

SPRING 2026 • ISSUE #4

jeté

magazine

RTDC

POSSIBILITIES

from the

ROBERT THOMAS
DANCENTER



In the late Winter /Early Spring of 1978, **Robert and Miyoko Thomas** traveled to Ames, Iowa from New York City in a recently purchased pre-owned sky blue Opel station wagon. They traveled with their two cats, a monkey and most of their personal belongings. After three decades as professional dancers working in touring companies, Robert and Miyoko were ready to retire to Robert's hometown.

Their goal was to create a dance environment where young people could enjoy the experience of learning the technical skills, presentation, and performance of dance in a professional setting much like the one Robert and Miyoko had been working in.

PAS de DEUX *Robert & Miyoko Thomas*



Robert Thomas, in 1964, retained a position in the highly competitive Harkness Ballet first as a trainee then as a company member and toured the world. In 1969, Robert was offered positions with the Stuttgart Ballet, the National Ballet Contemporair, the Joffrey Ballet, the Geneva Ballet, and the second Harkness company. Choosing the Joffrey Ballet, Robert performed in New York, throughout the United States, Europe and Russia.

Miyoko Kato Thomas received her extensive ballet training at the Tachibana Ballet School of Tokyo in her native Japan, subsequently joining the Asami Maki Ballet Company. Miyoko became a first-ranked ballet dancer in Japan. Wanting to further her training, she traveled to the American School of Ballet. New York was the center of the dance world at the time. In 1965, she joined the Harkness Ballet Company. She was promoted to the rank of Soloist in 1969. Ms. Kato joined the Joffrey Ballet in 1974.



jeto
magazine

JETE Magazine is published quarterly by **Robert Thomas Dancenter** as a tribute to the history, heritage, and social impact of Dance and Dance Education throughout the world.

© 2025 by Robert Thomas Dancenter. All rights reserved.



The Motivation of Inspiration

Musings
by

Robert Thomas



New Creative & Managerial Leadership for the Robert Thomas Dancenter

As we begin the new year and welcome a new era at the Dancenter, I want to pause briefly from the *Pas de Deux* section and look ahead.



Susan Thomas Lee has assumed leadership of RTDC as Executive Director and Artistic Director.

A long-standing board member (on which **she holds the titles of CEO and President**), Susan is an accomplished artist, and experienced producer with a **strong business background and MBA education**. Susan brings fresh energy and vision to our organization.

Her extensive experience includes **writing, directing, and producing for the Walt Disney Company in California and Florida**. Under her guidance, we will expand our offerings to include Musical Theatre classes and performances, complementing our strong foundation in ballet, modern, contemporary, and Irish dance.

Susan and her lifelong partner, John

Alexander Lee - both board members and shareholders - are **committed to enhancing our programs and re-imagining past initiatives**.

They share the goals and values that have shaped RTDC for the past fifty years. With their leadership, we anticipate exciting new projects and growth under the banner of **RTDC Innovations**.

A **resident of the Los Angeles area and now Ames commuter**, Susan will remain actively involved day-to-day thanks to technology and many short air flights.

I am thrilled about this next chapter and confident that these changes will propel RTDC into a vibrant future.

I'm looking forward to **my new roles as Artistic Director Emeritus for RTDC and Board Chair, Robert Thomas Enterprises, Inc.**

I am now able to get back to what i truly enjoy - creative conceptualizing, bringing talent together, and creating lasting art.

CHOREOGRAPHY





"To dance is to be out of yourself. Larger, more beautiful, more powerful. This is power, it is glory on earth and it is yours for the taking."

AGNES DE MILLE

Choreographer Agnes de Mille, who created the iconic ballet *Rodeo* (1942) for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo with its distinctive American Western themes, lead directly to her being hired for the revolutionary dance sequences in Rodgers & Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma!* (1943), especially the famous "Dream Ballet," forever changing American musical theatre by integrating dance into the plot.

De Mille felt that the traditional Russian style of ballet was out of touch with American audiences. In her view, dance needed to speak to people here and now. With that in mind, she choreographed *Rodeo* as the first ballet to feature American tap dancing and indigenous folk dance along with classical ballet technique.

Rodeo was the ballet that truly launched de Mille's career. De Mille danced the lead role of the Cowgirl. At its world premiere in New York, she received 22 curtain calls and a standing ovation! She went on to choreograph other Broadway musicals. She won two Tony® awards for Best Choreography for *Brigadoon* (1947) and *Kwamina* (1962). She also received a Special Tony Award in 1993 for *Oklahoma!*'s 50th anniversary, celebrating her pioneering narrative dance in the show's original "Dream Ballet"

The
IMMORTALS

Rodeo: Agnes De Mille Unites with Composer Copeland to Create An Epic Ballet

The original *Rodeo* ballet was choreographed by Agnes de Mille for the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo, a dance company that moved to the United States during World War II. In order to compete with the rival company Ballet Theatre, the Ballet Russe commissioned de Mille out of a career of relative obscurity.

