

# Agnes de Mille

(1905 ~ 1993)

Agnes de Mille (September 18, 1905 – October 7, 1993) was an American dancer and choreographer. Her accomplishments to the theater have left an impression on the growth and resilience of theatrical dance as one sees it today. She developed her own style. She added lyricism and comedy, which is perceived as a divergence from the cultural dance forms of the era. Those aspects became her signature trademarks seen in many of her best known and beloved works.

De Mille was born in the Harlem section of New York City and moved to Hollywood with her family. She aspired to become an actress, which seemed appropriate being that her uncle was the illustrious Hollywood filmmaker and director, Cecil B. de Mille. As it turned out, her desire to perform for the camera wasn't fully realized. She was told that she wasn't "pretty enough." So, she studied and performed the piano and also staged drama productions. She then began studying dance, including ballet. Classical ballet was the most widely known form of dance at that time, but she lacked the physical attributes needed to have a career in classical ballet. And, her family saw it more as an activity, rather than a career choice. Her early and most elementary training was mostly self-taught. She was able to convince her parents to allow her to take dance lessons, but she wasn't given positive encouragement by her family or instructors. However, she accompanied her father to the film sets to see her uncle at work. There, she studied the dancers and taught herself the dance sequences.

She attended UCLA and again faced disparaging remarks from dance professors. Her gift was for the drama, but she still was determined to dance. Upon graduation from UCLA, she moved to New York and struggled to work in the dance field. Dancing jobs were few and far between for de Mille. In 1932, she moved to London to find an outlet for her desire to dance.

Marked as her most extensive phases of dance training, her work with Marie Rambert at Ballet Club proved to be highly significant. It was there that she met emerging choreographers Frederick Ashton and Antony Tudor who she'd later work with at American Ballet Theatre.

Throughout the 1930's de Mille spent much of her time training, but was never able to support herself as a dancer or choreographer. She would return to the United States to take jobs, through family connections. She was hired to choreograph for the movie *Cleopatra* (1934). Unfortunately, the dance sequences were cut from the film. She also gained some attention for her choreography for the film *Romeo and Juliet* starring Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard.

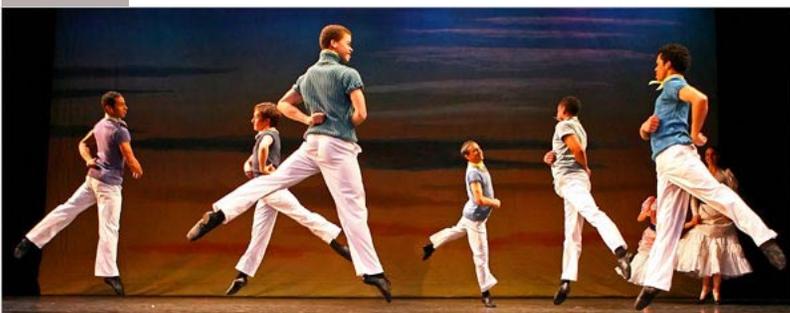
By this time, de Mille had begun to make a choreographic impact on the dance world. In 1940, she became a charter member of American Ballet Theatre and created *Black Ritual*. Although the ballet was not a success, it was the first time black dancers had appeared in a major ballet company. Her next work, *Three Virgins and A Devil*, also for American Ballet Theatre, was a hit and sparked the beginning of her American choreographic career. In her own words, "Technically, my work is eclectic, a mixture of classical and modern, which makes special demands on the performers."

"The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark."

Agnes de Mille



Photo by Beryl Towbin



NYTB in *Carousel*, 2006 .

For Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, she created *Rodeo* (1942) to music by Aaron Copeland, and from there, her signature American folk style became evident. She built dance phrases out of riding and roping techniques most known to wranglers and cowboys. She also incorporated tap dancing in the ballet – a first of its time. The ballet was rich in formal dance patterns and choreographic texture. Athletic in nature, de Mille made the steps lyrical and precise and assured their careful execution by choosing the most skilled and talented dancers of their time. de Mille herself danced in the work at the Metropolitan Opera House, receiving standing ovations and over twenty curtain calls.

