

Agnes deMille to talk

Mental discipline aided recovery from stroke

By JIM WINDELL

At 71 years of age, Agnes deMille has a right to oversleep. Last Friday morning she did and apologized when she wasn't ready for a telephone interview at the Greenwich Village apartment in New York City.

"I was very tired this week and I'm not well, you see. When I get very tired, suddenly boom! The lights go out. And last night I went to bed."

Miss deMille, grande dame of dance and choreography in the American theatre, had a reason for being overtired last week.

With the televised showing of her 90-minute "Conversations About the Dance" on Jan. 28, her return from the ravages of an insidious hemorrhage, if not complete, was progressing better than when she was left paralyzed and speechless.

Later in the week, she and Broadway dance master Bob Fosse, who himself has undergone open heart surgery, appeared together on the NBC Tomorrow Show. That was Thursday night and she couldn't stay up late enough to watch herself on TV. "How was it?" she asked, and before an answer can be given, said that Fosse is "marvelous."

AS SHE DID ON television in both appearances, she sounded alert and ar-

ticulate. There was no indication of speech impairment but ever the perfectionist, she isn't satisfied yet with her recovery. "I haven't recovered, you know. I have no feeling in my right side at all."

Her stroke took place in 1975, not long after she did her first "Conversations About the Dance" at Harvard the year before. The planned filming of the program was rudely interrupted by her cerebral incident.

Admitting it had been a long, difficult road back from paralysis and aphasia, her years of dance helped, she said.

"My old dance trainer talked to me and told me I had patience. I can wait and work on a problem. I do work on something until it comes right."

Her words were sharp, clear and carefully pronounced. "I know how long it takes to train muscles. It takes a long, long time. And patience."

That was something she had as both a dancer and a pianist before that.

She's presently writing her 14th book, to be called "Insult," which deals with her recovery from her stroke. In the book there will be much of what she learned about living with such an illness. That, she calls the spiritual side of things. She also wouldn't talk about that side of her in this interview.

"THAT'S A SPECIAL part of me. I

can't talk about it in newspapers. I just can't."

She would say that if theater people are better able to recover from bodily traumas — and she and Fosse are two good examples and both are dancers — then it's probably because of the discipline they learn.

"That takes spiritual and mental preparation. It has nothing to do with the body. The body can organize itself to fight, but the rest is all spiritual and mental. That is not particular to any trade."

Miss deMille was catapulted to fame by her ballets for the musical "Oklahoma!" back in 1943. Less than six months before Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical with her brilliant choreography opened at the St. James Theatre, her ballet "Rodeo," to music by Aaron Copland, was presented by The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

Its cowboy themes and square dances made it an immediate hit and prepared the way for the "Oklahoma!" dance, which soon became the rage in the musical theater. She went on to do the choreography for "Carousel," "Brigadoon," "Paint Your Wagon," "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" and many more shows.

Following her stroke, this lady whose life was devoted to the dance, was able to begin public appearances again in

mid-1977. These days she makes very few public engagements.

"I DON'T HAVE TO," she said with her usual forthrightness. "I'm very expensive. I do just a few."

Sunday, Feb. 10, at Kingswood Auditorium in Cranbrook, Miss deMille will bring her "Conversations About the Dance" to the second program in this season's American Artist Series. It won't be the same program viewers saw on public television last month.

"My thing is done with movies. It's actually quite a different program. I talk about different things, and it's much shorter, of course."

In her traveling "Conversations," she depends on film, not live dancers.

"The films are the old thing with the real people, not just contemporary dancers. There's the Castles and Ruth St. Denis and various older dancers doing ballet and so forth. These are people who don't dance any more.

Some are dead."

"Conversations About the Dance" has been done several times since Harvard, 1974, and each time Miss deMille says it has been successful. Part of the reason for this is that she relates the history of dance to people and their customs.

"I'm in love with a lot of things. The thing that makes this program bearable for ordinary people is that I talk about costumes, food and weapons, about the way people live and how they had to live. Also, one of my hobbies is the history of clothes and I bring this in.

"PEOPLE OFTEN COME to these programs expecting me to tell gossip, but I don't talk about why Baryshnikov left Balanchine. I just don't talk about it. It's not worth it."

What she does talk about is what she knows best. That is the dance and the sociology and anthropology surrounding

ing its development. Miss deMille has been involved with the dance since the early part of this century when she studied with Martha Graham, a woman she believes to have been one of the truly great innovators of this century.

When she talks about dance and choreography, her wit and perception command constant attention. At times a certain amount of jadedness slips into her remarks.

"A lot of modern dance is boring. So is a lot of old dance. A lot of everything is boring."

The job of choreographer, she said, is to be interesting. "It is very hard to be interesting. It takes energy and economy. You have to be strong, vigorous and brief."

How about creative?

"That's a very loose word, very loose. Real creation very rarely exists. Only a few people in a generation have it," she said.

She might have added, although she didn't, that she is one of those few.

Dworkin heads 'Understudies'

Olga Dworkin, a Farmington Hills resident and active member of a number of Detroit area service organizations, is the new chairman of "Understudies," the women's committee for Wayne State University Theatre.

First job at hand for the new leader is planning for the group's May theatre party which is designed to introduce Hilberry Theatre to new playgoers. She will seek out ways to assist Hilberry Theatre as well as the proposed Globe

Theatre reconstruction in downtown Detroit.

She and her husband Irving are owners of Diore Building Company, Rose-View Building Company and Diore Management Company.

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