

The Ballet and the Country Dance

by May Gadd, from *The Country Dancer*, December 1942

That “the true preserver of tradition are those who recreate them in their own terms—never the sterile imitator and reactionaries,” (to quote Robert Sabin quoting Stravinsky in the November *Dance Observer*) has never been more clearly demonstrated than by Agnes de Mille in her new ballet *Rodeo, or the Courting at Burnt Ranch*, produced by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo during its recent season at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.



The program notes state that “the Saturday afternoon rodeo is a tradition on the remote ranches of the Southwest...that the afternoon’s exhibition is usually followed by a Saturday night dance at the Ranch House. The theme of the ballet is basic. It deals with the problem that has confronted every American woman, from earliest pioneer times, and which has never ceased to occupy them throughout the history of the building of our country: how to get a suitable man. The material of the ballet is redolent of our American soil.”

This basic theme is presented through the medium of the story of the cowgirl who wants to compete with the cowboys on their own term, and yet longs for romance, and goes on to show how she “gets her man.” In New York Miss de Mille herself danced the part of the cowgirl, which was admirably suited to her own particular combination of humor and reality. She also provided wonderful opportunities for all the rest of the dancers, and they take them with a will. Champion Roper, Head Wrangler, the Rancher’s lovely daughter and her “Eastern friends from Kansas City,” and the neighbors who come to the dance—all come to life in a way that one often looks for in vain in ballet performances.

As an integral part of the telling of a story Miss de Mille takes the spirit and the patterns of the traditional dance of the American people—the Country dance in its various forms—and creates a rousing entertainment that leaves the audience determined that if they cannot aspire to be ballet dancers, they will at least go out and find the nearest square dance and get into it. And what preserves tradition better than that?

In his account of the general square dancing at the recent New England Folk Festival...[Alexander] Hoyle quotes the remark made by a solid lady in the audience—“My God” she said, “I wisht I could

get me a man and get into that dancing!” This same identification of the audience with the performance is one of the achievements of *Rodeo*. It gets this result because, like the best square dancing today, it makes no attempt to be an exact reproduction of something that has gone before. Traditional country or square dancing naturally builds more closely on the patterns handed down from the past; but the fact that Callers do build on them and adapt them to their own needs, and that the dancers of each generation adapt the style to fit their own times, is the element that make these old dances eternally new—a fresh creation every time that they are danced.

Rodeo is true creation based on a true foundation, and the result is entertainment that has a universal appeal because, although light and amusing, it has reality. One of the most delightful episodes—and one most appreciated by the audience—is the interlude called “Retrospect,” when the story is temporarily dropped and the choreographer returns to foundations by having four couples dancing a Running Set to the sole accompaniment of their own clapping and calling. They use the patterns and dance in the general style of the Kentucky mountains, but with no attempt to be pseudo mountaineers, or indeed to be anything except vital young people dancing in a style natural to them.

In the final scene of the Saturday night dance at the Ranch everything works up in true square dance fashion. Here Miss de Mille guides the dancers from longways-to-square-to-round dances and so on to breakdowns—while at the same time the social life of the Party continues—with an expert skill that will be the envy of many a Caller. Incidentally she has evolved some variations of familiar dance figures that every Caller will want to add to his repertory; just as he will also want to add to his collection of tunes many of the melodies woven into Aaron Copland’s enchanting score.

In the past the folk dancer has found much to discourage him in composition allegedly based on traditional dances of the people, and has often been tempted to withhold his material from the death-dealing touch of these choreographers. Old-fashioned “quaintness” and a hearty or grotesque (the men) or dainty (the girls) peasantry, all wearing the same fixed smile, have been considered essential, and the emphasis has been on elaborate steps and very little pattern. But today the picture is different. Compositions such as Martha Graham’s *Letter*

May Gadd in 1942 just after she enlisted in the USO.

to the World, Doris Humphrey's *Square Dances*, Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid*, and Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*, as well as her other smaller productions, such as *Hell on Wheels* and various solos, show a clear and deep understanding of the dances of the people, and themselves gain in reality because they are built on this sure foundation. The folk dancer who sees them is awakened to a new appreciation of the eternal vitality of the country dance, and an increased understanding that its qualities are in no way dependent on costume, period, or a particular style, but rather that rigid insistence on a static preservation will tend to destroy them, and that, so long as the foundations are true—and on this depends the truth of the opening statement—tradition will surely be more truly preserved by allowing each generation to recreate the dances in its own terms.

May Gadd (1890-1979), CDSS's longtime director, was an expert on English and Anglo-American folk dance. Agnes De Mille consulted with her on Rodeo as well as on De Mille's choreography in Brigadoon and Oklahoma.

Web extra! A brief clip of the Colorado Ballet performing the Hoedown section of *Rodeo*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKChyxd9Mn>.



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said appreciatively that there were many good-looking “older” women at camp. Though this last was said tongue-in-cheek, it was true, and I’m sure that frequent dancing is responsible!

The Postscript (JS)

VCD and VECD are both proud affiliates of CDSS, which has supported us in the past with financial backing (a promise to cover half of any loss up to a designated amount) for English and contra workshops, and for the Raincoast Ruckus contra dance weekend when it was first proposed. This year, Chehalis received financial backing and a CDSS Outreach grant of \$200 to underwrite two youth scholarships. The grant was instrumental in giving us the confidence to move ahead with our plan to offer youth scholarships to all who asked. The good news is that we actually made a profit this year, and were pleased to return the grant to the CDSS Outreach Fund to be recycled to support another dance or song endeavor.

* Seventeen percent more came in 2015 than in 2014. About half the dancers/musicians came from the United States: Texas, the East Coast, Alaska, and all points in between. Canadian dancers came from BC (including a large contingent from Vancouver Island) and Alberta.

** Uncle Farmer is Ben Schreiber, Michael Sokolovsky; KGB is Julie King, Claude Ginsberg, Dave Bartley

“News from Canada” features news about Canadian events and groups. Ideas for articles should be sent to Bev Bernbaum, wturnip@sympatico.ca, or to Rosemary Lach, rosemaryklach@shaw.ca.

Web extras!

- Sunday afternoon contra video by Lisa Siddons: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDwOIWgJbbc&feature=youtu.be>
- Dance video by Doug Butler: <http://photography.doug-butler.com/chehalis/h590d314d#h5934eea3>
- Singing video by Doug Butler: <http://photography.doug-butler.com/chehalis/h5934ef17#h5934ef17>
- Sunday afternoon waltz video by Lisa Siddons: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUSHvNzS2g&feature=youtu.be>



Chehalis Dance Camp (Doug Butler)