**Agnes de Mille (b. 18 September 1905, New York, New York; d. 7 October 1993, New York, New York.)**

**Summary**

Agnes de Mille performed as a self-producing female dance soloist; choreographed for Ballets Russes and Ballet Theatre and transformed the function of dance in the American musical. Her Americana ballet *Rodeo* (1942) presents an iconic individualistic American character in her misfit cowgirl; while her *Three Virgins and a Devil* (1941) exposes the temptations of lust, greed and piety rendered in comic dance/pantomime; *Fall River Legend* (1948) examines the psychological torment of accused murderess Lizzie Borden. These ballets are important contributions to the canon of American ballet; however, it is in de Mille’s musical theater dances that her modernist methodologies served to transform a genre. Developing her choreographic art in the early days of American modern dance, de Mille was a practitioner of the methods and tenets of the burgeoning form. Making the American musical a medium for modern dance expression, she ushered in an exceptional period of choreography during the prolific era of the ‘Golden Age’ (1943-1964). De Mille’s influence is still apparent in twenty-first century Broadway.

**Background**

In 1926, shortly after arriving in New York City, Agnes de Mille began her career as a self-producing female soloist. Her limited dance training in classical ballet had been obtained at the Theodore Kosloff School in Hollywood, California, where she spent her childhood as a privileged daughter of the Hollywood De Milles. Creating solo dance characterizations, rendered in pantomime and classical ballet, de Mille demonstrated a gift for exposing human flaw with brutal clarity, humour, and wit. In 1928, she was engaged as a soloist with Adolph Bolm’s company Ballet Intime*.* It was there that she met Louis Horst, an accompanist, conductor and composer who had served as musical director for the Denishawn Company. He introduced de Mille to Martha Graham, whom she revered, and the two women maintained a life long relationship. Horst’s books, *Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts* (1961) and *Pre-Classic Dance Forms* (1937)are among the earliest written works defining the systems and methodologies of American modern dance. In her autobiography, *Dance to the Piper* (1951), de Mille wrote of Horst, ‘Over the years he has influenced and helped the dancing in this country more than any other non-dancer, with the possible exception of John Martin and Lincoln Kirstein. The long talks he had with us worked like yeast in our creative thought’ (124). Like Horst, John Martin, first dance critic for *The New York Times* was occupied with defining modern dance as a unique genre. His definition of distortion processes is articulated in his book, *The Modern Dance* (1933).Careful to distinguish modern dance from dance forms associated with the nineteenth century, including pantomime and ballet Martin struggled with how to classify de Mille. In his 1938 publication *America Dancing* Martin wrote, ‘To classify Agnes de Mille among the modern dancers is perhaps to stretch a point, but to omit her would be indefensible’ (264).

**Contributions to Modernism**

The Broadway stage became the site of de Mille’s most original modernistic experiments. With her choreography for Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical *Oklahoma!* (1943) she developed a unique paradigm for making dances in musical theater. Her employment of modern dance methods required a readjustment in the skill requirements of dancers on Broadway. Drawing from fledgling ballet and modern dance companies, de Mille populated her theatre dances with a new breed of concert dancer thereby displacing the chorus girl and introducing the actor-dancer to the commercial theatre. This new pool of dance talent enabled de Mille to express unspoken aspects of the libretto through the medium of dance and caused an ideological shift in the function of dance on Broadway. Her *Oklahoma!* dream ballet, “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind” explores the character Laurey’s conflicted feelings of desire and fear in relation to two men, Curly; the stalwart cowboy and object of Laurey’s flirtations, and Jud, the play’s villain. In the course of the ballet Jud abducts Laurey and takes her to a saloon where she is and taunted by the Postcard Girls – garishly dressed saloon dancers. Using modernist distortion, and Louis Horst’s method of Introspection-Expression which was based on Freudian psychology and was intended to facilitate the creation of movement that originated from an essential, personal emotion(Horst 1961, 98), de Mille engaged in a modernistic deconstruction of the archetypal dance hall girl, rebuilding the construct as an extension of Laurey’s psyche. Within a year’s time de Mille created dances for three Broadway musicals: *Oklahoma!* (1943), *One Touch Of Venus* (1943) and *Bloomer Girl* (1944). While her artistic choices were driven by narrative intent and a highly attuned dramaturgical prowess, her movement innovations were created within the realm of dance modernism and distortion methodology was a defining aspect of her Broadway oeuvre.