The fame and recognition of the success of *Rodeo* led to her invitation to collaborate with Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II on *Oklahoma!* (1943). Her revolutionary Americana style had become one of her unique choreographic trademarks. The content of the work was particularly timely. America was at war and the work appealed to one's love of the United States. Although the piece was laced with comedy and happy moments, the uniformed men and women who attended performances were often moved to tears. Although optimistic and pastoral in feeling and setting, it brought a sense of pride to its audiences.

After the success of *Oklahoma!* she began to create consistent, successful and remarkably steadfast works. *One Touch of Venus*, *Bloomer Girl*, *Carousel*, *Fall River Legend* and *Tally-Ho* all earned her critical acclaim.



NYTB in "Come To Me, Bend To Me" from *Brigadoon*.

*Brigadoon* soon followed, and then she attempted the tremendous feat of acting in dual capacity as stage director and choreographer for *Allegro* (1947). Although not as successful as the public hoped, it still holds a significant place not only in de Mille's career achievements, but dance history as well.

She worked steadily throughout the 1950's creating many works still seen on stage today. In 1954, *Oklahoma!* the movie, was filmed, again with de Mille as choreographer. It is recorded as the most expensive movie of its time, costing one million dollars.

de Mille has many other accomplishments besides that of choreographer, director and dancer. She was married and had a son. In the mid 1900's a working mother wasn't accepted the way it is today. She also was an avid speaker and writer. In 1973 she formed the Heritage Dance Theatre in conjunction with the North Carolina School of the Arts. She received several significant awards including the New York City Handel Medallion. She received this honor in 1976 and it's the most distinguished honor the city can give to a citizen. She was also recognized nationally by President Carter with a Kennedy Center Honor. (1980).



NYTB in *Carousel*, 2007. Photo by Richard Termine.

In 1975 she suffered a stroke but continued to write and publish books. She restaged *Oklahoma!* in 1979 and her lecture series, *Conversations about the Dance*, was aired on PBS. She remained active and a constant artistic presence in dance throughout her life. The last ballet de Mille choreographed was *The Other* for American Ballet Theatre (1992). She died in New York in 1993.

The impact she's made in dance and theater is incomparable. Her revolutionary works are still unsurpassed in originality, emotion, wit and charm. Her contributions to the world of dance are extensive. She's written books on dance, has been awarded honorary doctorates at universities and been produced on television. de Mille has won two Tony Awards and one Emmy. And, her visionary work, led by a desire to contribute to the theater has made her a legend. To this day, the remarkable impact she's made not just on American dance but in the world of dance are distinctive achievements worthy of constant recognition and a place in major dance and theater history.

The following listing information was gathered from an extensive and complete list from the Agnes de Mille Dances website. [www.agnesdemilledances.com](http://www.agnesdemilledances.com). Anderson Ferrell, Executive Director.

### Choreographic Highlights: Theatre

1943	<i>Oklahoma!</i>	Rodgers & Hammerstein
1945	<i>Carousel</i>	Rodgers & Hammerstein
1947	<i>Brigadoon</i>	Lerner & Loewe
1951	<i>Paint Your Wagon</i>	Lerner & Loewe

### Choreographic Highlights: Ballet

1941	<i>Three Virgins and A Devil</i>	Respighi
1942	<i>Rodeo</i>	Copeland
1948	<i>Fall River Legend</i>	Gould
1965	<i>The Four Mary's</i>	Traditional folk tune arranged by Trude Rittman
1992	<i>The Other</i>	Shubert, to poems by Goethe



Agnes de Mille as The Priggish Virgin in *Three Virgins and A Devil*. Photo by Carl Van Vechten. Used by permission courtesy of the Van Vechten Trust.

### Publications

*Where the Wings Grow*  
*Speak to me, Dance with Me*  
*Dance in America*  
*Russian Journals*  
*Lizzie Borden: Dance of Death*  
*The Book of the Dance*  
*To a Young Dancer*  
*And Promenade Home*  
*Dance to the Piper*  
*America Dances*  
*Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*

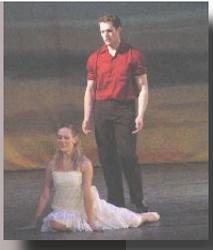


NYTB in *Three Virgins and A Devil*. Photo by Richard Termine.

