



A TIMELINE OF THE WOMEN
WHO CHANGED AMERICA



March 2022 Her Story ENewsletter Dancers and Choreographers

In this month's newsletter, we profile two women who have made their mark in the fields of dance and choreography: Agnes de Mille and Cleo Parker Robinson.



Agnes de Mille originally wanted to be an actress but was told that she was not pretty enough. She turned to dance instead but was dissuaded from pursuing a career in dance during her youth, as her parents did not see dance as a viable career option. After her youngest sister was prescribed ballet classes to treat her flat feet, de Mille accompanied her. Despite her lack of flexibility and lack of a dancer's body, de Mille persisted, teaching herself by watching film stars. She choreographed her uncle Cecil B. de Mille's 1934 movie *Cleopatra*, graduated from college, and then moved to London to study dance.

After her return to the U.S. in 1938, de Mille became associated with the American Ballet Theatre. One of the pieces that she developed for them was *Black Ritual*, a 25-minute piece performed by the "Negro Unit" of the company, the first ballet representation from Black dancers in a New York predominantly white organization. De Mille's breakthrough work was the choreography for the ballet *Rodeo* with music by Aaron Copeland. She also choreographed many Broadway musicals including *Carousel*, *Brigadoon* (for which she won a Tony), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Paint Your Wagon*, and *Oklahoma!* Her many awards include induction into the American Theater Hall of Fame, the Kennedy Center Honors, and the National Medal of Arts. She has been featured on a U.S. postage stamp.



Cleo Parker Robinson overcame a heart attack at age ten caused both by rheumatic fever and the delay in her treatment due to segregated hospitals in Dallas refusing to treat her as a patient (she is biracial). She threw herself into dance as a way to recover from the physical remnants of her condition, as well as the blatant racism that she experienced. By age 15, she was teaching university level dance classes at the University of Colorado. A woman who brings joy to the world through dance, Parker founded the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance

Ensemble in 1970. During its more than fifty years, the Ensemble has performed in Europe, Africa, Belize, Singapore, Nassau, Iceland, New Zealand, Columbia, Mexico and Israel. She has collaborated with Maya Angelou (one of her mentors), Katherine Dunham, and many others.

Robinson has received four honorary doctorates and been inducted into the Colorado Women's Hall of Fame. Her many other awards include recognition from the Anti-Defamation League and the International Black Women's Congress. She was appointed by President Clinton to the National Council on the Arts and received a Kennedy Center Medal of Honor during the Center's "Masters of African American Choreographers" series.

Agnes de Mille and Cleo Parker Robinson are among the more than 850 women profiled in our book *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*. Women's accomplishments continue to inspire and encourage us all. Continue to help us tell women's stories!

Charlotte Waisman and Jill Tietjen

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