The choreographer was given considerable creative control, choosing Aaron Copland as the composer after being impressed by his previous ballet, *Billy the Kid*.



Though Copland was initially reluctant to compose "another Cowboy ballet," De Mille persuaded him that this show would



Ballet West production in 2022.



De Mille's Choreography performed by the Kansas City Ballet in 1996.

ser Aaron



mark a significant departure from his previous work.

De Mille found herself occupied with instructing a highly international cast in the mannerisms of American cowboys and De Mille herself played the lead (upper right photograph).

At the premiere staged at the Metropolitan Opera House on October 16, 1942, the ballet received 22 curtain calls. Though de Mille herself was not entirely pleased with the premiere, it was attended by Rodgers and Hammerstein, who approached de Mille afterward to request that she choreograph their upcoming production of *Oklahoma!*.



RTDC



The ballet makes use of riding movements that de Mille devised. De Mille also made use of such vernacular forms as a square dance and a cadenza for a tap dancer.

The set, costumes, and lighting help create the Old Western vibe of the ballet. Designed by Oliver Smith, both the set and lighting define not only the ranch but also the time of day throughout the 5 sections.

The costumes are, predictably, indicative of the Wild West, with cowboy attire for the men and traditional Western dresses for the women.

The exception to this is the Cowgirl, who is also dressed in cowboy attire as she tries to fit in with the men. In the second half of the ballet, she dons a red dress and has an "ugly duck moment," suddenly becoming noticeable and





desirable, even to the Head Wrangler (and the Lead Roper, her true love), which is in deep contrast to her character during the earlier sections of the ballet.

Noted among many reviews was de Mille's highly evocative choreography, described as "film sensibility" and renowned for its realism.

The original production went on to lead a successful tour, though producers were hard pressed to replicate the skill with which de Mille had portrayed the lead.

De Mille (right) retained veto power over any casting of the ballet, which often sent companies to extremes in order to find a worthy Cowgirl.



RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN'S *Oklahoma!*



Agnes de Mille C Game-changing E

Oklahoma! is the landmark 1943 musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, based on Lynn Riggs' play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, that tells the love story of cowboy Curly McLain and farm girl Laurey Williams in the Oklahoma Territory around 1906, blending song, dance, and drama to advance the plot and usher in the Golden Age of musical theatre.

It was the first collaboration for the iconic duo, known for its innovative integration of song and story, and features famous songs like "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" and the title song. It was a massive success that ran for years on Broadway, won

a special Pulitzer Prize, and led to a famous 1955 film adaptation.

The choreographer de Mille was largely responsible for the musical's success as the norms of musical theater were challenged and replaced. Before de Mille, Broadway dances were largely "interludes" featuring generic kick lines for entertainment only. Her work on *Oklahoma!* permanently shifted this paradigm:

Narrative Integration: She was the first to use choreography as a primary means of advancing the plot and developing character emotional depth.

The Dream Ballet: This iconic 18-minute sequence, "Laurey Makes Up Her Mind," explored the protagonist's subconscious fears and desires regarding her suitors, Curly and Jud. It established the "dream ballet" as a standard device in musical theater.

The Actor-Dancer: De Mille insisted on hiring "actor-dancers" who could fully embody characters rather than just tech-



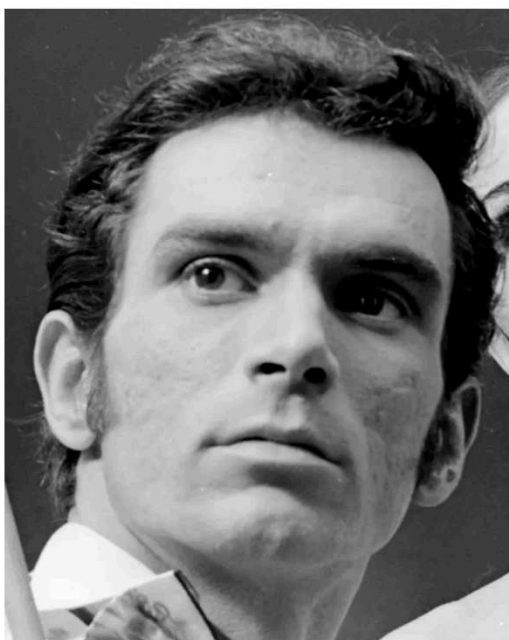


Choreographs Broadway Musical

nical specialists, a philosophy that influenced later giants like Jerome Robbins.

