

The New York Times

DANCE

Review: José Limón International Dance Festival at the Joyce Theater

By SIOBHAN BURKE OCT. 14, 2015



José Limón International Dance Festival: Aaron Selissen and Elise Drew Leon of Limón Dance Company performing in the choreographer's "Mazurkas" at the Joyce Theater. Credit Paula Lobo for The New York Times

It's been 70 years — a long time in modern dance — since José Limón, a pioneer of the form, founded his company; it's been 43 years since his death. In his absence, **the Limón Dance Company** has soldiered on, and so have his dances, in his company and in other troupes around the world. The two-week **José Limón International Dance Festival**, which opened on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, is one of the most extensive celebrations of his legacy in recent years, featuring 14 works performed by the company that bears his name and a diverse group of guests: sjDANCEco from California, American Repertory Ballet from New Jersey, Coreoarte

from Venezuela, members of the Royal Danish Ballet and students from leading dance conservatories.

But opening night was entirely in the very capable hands, or bodies, of the Limón Dance Company. (Two dancers from the Bavarian State Ballet, originally scheduled to perform “The Exiles,” couldn’t be there.) Three classics — “Mazurkas” (1957), “The Moor’s Pavane” (1949) and “Missa Brevis” (1958) — showed that while the Limón oeuvre can feel dated in its decorum, it has plenty of lasting power.

“Mazurkas,” to Chopin (played live by the pianist Michael Cherry), made for a good introduction to the company’s likable dancers, who look relaxed in Limón’s concurrently grounded and soaring language. Notes of Polish folk dance (the choreographer visited Poland in 1957) weave through the solos, duets, trios and quartets, like the thigh-slapping introduced by the quick and light Durell Comedy or Roxane D’Orleans Juste’s ruggedly flourishing hands. Mr. Comedy is a particular joy to watch in both lateral and vertical feats: He can effortlessly cover large swathes of the stage, and when he’s airborne, there’s a moment when you think he might not come down.

The suite progresses through a range of moods, from introspective to flirtatious, in the kind of earnest, orderly way that a Limón dance promises. Some performers seem to believe in the movement more than others, and Ms. D’Orleans Juste, who has been with the company for over 30 years, is one of the believers, a dancer who treats each step like the truth. She also brought that wisdom to “The Moor’s Pavane,” Limón’s response to Shakespeare’s “Othello,” playing the moor’s wife alongside Francisco Ruvalcaba (the moor), Mr. Comedy (his friend) and Kristen Foote (his friend’s wife). They imbued the tragedy with real intrigue, aided by Ms. Foote’s potent coquettishness and Mr. Ruvalcaba’s muscular swagger.

The company was joined by members of its affiliated Professional Studies Program for “Missa Brevis,” to the Mass that Zoltan Kodaly wrote at the end of World War II. The subject here is the human spirit’s resilience in times of destruction, and it’s no joke. The triumphal work sets a lone man in black (Mr. Ruvalcaba) against a large chorus in many colors. The group, which had wonderful momentum, gives individuals something to rise from; the image of a single dancer ferried aloft, mournfully or heroically, emerges again and again. Perhaps it’s not surprising that a company steeped in such material should make it this far.

The José Limón International Dance Festival continues through Oct. 25 at the Joyce Theater, Manhattan; 212-242-0800, joyce.org.

The New York Times

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Review: Limón Dance Company Celebrates Its Heritage

By BRIAN SEIBERTOCT. 19, 2015



Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

By 1972, a year after José Limón finished “The Unsung,” a dance he called a “paean to the heroic defenders of the American patrimony,” his sincere, high-minded, heart-on-its-sleeve style of modern dance was already out of fashion. Deborah Jowitt, in *The New York Times*, likened his status to that of “*a king in exile from a foreign country.*” That December he died.

But the Limón Dance Company lives on, now nearly 70, and its members remain heroic defenders of their patrimony, the work of a man who was born in Mexico but became part of the core of modern dance in the United States. On Friday, “The Unsung” opened Program B of a two-week José Limón International Dance Festival at the Joyce Theater.

The “heroic defenders” that Limón meant were Native American leaders like Geronimo and Sitting Bull. Performed to no sound other than the dancers’ breath and the slap of

their stomping feet, “The Unsung” is a men’s piece. Tribal circles set up a series of valiant solos, each characterized through motion, one man (Mark Willis) bending and snapping like a mighty bow, the next (Kurt Douglas) churning the air with the spinning arms of his spinning body.

On Friday, the final three soloists were guests from the Royal Danish Ballet, present to demonstrate Limón’s international reach. Cleanlimbed and strong but less weighted and higher gloss than the unaffected Limón men, they put a slight foreign accent on a Native American mode already made foreign by time.

The center of the program was Limón’s best-known work, “The Moor’s Pavane,” his 1949 take on “Othello.” Francisco Rualcaba invested the Moor with impressive violence, and Kristen Foote, with an innocently sensual pleasure, made the Emilia figure, who is sometimes played as a shrew, into a tragically unwitting accomplice. But on Friday’s program, it was not the performances but the enduringly tight structure of the work, making meaning through form, that stood in contrast to the looser later pieces.

