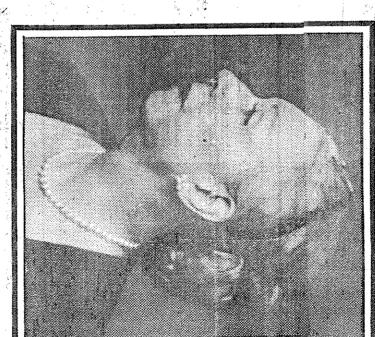


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Agnes de Mille

By PATRICIA O'HAIRE

ALLET 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 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, flercely determined and completely American woman named Agnes de Mille, Now 73, she was a dancer in her time but mostly a characrapher.

approach was similar to the way America 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 diven 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 is night off from Broadway's "On Your Toes," will perform. So will Cynthia Gregory and Sean Lavery, Chita Rivera, Christine Sari, members of the pance Theater of Harlem and the American Dance Robbins, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Isaac Stern, Sally Wilson, James Mitchell, Mel Tomlinson, Kitty Carlisle Hart, Betty Comden and Adolph Green.

While different choreographers will be represented the Mile's work will be preeminent From

different choreographers will be repre-le Mille's work will be preeminent. From movie, "Romeo and Juliet," her "Payane" gilled 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 Mimi" from "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." Actress Celeste Holm worked with de Mille on her first Broadway show, "Oklahoma!" in 1943, t 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

"We were rehearsing on the stage," she recalls.

"And Reuben Mamoulian, the director, had the dancers rehearsing in the basement. There wasn't much room there and the cellings 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

Continued

the great musicals in theater history, a turning point. And every reviewer of

"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 thearter. It all came together then."

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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.

California once 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 to ballets and then, finally, to ating several unsuccessful llets and then, finally, hree Virgins and the Devil," rst mounted in 1941 and still erformed 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

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

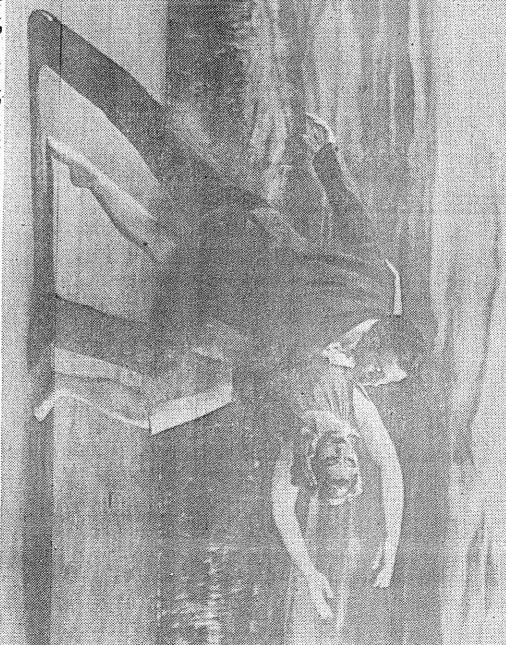
In 1948, she approached composer Morton Gould about a dance she was commissioned to do by Ballet Theater. From that collaboration came "Fall River Legend," still performed today most recently by the Dance Theater of Dance Theate I That was the ballet that Rodgers and Hammerstein saw. After "Oklahoma," there would be "One Touch of Venus," "Bloomer Girl," "Carousel," "Brigadoon" and later "Allegro," for which she served as both director and 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 hallet

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 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." den Ours was a very, very compatible working relationship, and one I remember with great pleasure. She's great artist, a great person, with great artist, a great tremendous spirit an Then it was susport walk again. "about Lizzie Bo

would never work again. But when go "Oklahomai" 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, sarrhang

Tomorrow night, de Mille will take active part in the festivities: She'll



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

in a 1938 dance