

De Mille lets her voice continue lifelong mission

It's been more than 50 years since Agnes De Mille made her debut as dancer and choreographer.

Her dancing days are long since over and her choreography has become part of musical theater history, but De Mille's career—her mission, really—continues undiminished. Now limited to her writing and lecturing, she hasn't forfeited her role as a champion of the movement arts, as a spokeswoman who can explain to American audiences how their vibrant dance culture took root and blossomed.

De Mille makes one of her now-rare personal appearances in Wayne at 2:30 p.m. next Sunday when the YMA-YWHA of North Jersey hosts her illustrated lecture program "Conversations About the Dance."

Chatty and informal, De Mille's "conversations" were adapted for a 90-minute public television special broadcast in 1980. The Wayne engagement, supported by a special grant from the state Council on the Arts, offers an opportunity for New Jersey dance fans to encounter the woman herself. She's a rare individual, feisty and independent, pungently witty, eloquently opinionated.

De Mille was one of the first American choreographers to make a name for herself. While she is best known for her work on Broadway, her energy and talents also have been applied to the ballet stage, film and television, as well as to authorship of eight books. The latest, published in 1981 and titled "Reprieve," is an account of a personal struggle more difficult than any of her professional battles—her comeback from a massive stroke in 1975 that paralyzed her right side.

If the awards and honors presented to De Mille were medals, she would be more highly decorated than any general. Fifteen honorary doctorates, New York City's Handel Medallion, the Capezio Award, charter membership on the National Council for the Arts, the 1982 Elizabeth Blackwell Award...to name only the most notable.

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To appreciate De Mille's accomplishments, it's important to remember that in the late 1920s when she began her career there was virtually no American audience for theater dancing outside the vaudeville halls. As a young woman she faced the disapproval of her "fiercely successful" and culturally well-placed family in pursuing her ambitions to dance, then a field considered less than respectable.

With her father William a successful Broadway playwright and her uncle Cecil B. a Hollywood giant needing no introduction, it's ironic that she was so consistently opposed and so little aided. But hers was a family that valued education—they packed Agnes off to college—and that had an unusually distinguished heritage.

De Mille's grandfather, Henry George, was an economist and social philosopher whose theories won advocates here and in Europe. His proposal to fund government services with a single tax based on land values never was adopted, but many of the reforms he advocated were—including social security, unemployment insurance, collective bargaining, and protection of the con-

sumer and the environment.

Despite her college education, De Mille's family was "fighting a losing battle to bring me up as a normal girl."

She made her dancing debut in New York in a 1927 production of Mozart's "La Finta Giardiniera," and two years later designed her first dances when she supplied choreography for a Hoboken revival of "The Black Crook."

Although she was praised by the knowledgeable few as a fine recitalist, a career as a dancer was highly unprofitable in the America of the 20s and '30s, De Mille ultimately left for England where she had a productive but equally unprofitable career with the late Marie Rambert's Ballet Club. Barely able to eat and pay the rent, she depended on her mother's generosity for subsistence.

Despite her many accomplishments, De Mille's greatest achievement in her own eyes is the role she played in promoting the cause of professional dancers in this country. "Today the salary scale is over \$300 a week, and a small group of humanity once denied the privilege can now live decently, educate themselves, go to the doctor. They're real human beings now...and for that I'm very, very happy," she recently said.

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De Mille returned to America at the outbreak of World War II, and in 1940 was invited to join the choreographic staff of the newly formed American Ballet Theatre. Two years later she choreographed her best known ballet, "Rodeo." With a score by Aaron Copland and movement derived from the stance and gestures of cowboys, it was among the first ballets created that was thoroughly American in theme and style.

De Mille was important to the musical theater not only for integrating dance and plot, but for insisting on well-trained dancers and for providing a showcase for popularizing ballet with the general public. Her enormous success with "Oklahoma" in 1943 was the start of a string of widely acclaimed shows: "Bloomer Girl" in 1944, "Carousel" in 1945, "Brigadoon" in 1947, "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" in 1949 and "Paint Your Wagon" in 1951. Many have enjoyed recent revivals.

De Mille has witnessed the circumstances that turned indifferent American audiences into the world's most avid dance fans—some 20 million dance tickets are now sold annually. Her perspective is deep and incisive, and her style of commentary unique.