“The Winged,” from 1966, is a 40-minute suite of dances on the theme of flight and feathered creatures. Like “The Unsung,” it was originally choreographed in silence, but before the premiere Limón added music, which was replaced for the company’s 50th anniversary by a flute-as-birdsong score by Jon Magnussen. Longer than it needs to be and overreliant on fluttering hands and quick-trilling feet, “The Winged” is nevertheless a feast of invention. There’s even some welcome oddness: During a feeding frenzy of harpies, just the heads of the company’s men stick out from the stage’s wings.

The José Limón International Dance Festival continues through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-242-0800, joyce.org.

The New York Times

DANCE

Review: A Festival Invigorates José Limón's Legacy

By BRIAN SEIBERTOCT. 22, 2015



From left, Ross Katen, Mark Willis and Brenna Monroe-Cook of the Limón Dance Company performing in "Carlota" at the Joyce Theater. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

For the [José Limón International Dance Festival](#), now in its second and final week at the Joyce Theater, the [Limón Dance Company](#) has invited troupes from across the country and the world to join it in performing the work of its namesake choreographer, who died in 1972. The intention is to show the spread of Limón's legacy, but during Program C on Tuesday, that wasn't the only effect.

Members of [sjDANCEco](#), a company founded in San Jose, Calif., by the former Limón dancer Gary Masters, performed “Mazurkas,” Limón’s 1958 suite of dances to Chopin. They did not perform it very well. Even apart from the wobbles and stumbles, the dancing was tentative and imprecise, only in the general vicinity of the choreography’s shapes and rhythms.

In the context of the festival, though, this subpar performance functioned as a reminder of how hard it is to get Limón right — not just how physically difficult the movements are, but also how much concentration and faith it takes to keep the style from seeming irredeemably antiquated and hokey. The failure of sjDANCEco in this respect set into relief the amazingness of what the Limón Dance Company regularly accomplishes.

On Program C, the host troupe had less to work with than on previous programs. “Carlota” was the last piece that Limón made before his death, and it’s a weaker version of earlier dramas. It is about the Empress Carlota, whose husband, Maximilian, was the short-reigning Hapsburg emperor of Mexico (Limón’s home country), until he was executed in 1867. The original dancer in the title role was Carla Maxwell, who has heroically served as the company’s artistic director since 1978 and recently announced her plans to retire.

The dance takes place inside Carlota’s grief-addled mind. In silence save for the scream before the lights first rise, she remembers Maximilian’s final days amid treacherous court ladies and stamping guerrillas. The work is uneven as theater, but Brenna Monroe-Cook, as Carlota, made the unraveling of her dignity affecting, spinning in her hooped dress, rolling in it on the floor, biting its hem.

Let’s hope that the Limón company’s transfer of power goes more smoothly. In the meantime, [American Repertory Ballet](#), from New Jersey, reestablished that other troupes can do justice to Limón classics. “There Is a Time,” Limón’s 1956 treatment of Ecclesiastes and temporal cycles (a time to be born, a time to die), is in its use of circles a testament to eternal verities of choreographic construction. As danced by American Repertory, and as staged by the Limón alumna Sarah Stackhouse, this piece stood up to time’s tests a little while longer.

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Review: José Limón Festival Celebrates in a Transportive Way

By BRIAN SEIBERTOCT. 26, 2015



Mark Willis and Elise Drew León of the Limón Dance Company performing at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

José Limón's *"The Traitor"*, a dance drama made in 1954, looks and sounds like cultural programming on 1950s television. The arches of the cutout set, the anguished brass and percussion of the Gunther Schuller score, the portentous atmosphere: Even when performed live, the work seems to transpire in black and white.

The characters have archetypal names — the Leader, His Followers, the Traitor — but everyone can recognize Jesus and Judas, the Last Supper table, the kiss of betrayal. No one makes dances like this anymore.

That fact carried a force of justification at the Joyce Theater on Saturday, as “*The Traitor*” closed Program D of the two-week **José Limón International Dance Festival**. The work opens at a run and doesn’t let up through its final moment, when the Traitor snaps a noose tight around his own neck. The dramatic compression is incredibly high, with physically and poetically potent images coming in a thick, inexorable flow. This is a dance made to last and to retain its power, but someone has to keep it alive — and that is what the **Limón Dance Company** does.

One aim of the festival was to show that the namesake troupe isn’t alone in doing that preserving. On Saturday, Carolina Avendaño from the Venezuelan company **Coreoarte** performed the Limón solo “*Chaconne*” (1942). Although the strength of her legs didn’t match that of her arms, the dour Ms. Avendaño nevertheless caught the work’s weighty momentum in close harmony with its recorded Bach score.

The remainder of the program, like the festival as a whole, relied too heavily on lesser Limón works from the two years before his death in 1972. “*Orfeo*” (1972) is a rote retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth with lots of fabric and little tragic force, even as Eurydice’s guardians carry her back into death. The choreography, lacking the sense of necessity in “*The Traitor*”, falls far short of the Beethoven score.

“*Dances for Isadora*” (1971) is a well-constructed suite of evocations of the modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan, set to Chopin (played live on Saturday by Michael Cherry). The work gestures at her gamboling side, but is most convincing in showing her grief. It ends with an older Isadora (embodied by the well-cast veteran Roxane D’Orléans Juste), reliving her past before her neck is snapped by a scarf. The “D” in Program D could have stood for Death, but Limón’s legacy is in good health.