Her work was seen as creating a distinctly American form of dance—"knee-slapping" and "full of fire"—rather than traditional, abstract ballet. The choreography was deemed a "triumph" that set the standard for future Broadway musicals.





Joffrey Ballet Legend Paul Sutherland Remembers Agnes De Mille

Robert: Paul, would you be interested in telling me a little bit about your work with *Rodeo*? I remember you have a history of setting the ballet and extensive knowledge of Agnes.

Paul: Sure.

Robert: One of the reasons she's being featured in our magazine as an *immortal* is because her ballet, *Oklahoma!*, which was done one year after *Rodeo*, as far as I can recollect, *Rodeo* is evidently the precursor to that musical.

That ballet changed the course of musicals from that point forward. You were so close to it. You were the Head Wrangler at the time.

Paul: She just had a great, a great eye for movement and

action being real. She was great to work with. I knew her before she had a stroke. She was very active. Of course, she wrote beautifully, you know, her books.

She was just had a real talent for writing and, putting things into words and into when describing things. The two ballets of hers, *Rodeo* and *foreign religion* I was also in and the latter wasn't so successful. But, *Rodeo* is one of those ballets that will live forever, you know? It's just a masterpiece. The music is wonderful. The choreography just really, really fits.

Miss de Mille was very descriptive. She knew how to describe how she wanted the movement. And we worked hard to make it real. To give her what she wanted. She was very demanding.

Robert: She had high respect for the Joffrey Ballet. Several people stood out to her as the best, the Cowgirl, the Roper, and the Head Wrangler.

Paul: Carol Valesky, Christine Sari and a few others. She would really look at and appreciate the dancers and the Joffrey. Robert Joffrey was really brilliant. I know he believed in reincarnation, and when he picked dancers, sometimes I think, in his

e Mille

own mind, even as a fantasy, he believed those people were the reincarnate of the person that originated that part. Agnes originated that part of Cowgirl.

Robert: I was just wondering, what got Agnes interested in creating the great American Western, uh, musical in ballet? I mean, where did that come from?

Robert: Did it premiere in the United States or in Europe?

Paul: No, it premiered at the Met, 1942.

Robert: And you have carried out De Mille's legacy by staging Rodeo countless times. You're the only répétiteur ever authorized to teach the ballet.

Paul: I have staged it more than 40 times over the years.

Robert: That's amazing. Such an amazing accomplishment. You're a great inspiration to dancers all over the world. So God bless you and happy New Year, Paul.

Paul: Thank you so much.



Legend Ballet Dancer Paul Sutherland stages de Mille's Rodeo with Ballet West in 2022 for its 80th Anniversary.



Create A Strong Dance Ethic

To Thrive at Dance, Talent Isn't Enough

Ever wonder why some of the most talented dancers never went anywhere with their talent and careers.

The overriding reason is that they were not persistent in their training. They arrived late to class or not at all. In rehearsal, they shone due to their natural talent, but were soon injured and sidelined.

The body has a "mind" of its own. Youth and talent will sustain you, but for a short time. If you develop good training habits as a student dancer, you will have them throughout your life, and not just in dance.

the challenges posed by talent and body, and the joy of personal accomplishment earned will be a reward beyond explanation.

Persistently attend your dance classes on time or early. Vacations and time off are fine, even beneficial for your body, but when you train, train. The exercises are built one upon another.

If you miss fifteen minutes of class, your body misses fifteen minutes of physical training that prepares it for the next progression. Your body will suffer and slowly start to rebel.



RTDC wants its students to be happy, healthy dancers reaching their full potential, but this can be hindered by persistent and inconsistent class attendance during their training.

One of our core values is focusing on excellent training for the very young and beginning dancers is to provide

them with a solid foundation of habits.

Most successful dancers have strong study habits and are honor roll students. Persistent training will overcome most of

The habits developed there last throughout their lives. It is the most critical period

in a young dancer's training life. Habits learned early on, both good and bad, tend to persist.

Excellent training is a thoroughly enjoyable experience for young dancers. The instructors that the Dancenter provides are among the best. Persistence is probably the most crucial element to success. Calvin Coolidge said it best:

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent.

"Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

"The slogan 'Press On!' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."





