

Groundswell, Sept. Oct '93

# Agnes De Mille Remembered

The news of the death of Agnes de Mille, in New York on October 7 from a stroke at age 88, brought back a lot of personal memories to Georgist Marguerite Merrill. Maggie spent close to 25 years in ballet, 20 years of which were in New York City and the rest in Los Angeles and San Francisco, where she resided.

Agnes de Mille was the daughter of Anna George de Mille, daughter of Henry George, and Broadway playwright William C. de Mille. Agnes and her sister Margaret grew up in New York. They later moved to Hollywood. Film producer Cecil B. DeMille was the William's younger brother.

Marguerite Merrill first saw Agnes de Mille when Maggie was one of the speakers at the completion ceremony after a course in **Progress and Poverty** at the Henry George School of New York. Maggie looked up, and there was Agnes sitting in the back row. The other speaker at the ceremony, Abraham Geneen, had brought his girlfriend who was a ballet dancer. Maggie discovered, in talking to others in the class that were dancers, that Agnes de Mille was brainwashing all the dancers about Henry George.

Months later, after Marguerite had completed three Henry George School classes, Maggie was at dance class. A copy of Henry George News from the School was face-out in the flap of her pack. Agnes came down to the ground floor from her 5th floor studio and noticed the Henry George News. "Who is the Georgist?" she asked. Maggie raised her hand, and later after class Agnes talked further with her.

Though Agnes de Mille used her maiden name professionally, her husband's name was on the mail box at that studio address. Agnes and Walter Prude, an officer during World War II, were married while he was in service. Agnes was well es-

tablished as a choreographer and director when the War was over, and her husband went to work for the great theater impresario Sol Hurok. Agnes and Walter had a son, Jonathan, who grew up to be a university professor.

Agnes did not get much involved in the Georgist movement while her mother, Anna George de Mille, was alive. Anna was divorced from William while the family was living in Southern California. After the divorce, Anna devoted herself to the Georgist movement. She sailed back and forth from New York to London, where the British Land Union was very active. From this period, much correspondence exists between mother and daughter. Marguerite recommends Ann Edwards' biography, **The de Milles**, which prints excerpts of some of the letters.

Agnes de Mille has written several books, mostly centered on her theatrical life, including *Dance to the Piper*, *Promenade Home*, *Speak to me, Dance to Me*.

Agnes was too disabled (by cerebral hemorrhage in 1975) to travel to San Francisco for the Georgist Conference Centennial of **Progress and Poverty**. In spite of her frail health, at the time of Henry George's birthday a few months later, Agnes hosted a local Centennial for people who had not been able to get to San Francisco. Marguerite Merrill was among the lucky 200 or so to get an engraved invitation. The Centennial reception was held in the Directors Room at the main Branch Library, 47th and 5th Ave. The Henry George collection from the family (in the archives of the N.Y. Public Library) was all set up in glass cases in the hall of the floor of the Directors Room, as they are every year on Henry George's birthday. Agnes' cousin, Henry George III, was also there. Though

in severe pain and incapacitated from her stroke, Agnes, with Mike Wallace on one side and Dick Cavett on the other side, was positioned and assisted so she managed to make it from the door of the room to the podium. Only her training as a dancer could have allowed her to do that. She was positioned at the podium and spoke for ten minutes. Marguerite remembers how clear her mind was, and how witty and strong was her spirit.

A few years after the Centennial, Robert Joffrey Ballet Company gave Agnes de Mille a night in that current season. Agnes researched the History of American Dance, and gave a long solo narrative for each type of dance that was going to be performed. She included every type of dance, and cast each type of dance with dancers who were already well known. Marguerite and another friend were in the audience at the City Center. The friend, Lisa, was a head nurse who had checked in on Agnes daily during her previous hospital confinement at New York Hospital. Through a principal dancer in the program that Maggie knew, they were invited backstage after the program for the reception. Agnes de Mille sat at one end, apart from the receiving line which had to be gone through before one could speak to her.

At the Georgist Sesquicentennial International Conference in Philadelphia, Agnes de Mille came to be part of the dedication of her grandfather's birth place, 413 South 10th Street, as a Historic Place. That evening, she also was one of the speakers at the opening banquet at the Penn Tower Hotel. A complete obituary of Agnes de Mille is printed in the October 8, 1993 New York Times. She is survived by her son and two grandsons of Atlanta.

All of us need to tell what is in our hearts, but most of us manage to say what we really mean only at three of four high moments in our lifetime, and then perhaps only to intimates. The artist tries to reach anyone who will listen; but to do this he must talk through symbols. 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 of dancing, which, because dependent on human habits and action, is the most malleable and changeable. It is also the oldest art.... Before man can do anything, he must draw breath, he must move. Movement is the source and condition of life."

- Agnes de Mille, *The Book of the Dance*

Memorial Program  
for

## Agnes de Mille

1905 - 1993

Sunday, January 9th, 1994

two to five PM

Henry George School

121 East 30th Street

New York City

*Agnes George de Mille Prude*



*Child of New York,  
born of a family  
steeped in the history, arts  
and politics of the nation.*

*Nurtured in an atmosphere  
of loving expectation  
and high achievement.*

*Dancer, choreographer,  
author, Georgist.*

*Celebrated for her art.*

*Admired for her courage.*

*Indelible figure for the ages.*



*Program*



*Introduction*

*The de Mille Family*

*Henry George School of Social Science*

*American Ballet Theatre*

*Robert Schalkenbach Foundation*

*Council of Georgist Organizations*

*Friends and Admirers*



*Video: "Agnes - the Indomitable de Mille"\**



*Refreshments*

*\*Courtesy of WNET*