

Miss Ruth

The "More Living Life" of Ruth St. Denis

By WALTER TERRY

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY, NEW YORK

Popular Guide for the Ballet-

r Art, Her Legacy

ing Dancers on Toe

veliest Art

ory of the World's Great

Miss Ruth

were considered as divertissements—could use her art to project images of elemental timelessness.

Although visually fascinating in its surge of silks, *Spirit of the Sea* was far more than a trick of staging. In late years, Miss Ruth would explain to a whole new generation of dancers and theatergoers that although some moments in her dances might justly be described as "Ruthie attitudinizing," her whole concept of the use of draperies and properties was firmly based in a belief that, for the dancer, draperies represented "an extension of the movements of the body itself into space." This she demonstrated in dance laboratory sessions which I conducted in the late 1950's by showing how weight, color, and even texture of the materials she used were selected in accord not only with the place and period of a given dance but with the movement itself. No one, not even Loie Fuller, exploited materials with such esthetic perceptivity. In her much later *Color Study of the Madonna*, St. Denis's use of color, weight, and texture in fabrics constituted a major choreographic element in the dance itself. In another dance, *Salome*, she did not simply strip off seven veils as the scenario suggested. She did not strip at all, but she *did* have seven veils, each totally different from the other and each representing a different mood or quality of action in the enchantress, for one was veiled seductively, another slithered like a serpent, still another suggested wantonness, and so it went. *The Spirit of the Sea* was the choreo-geographic peak of her relating of the movement of the body with the motion of her costumes.

Miss Ruth

to "the heart's corruption," but instead, with a dramatic gesture, she proclaimed, "I shall make visible the *hearst* corruption!" No one ever knew whether it was a slip of the tongue or, knowing the St. Denis wit, intentional. She would never say.

As the years went by, she did other plays, among them Wilde's *Salome*, in which she danced as well as acted, and the popular play *The Royal Family*. Both of these were done for Daniel Reed and his wife, Isadora Bennett, in their summer theater in North Carolina. By this time Miss Ruth was having difficulty remembering her lines. Before going to Carolina she was at Jacob's Pillow and she asked Shawn's composer-pianist, Jess Meeker, if he would hold the book for her and correct her when she went off the speech. Naturally, he tried to give her the cues by reading the last line of the character speaking before her. After a few minutes she startled him with, "Enough of that, Jess. I'm going to have trouble enough learning my *own* lines without being bothered by what *other* people say." Meeker said later, "I think Miss Ruth learned the whole play as if it were an uninterrupted soliloquy."

And indeed she did have troubles. In doing *Salome*, she kept agreeing to Herod's request to dance much too soon, and in *The Royal Family*, Miss Bennett, who was holding the book, had strategic sites for herself. These included not only the customary prompter's box but also a trap door and a fireplace behind which she crouched. It was a nerve-shattering experience for Miss Bennett and, of course, for the cast. In one scene, when several

Miss Ruth

we grow indifferent and dead to any human relationship,
we are dying in our whole being . . . ever your Ruthie."

* * *

With the coming of World War II, Miss Ruth participated in benefits for British War Relief, Russian War Relief, and other Allied causes, and then hied herself to California where, for a time, she worked (as a riveter!) in the Douglas Aircraft plant. There were plenty of publicity stories about this, and I remember, as a soldier, flying the Atlantic from Africa back home, that a friend leaned over to me as we were mid-ocean and said, "I know you love her dearly, but I hope Miss Ruth didn't have anything to do with *this* plane."

While she was working patriotically in an aircraft plant, she was also pondering on war, on man's nature. She wrote innumerable poems on the subject. One that she sent to me included these lines:

These parts of machines
These assemblings
These earnest, intelligent, feverish workers
Putting their minds on the problem
Their hands to the task
These planners and changers
These gatherers of raw materials
These triumphant presenters of the finished plane
I say
What are you doing this for, my friend?
Do you know, and if you do not, do you inquire?