Will Williams

ROBERT THOMAS DANCENTER STUDENT • 2010-2025



Will Williams, a 2025 high school graduate from Ames, is continuing his dance education at Dean College in the Boston area. In his first year at Dean College, Will is taking ballet, jazz, improv and modern dance classes along with a rhythmic analysis class and honors courses in English, communications, math and art. His dance classes are scheduled throughout the day, with performance rehearsals on weekends and evenings. New to him are in-class assessments on dance technique and written assignments based on live ballet performances in Boston. As part of the honors program, he has traveled to Providence for live theater performances and is studying biographies and impact of notable dancers.

There are numerous audition and performance opportunities for students at Dean College. Will was cast in two performances for the fall semester, including one contemporary and one tap piece in the

Photos above courtesy Dan McClanahan





New Dancer Showcase and one improv piece in the Faculty Works performance. For the Spring 2026 semester, he will perform in the Choreographer's Concert and Dance Company, with other casting yet to be announced. For Summer 2026, he is applying for summer dance festivals and intensives.

The education he gained from the studio, Iowa Youth Ballet and the Dancenter Dancer Performance Company provided a solid foundation for learning choreography, training discipline and performing with authenticity. Will is excited to dance at Dean College and explore dance as a profession.



And Then. . .

Susan Thomas Lee

Executive Director & Artistic Director
Robert Thomas Dancer



The first of a year brings new energy and enthusiasm and that's certainly true at the Robert Thomas Dancer, after a successful 44th production of ***The Nutcracker Ballet***. The first of the year also **marks my return to the Ames Community as I assume the roles of Executive Director and Artistic Director for RTDC**. I have some big shoes to fill following the incredible legacy of Miyoko Kato and the inspired legacy of my brother Robert Thomas.

I am grateful for this opportunity as it not only **allows Robert to take a higher role creatively in the company**, but affords me an opportunity to **innovate, create, reimagine and retool our core dance educational program** in this era of handheld screens and artificial intelligence.

I'm looking forward to not only building on the legacy of RTDC but **building tomorrow's traditions today**.

Albert Einstein referred to dancers as the "athletes of the Gods." Here's a hint of where we are going. **Excellence in dance education is at our very core**, and is the **foundation of fine health, athleticism, self-confidence, and discipline**. These are the values we wish to bestow upon our children and want within our own lives. As they say, **it is never too early to learn, it is never too late to learn**.

Look for "RTDC Innovations." This new brand is not only packed with some of **our best current programs: the 45th Nutcracker Ballet, the RTDC Dancers, RTDC Irish performers, and June dance recital**, but the curriculum will expand to **encompass the needs of our community**.

From tiny tumblers at the age of 3, to physically challenged individuals, to encouraging young performing artists in theatre, to providing offerings to those seeking a way back into physical health, our focus is to build health, athleticism, self-confidence, and discipline.

Imagine **your child entering a room of strangers with a commanding presence**. That is what we strive to build in students.

Offering a safe and encouraging environment, **we will allow them to step outside their comfort zone and explore their inner potential in multiple ways through the performing arts**. Feeling free to let their "inner freak fly" with a **self-expression unique unto them. One they are proud to possess**.

We will **seek new individuals and contributors to join our "superstar" bench of teachers**. We look forward to a **future of molding strong, confident, disciplined individuals who never forget to have fun and create joy**.

Jeté is a magazine designed to raise awareness about the Dancenter, its activities, goals, and features. We will present manageable bites of the history of dance and dance makers in each quarter's issue. There are numerous dance-related issues that we could discuss, and I would appreciate hearing from you about your areas of interest.

The articles will be concise, inspiring curiosity regarding the subject rather than providing a detailed account. So much is happening in dance now. Styles and discipline are being blended.

Classical icons are being re-imagined. Women are increasingly taking a more prominent role in the creation of dance and dance administration. The dance company is expanding into universities.

As time passes, more of the AI technology will play a part in creation. Dance is moving into public spaces and becoming an integral part of daily experience. And the

Social Network is changing everything.

This is the most creative time in the history of dance .. What are you interested in discussing? What do you wish to hear more about? What shall we debate?

Let's become energized about dance!