On Pavlova: "Wherever Pavlova passed, hearts changed, flames sprang in the grass, and girls ran out to a strange, wild, ancient dedication. My life was wholly altered by her."

On Duncan: "Isadora Duncan's effect on the theater was immeasurable. Her bare feet caused more ruckus in those days than bare genitals today. They were the first bare feet that had been seen in the Western theater for 2,000 years."

On Fanny Elssler: "In 1845 a real ballerina visited us (from Paris). She went down to Washington, D.C., and Congress recessed. This is an historic fact...senators of the United States

DANCE THIS WEEK

TODAY

JERSEY CITY (St. Peter's College, Montgomery Street) — The local **KENNEDY DANCERS** perform modern, ballet and jazz works in a program marking the troupe's fifth anniversary, 3 p.m. Dineen Auditorium.

FRIDAY

MONTCLAIR (State College, Valley Road) — The **PILOLOLUS DANCE THEATRE** opens this season's dance series at the college, 8 p.m. Memorial Auditorium. Repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday.

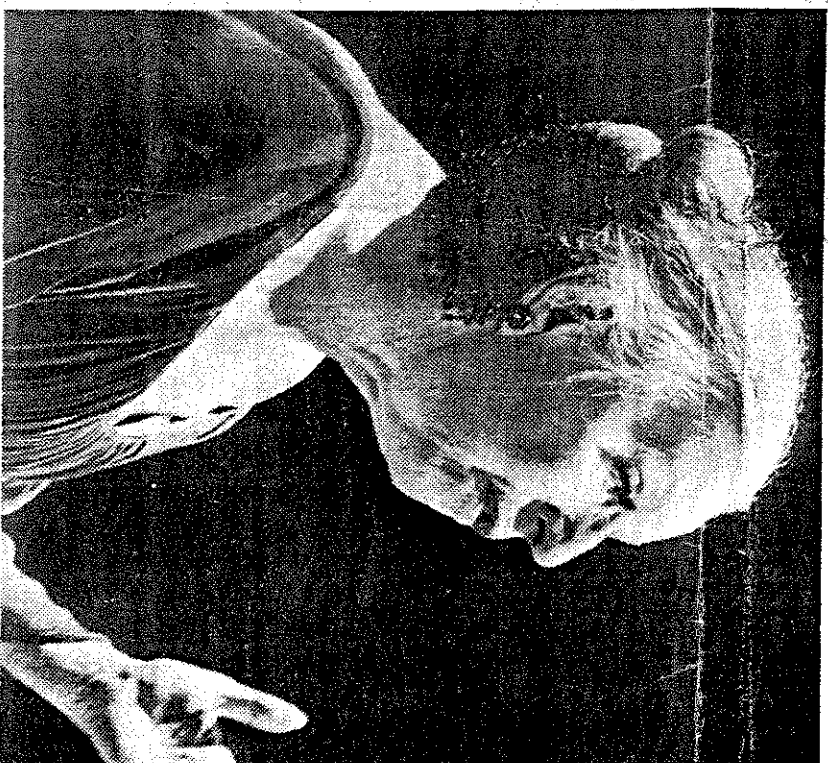
SATURDAY

HOBOKEN (High School, 820 Clinton St.) — The **NEW JERSEY BALLET** makes its first appearance in the city under auspices of the Hoboken Civic Theatre, 8 p.m. Auditorium.

SUNDAY

WAYNE (YM-YWHA of North Jersey, 1 Pike Dr.) — **AGNES DE MILLE** appears in her illustrated lecture program entitled "Conversations About the Dance," which opens the Y's cultural series, 2:30 p.m.

LAWRENCEVILLE (Rider College, Route 206) — The **HARTFORD BALLET** presents a program of classical and contemporary dance, 8 p.m. Fine Arts Theatre.



Agnes De Mille, noted choreographer of the American musical the makes a point in her "Conversations About the Dance"

pulled her carriage through the streets. Isn't it refreshing to think of senators doing anything so innocent?"

But come hear for yourself. The pleasure of De Mille's company can be had for the price of a ticket—\$4 in advance, \$5 on the day of the program at the Y, 1 Pike Drive.

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