowboys in competition. Aaron Cop-

land wrote the music and Oliver Smith was hired to work out the Western costumes; de Mille herself danced the leading role when it opened at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1943. She—and it—received 22 curtain calls and a standing ovation, and suddenly everyone was talking about the new hit ballet.

That was the ballet that Rodgers and Hammerstein saw. After "Oklahoma," there would be "One Touch of Venus," "Bloomer Girl," "Carousel," "Brigadoon" and later "Allegro," for which she served as both director and choreographer.

In 1948, she approached composer Morton Gould about a dance she was commissioned to do by Ballet Theater. From that collaboration came "Fall River Legend," still performed today, most recently by the Dance Theater of Harlem.

"Agnes came to me with the idea for this ballet already in her head."

Gould remembers, "about Lizzie Borden. Ours was a very, very compatible working relationship, and one I remember with great pleasure. She's a great artist, a great person, with tremendous spirit and vitality and a razor-sharp mind. And she's tremendously eloquent. If Agnes ever wanted to be for sin, she could convince you that it was right, she's that good."

De Mille suffered a crippling stroke in 1975 and has lost the use of half of her body (her mind was not affected). At first, it was doubted she would ever recover. She did. Then it was suspected she would never walk again. She's walking—she uses a cane and sometimes depends on a wheelchair, but she



De Mille in a 1938 dance concert

gets around. Later, it was thought she would never walk again. But when "Oklahoma!" was revived in 1979, she was on hand for rehearsals, giving advice and taking an active part in the proceedings. She's also written three books since she was incapacitated—no, that's the wrong word. Slowed down, perhaps....

Tomorrow night, de Mille will take an active part in the festivities: She'll recreate a narrative segment from her program, "Conversations About the Dance," while members of the Dance Theater of Harlem illustrate her points in movement. De Mille's performance, no doubt, will be characterized by the one quality she's always had in abundance—determination.

De Mille rehearsing John Curry, 1981