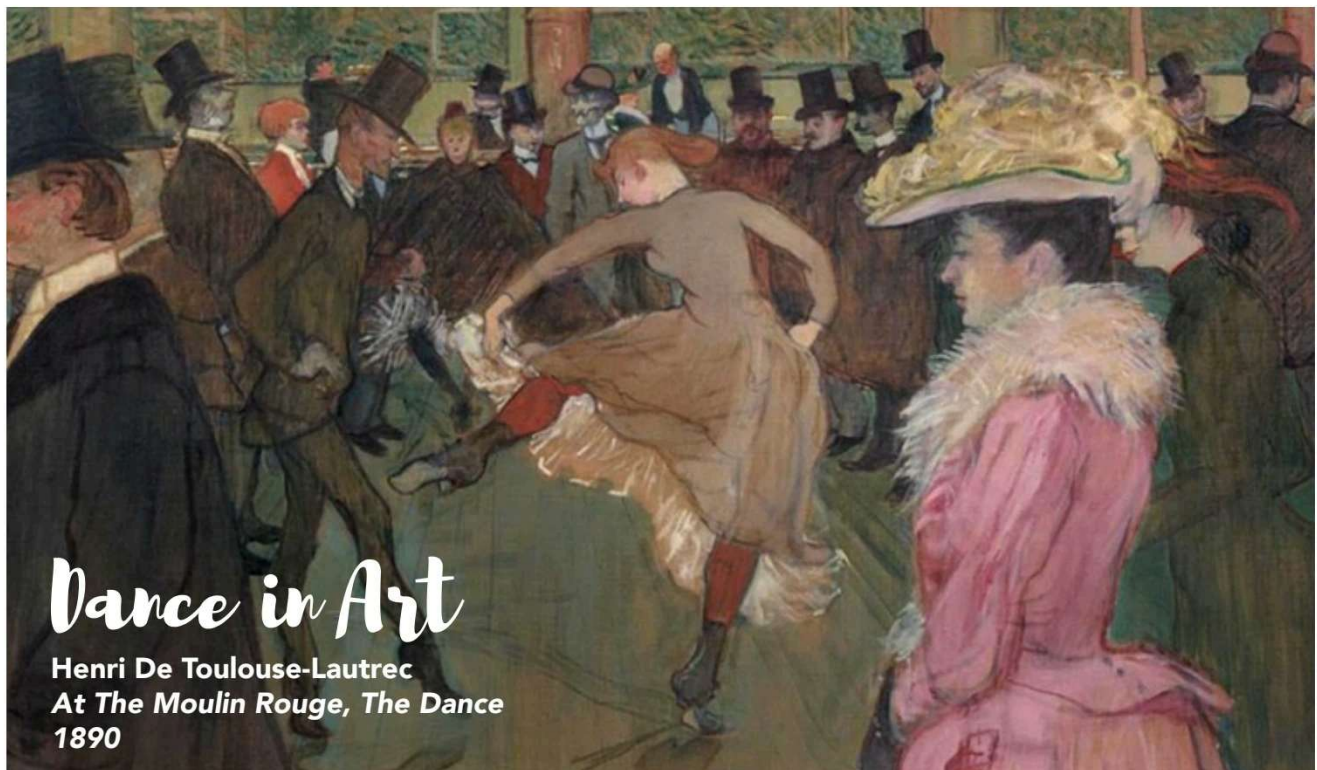
Robert

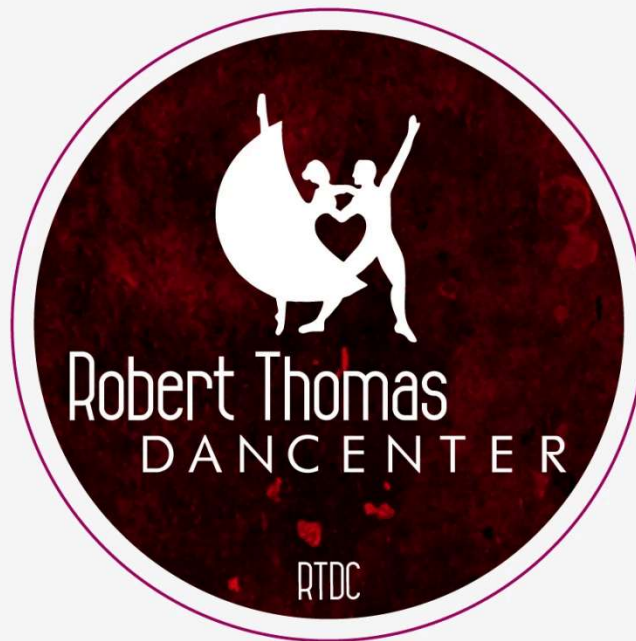
TAKE THE LEAP!

jeté
m a g a z i n e

Jeté is a dramatic "leap forward" movement in ballet.

Mastering the jeté is crucial for any ballet dancer as it showcases their strength, agility, and control.





RTDC

Robert Thomas Dancenter (South)

319 S 17th St
Ames, Iowa 50010
(515) 233-0826

Robert Thomas Dancenter (West)

134 Dotson Dr.
Ames, Iowa 50014
(515) 292-4602

Robert Thomas Dancenter (Mailing Address)

3405 Clinton Court • Ames, Iowa 50010

<https://rtdance.com>