Employing tenets of agit-prop choreographers, Sophie Maslow, Helen Tamiris and Anna Sokolow, de Mille also used dance in musicals as a platform for social commentary. Her ballet ‘Forty Minutes For Lunch’ created for *One Touch of Venus*,was a dystopian view of love and the inability to emotionally connect in an increasingly mechanical age. In the show, a statue of Venus, the Goddess of love, is reawakened. Wondering at the strange behavior of twentieth-century humans, the re-born Venus sings, ‘I’m a Stranger Here Myself’. Prompted by Venus’s musings about modern man’s apparent disinterest in romance, de Mille constructed a dance set in the high-pressure hustle bustle of Radio City at lunch hour. The stage direction reads, ‘A group of girls and young men are rushing aimlessly back and forth. Venus enters, puzzled by the frantic speed with which they get nowhere’ (Perelman 1943, 4).In a complete departure from the Americana dances of *Oklahoma!,* de Mille in ‘Forty Minutes for Lunch’,created mechanical, robotic movements, signaling an emotionally detached population existing in an urban dystopia. By referencing three distinct modes of artistic expression: 1930’s agit-prop dance; a German expressionistic depiction of the machine age; and the *Ausdruckstanz* innovations of Mary Wigman’s early works, which represent tensions between the individual and the group, de Mille created a satirical depiction of a population dictated by time and the desensitizing effects of an over crowded city landscape. The sequence of relentless movement is focussed inward on a deep anxiety and frustration reminiscent of the 1934 protest dance *Time is Money*, which was choreographed by the American modern dance choreographer and performer Jane Dudley, set to a poem by Sol Farnoroff and addressed the abuse of factory workers in a Taylorized system.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In 1931, de Mille explained her theories on modern dance as an extension of folk dance lexicons. In her essay *The New Ballerina* written for *Theater Arts Monthly* she described the revolutionary modern dancer, in contrast to the ballerina, as an artist more interested in dance content than individual performance charisma and concluded that the modern dancer was closely associated with the folk dancer. ‘Folk dancing has left the public square and is in our theatre’, wrote de Mille (432). Experiencing folk dance as an expression of ordinary people fulfilling a nationalistic call to patriotic dance representation, de Mille identified herself as a folk dancer thereby positioning herself like the moderns as a representative of the masses; however, where the revolutionary moderns were overtly critical of the government, de Mille represented America as either an idyllic Jeffersonian democracy or a flawed system expressed with biting satire. Her propagandistic Americana and satirical dissent both at home in the American musical reached a far greater public than the relatively small audiences attending modern dance, a fact which placed her in a position to expose commercial audiences to high-art notions of social commentary in the low-art medium of the musical theater. In a 1943 interview with John Martin she remarked, ‘Perhaps at the moment…my function is to be the sugar coating on the pill’ (*New York Times*).

**Legacy**

Making Broadway a medium for movement innovations, de Mille paved for the way for ‘Golden Age’ (1943-1964) choreographers and heralded in a period of extraordinary dance in musicals. Her legacy is evident in the dances of Bob Fosse, notably his depiction of worn out taxi dancers in ‘Big Spender’ from *Sweet Charity* (1966). The connective tissue of sisterhood between the ‘Big Spender’ women and ‘The Postcard Girls’ is in their shared modernistic DNA. The twenty-first century has experienced a rekindled opportunity for complex, multi-layered movement structures on Broadway with post-modernist Bill T. Jones’ choreography for *Spring Awakening* (2006) and Steven Hoggett’s surreal movement explorations in *Once* (2012). Both Jones and Hoggett move beyond the diegetic employment of dance in musicals and, like de Mille, experience dance as an alternate realm of communication that only a body moving in space can communicate.

**Selected List of Works**

*Three Virgins and a Devil* (1941)

*Rodeo* (1942)

*Oklahoma!* (1943)

*One Touch of Venus* (1943)

*Bloomer Girl* (1944)

*Carousel* (1945)

*Brigadoon* (1947)

*Paint Your Wagon* (1951)

*Fall River Legend* (1948)

*The Other* (1992)

**References and Further Reading**

Barker, B. (1996) ‘Agnes de Mille, Liberated Expatriate, and the *American Suite*, 1938’, *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts* 19 (2): 113-150. (Barker examines de Mille’s early solo and small group choreography during her time in London under the auspices of Marie Rambert at The Ballet Club)*.*

Beiswanger, G. (1944) ‘New Images in Dance: Martha Graham and Agnes de Mille’, *Theatre Arts* (October): 609-614.(Beiswanger articulates the differences and similarities between de Mille and Martha Graham).

de Mille, A. (1951) *Dance To The Piper*,New York: Bantam Books. (Autobiographical account of de Mille’s development as a choreographer).

de Mille, A. (1956) *And Promenade Home* Boston: Little Brown and Company. (Autobiographical account of de Mille’s early success, her Second World War experience as a war-wife and her personal relationship to dance).

Easton, C. (1996) *No Intermissions: The Life of Agnes de Mille*, New York: Little Brown and Company. (Primary biography of de Mille’s life and career).

**Paratextual Material**

*Oklahoma!* (1955) - "Out of Your Dreams" including Part 1 (of 2) of the Dream Ballet 16/31

<http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=oklahoma%21+out+of+my+dreams&oq=oklahoma%21+out+of+my+dreams&aq=f&aqi=g6&aql=&gs_l=youtube.3..0l6.159664.185654.0.187791.37.26.6.5.9.0.190.1491.24j2.26.0...0.0.EasVOZOQ2qU>

*Oklahoma!* (1955) - Part 2 (of 2) of the Dream Ballet 17/31

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqZ2G_SfD_Q>

*Oklahoma!* (1955) - Part 2 (of 2) of the Dream Ballet with commentary

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9deKWhD9NW4&feature=relmfu

*Bloomer Girl,* Civil War Ballet

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXoUNQsdcUg>

*Rodeo*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9uzwiKNhCk>

**NYPL Library for the Performing Arts**

*Fall River Legend.* Video choreography Agnes de Mille. Film Archive, Dance Collection at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts, \*MGZHB 16-660.

*One Touch of Venus.* The De Mille Project Reconstruction Project, July 1998. City Center Studios, New York.

*Rodeo.* Video choreography Agnes de Mille. Film Archive, Dance Collection at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts, \*MGZIC 9-5108.

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1. *Time is Money.*  Video choreography Jane Dudley, 1993 reconstruction. Dance Collection at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts, MGZIA 4-5939. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)