

# Agnes George de Mille

by David Domke

Agnes George de Mille was the granddaughter of Henry George and an institution in the world of American dance. Her career spanned six decades. An innovator in both American ballet and the Broadway stage, Ms. de Mille was also an author of some fourteen books, including a recently published biography of Martha Graham. The Los Angeles Times once said of her "[she's] a gutsy lady, a pioneer, an iconoclast, a charmer, a writer of rare insight and fascination..." Part of her creative genius was her ability to translate and blend her vision of American commonality into her art, bringing traditional American themes such as the Old West rodeo onto the legitimate stage. In fact her best known ballet, choreographed in 1942, was called just that - *Rodeo* - widely considered the first ballet with an exclusively American theme. She was one of the first to combine what are now called "low" and "high" art.

When she began her career in the late 20s there was no tradition of American popular theatre dancing apart from vaudeville show houses. Her family was less than enthusiastic about her pursuing a career in dance, a profession deemed not respectable in those days, especially for a woman. Undaunted by her family's resistance (they had sent her off to college in an attempt to dissuade her from her chosen pursuit), she made her debut in New York in a 1927 production of Mozart's *La Finta Giardiniera*. Two years later she was choreographing her own dances with a company in New Jersey.



Her first Broadway hit was *Rodeo* in 1942. Combining the basics of classical ballet with a foregrounding of traditional

American dances, and an original musical score by Aaron Copeland, *Rodeo*, whose setting was Western ranch life, told the story of a tomboyish girl who rises above her outcast status with the typical American virtues of pluck and goodwill. In 1943 her most famous work, *Oklahoma!* made its debut. Based on the Lynn Riggs play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, with music and lyrics by Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!* ran



for more than five years. What was particularly impressive to American audiences in the 40s was that De Mille integrated dancing into the narrative structure of the play rather than using it for merely diversionary or ornamental purposes. John Martin, Dance Critic for the *New York Times*, said in a review: "Miss de Mille has turned her back entirely on the established procedure of making 'routines.' She has selected some delightful young people ... and has built her dances directly and most unorthodoxly upon them. As a result, they emerge as people and not automata - warm and believable people made larger than life and more endearing..."

Agnes de Mille continued molding her characters and narratives through dance, making American dance an expressive story-telling form. As she once said, reflecting critically on her life's work: "Works of art are the symbols through which men communicate what lies beyond ordinary speech ... this is true of all art and it is true

*"I have been searching all my life for the intrinsic American, Anonymous.... he has many faces and many names, but we all know him: humorous, salty, bold, original, independent certainly, at times persnickety and stubborn, neighborly and commonsensical... it is to become him that every immigrant has crossed the green water."*

of dancing, which, because dependent on human habits and action, is the most malleable and changeable. It is also the oldest art. It is the mother or germinal form... Before man can do anything, he must draw breath, he must move. Movement is the source and condition of life."

Ms de Mille continued to create inspired work for the next fifty years. She choreographed such hit shows as *Carousel*, *Allegro*, *Brigadoon*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and *Paint Your Wagon*, and did extensive work with the American Ballet Theatre. She was also much in demand on the lecture circuit, where she often gave demonstrations of dance history (some of which were transposed for educational television) and frequently appeared before Congress, arguing for increased Federal spending for the arts.

Like her mother, Anna George de Mille, Agnes de Mille was an enthusiastic supporter of the philosophy of Henry George. She wrote an eloquent preface to the centennial edition of *Progress and Poverty*, and spoke at a number of Georgist conferences. She also addressed the opening ceremony for the New York headquarters in 1989. In the preface she wrote: "We have reached the deplorable circumstance where in large measure a very powerful few are in possession of the earth's resources, the land and its riches and all the franchises and other privileges that yield a return. These monopolistic positions are kept by a handful of men who are maintained virtually without taxation... we are yielding up sovereignty... Henry George was a lucid voice, direct and bold, that pointed out basic truths... There never has been a time in our history when we have so sorely needed to hear good sense, to learn to define terms exactly, to draw reasonable (continued on page six)

Agnes George de Mille (from page four)

conclusions.. We are on the brink. It is possible to have another Dark Ages. But in George there is a voice of hope."

It was this sense of hope that in large part accounts for her tremendous drive. She was felled by a stroke in 1975, leaving her almost completely paralysed. She fought back, teaching herself to walk, talk, and choreograph dances again. Indeed she continued up until the end; her last ballet, *The Other*, premiered with the American Ballet Theatre in 1992. She once recounted some of her experiences of wartime London during the blitz. Many Londoners had been bombed out of their homes and were sleeping in subway tunnels. "But everyday at noon," she said, "in London's National Gallery, empty of the pictures that had been stored away for safe keeping, "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?"