



EARLY CHOREOGRAPHED SHOWS

Rodeo

Oklahoma

Allegro

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

AWARDS & HONORS

17 honorary degrees

2 Tony Awards

Emmy

New York City's Handel Medallion

Kennedy Center Honor

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AGNES DE MILLE: DANCING THROUGH LIFE

BY ELLE BENAK, Γ^A/OHIO WESLEYAN

While looking through the Notable Thetas list on the Heritage website, I noticed so many amazing women who had chosen career paths in the performing arts. Compelled by my love of dance and theatre, I began to learn more about these women, one of whom is **Agnes de Mille**, a choreographer and dancer. I was completely swept away by her wit and charisma that jumped off the paper as I researched her life.

Agnes was born in 1905 in New York City to William C. de Mille and Anna de Mille. Her parentage is important because her family was full of theater professionals. Her father and uncle, Cecil B. DeMille, were playwrights and directors for both film and stage.

Agnes was originally not allowed to take ballet lessons because, at that time, dance was seen as a profession for showgirls, not women from “nice families.” Agnes was finally allowed to sign up for lessons because her little sister needed them to fix a physical problem. At age 14, Agnes was late in starting a dance career, but she didn’t let that stop her. In fact, her career would be paved with many road bumps, not one of which stopped her.

Agnes attended UCLA with the intention of obtaining a degree in English, but she stayed involved in dance and theater. Again she was discouraged from becoming a dancer because she was not seen as having the beauty usually associated with ballerinas. Her teachers, however, commended her acting abilities. In 1925, Agnes became a member of **Beta Xi Chapter** at UCLA.

After college, Agnes moved back to New York City and eventually to London for more dance opportunities and training. Her style was more interpretive and character-driven than traditional ballet. It has been described as movement that replaces speech and creates a dialogue between characters on stage.

Agnes struggled professionally until she became involved with the American Ballet Company, in which she was a choreographer as well as a performer. Her first successful piece, *The Three Virgins and the Devil*, is still performed today.

In 1942, Agnes had her first great success with a ballet called *Rodeo*, a piece designed to illuminate the “American Spirit.”

And it was thanks to *Rodeo* that Agnes got her job with Rodgers and Hammerstein. The two men had seen *Rodeo* and wanted Agnes to choreograph their new show *Oklahoma*. The musical opened on Broadway, ran for five years, and continues to be revived today.

After *Oklahoma*, Agnes choreographed *Carrousel*, *Allegro*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and many more musicals. She also continued to create ballets for the American Ballet Theater.

Throughout her career, Agnes remained passionate about the subject she had studied in college: English. By the end of her life, she had written 12 books, including autobiographies, histories of dance, and advice on dancing. One, called *Portrait Gallery*, is a snapshot of the lives of entertainment figures she encountered while growing up.

In fact, several of Agnes’s books were reviewed in the Theta magazine, and copies of them rest on the bookshelves of the boardroom at Theta headquarters. We also know from the magazine that Agnes visited Theta college chapters while professionally touring and was involved in the New York City Alumnae Chapter.

In 1975, Agnes suffered a stroke right before going on stage to give a lecture, “Conversations About the Dance.” Afterward, she was paralyzed on the right side of her body, but she refused to stop working. She wrote five of her books after the stroke and restaged many of her original numbers from her wheelchair or her bed.

In her lifetime, Agnes earned 17 honorary degrees, two Tony Awards, and an Emmy. She was also awarded New York City’s Handel Medallion, which is the highest honor the city can bestow upon a citizen, as well as the Kennedy Center Honor.

Although she was never considered a “traditional” ballerina and was advised by many to give up on dance, Agnes de Mille worked hard to achieve her success. She committed herself to the art she loved, despite obstacles and setbacks, and personified the qualities of a leading woman.

Elle Benak worked in the Theta archives as an intern during the summer. In May 2018, she will graduate from **Ohio Wesleyan** with a degree in history and a minor in business and women and gender studies. For the past 15 years, she has studied dance and was also heavily involved in her high school drama club.