### Meet Gemze de Lappe...



**G**emze de Lappe has had an extensive career as a dancer, teacher, and choreographer, which has spanned all forms of theatre and dance. As a schoolgirl she trained with the Michael Folkiner Ballet and Isadora Duncan School under Irma Duncan. At an early age she became one of the leading members of the Agnes de Mille Dance Theatre Company. On Broadway she was the premiere dancer in productions of *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *Brigadoon*, and *Paint Your Wagon* (for which she received the Donaldson Award). **Agnes de Mille called her “one of the finest interpreters of her (de Mille’s) work.”** Ms. de Lappe also appeared in *The King and I* for Jerome Robbins, both in the original Broadway production and film, as “King Simon of Legree”. She has danced with the American Ballet Theatre in leading roles including Lizzie Borden in *Fall River Legend*, French Ballerina in *Gala Performance*, as well as *Billy The Kid* and *Fancy Free*, receiving superlative critical notices. Ms. de Lappe has restaged many Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals internationally, including Japan – the Takarazuka Co., Antwerp and Munich Volksoper, and did her own choreography in revivals of *Finian’s Rainbow*, *South Pacific*, and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*. She shifted to film to choreograph *Justine* for 20th Century Fox, assisting George Cukor. Ms. de Lappe has appeared as a partner to many fine ballet dancers including Edward Villella, James Mitchell, Gregory Hoffman, and Glen Tetley. On television, she performed in Agnes de Mille’s *Conversations About The Dance*, with the Robert Joffrey Company, and danced in Sylvia Fine’s premiere program *Musical Comedy Tonight*. She received the highest critical acclaim for her performances as “The Maid” in the Broadway production of *The Gorey Stories* at the Booth Theatre. Gemze de Lappe is a Professor Emeritus at Smith College where she taught the advanced level ballet classes, a course in musical theatre and the technique, repertory, and historical influences of Isadora Duncan. She has choreographed at Artpark and for Niagara University. She received an honorary degree, the Doctor of Fine Arts, from Niagara University in 1989. **In October 2007, she received an honor for Excellence in Theatre from the Tony Award Committee.**



For nearly 30 years, NYTB has produced for adult audiences dozens of contemporary ballets and classic masterworks. Its roster includes choreographers Frederick Ashton, George Balanchine, William Dollar, Michel Fokine, John Taras, Antony Tudor, and other legendary artists. During the 2006-07 season, as a 100th birthday tribute to her, it presented a special program of ballets choreographed by Agnes de Mille, *A. de Mille Celebration*. In August of 2007, NYTB performed its *A. de Mille Celebration* at the Inside/Out Festival at Jacob's Pillow.



“With the exception of *Rodeo*, Agnes de Mille’s dances are seldom performed these days, 13 years after her death. *A. de Mille Celebration*, a gem of a program presented by the New York Theatre Ballet on Friday night at Florence Gould Hall was a welcome attempt at giving de Mille the honor she deserves.

The lovingly, seamlessly staged evening, put together by Sallie Wilson and Gemze de Lappe and set to music performed live by a chamber ensemble and vocalists, began with de Mille’s *Three Virgins and a Devil*, created in 1941 for Ballet Theater (later American Ballet Theater), and *Debut at the Opera*.

Antony Tudor’s 1938 *Judgment of Paris* was also performed, a sardonic resetting of the Greek legend in a dusty little Paris cafe populated by an exhausted waiter, three broken-down prostitute-goddesses --one of them performed, hilariously, by de Mille in the original -- and the drunken lone customer who must choose among them. The second act, devoted to de Mille’s Broadway career, included the “Dream Ballet” from *Oklahoma!*, “Another Autumn” from *Paint Your Wagon*, “Come to Me, Bend to Me” from *Brigadoon*, and the “Hornpipe” from *Carousel*.”

- Jennifer Dunning, *The New York Times*

“The performances were expert and, even more important, so unassuming and wholehearted that once-dusty-seeming dances came vitally alive.”

Jennifer Dunning,  
The New York Times,  
April 2006

### New York Theatre Ballet

Diana Byer, Artistic Director  
Christina Paolucci, Associate Director

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## Photo Gallery



NYTB in *Carousel*, 2007. Photo by Richard Termine.



Sallie Wilson, Gemze de Lappe and Paul Sutherland, 2007.  
Photo by Margot Southerland.

Ms. Wilson, Ms. de Lappe and Mr. Sutherland all worked closely with Agnes de Mille. After a performance at NYTB, they participated in a question and answer session about her work.