

LIMÓN

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A Conversation with Nina Watt about staging PSALM at the University of Iowa



Photo: Nina Watt performs in José Limón's *There is a Time*.

Limón reconstructor and former Company member Nina Watt worked with students at the University of Iowa for two weeks to learn José Limón's "Psalm." The work will be performed for the "Dance Gala 2009: Synergy" performance on October 29 through November 7, 2009. Nina discusses the work and the process:

What is your personal history with "Psalm?"

In 1976, four years after I had joined the Limón Company, one of our major repertory projects was a staging of excerpts from *Psalm*. Ruth Currier was the Artistic Director of the company at that time, but the project was primarily in the hands of Carla Maxwell, then her Artistic Associate. *Psalm* was a work that particularly excited Carla, who had been part of the original cast in 1967. At that time, I hadn't seen the complete original piece. I've since watched it many times on a rehearsal film of the original cast, made during the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College.

In following years, we did two excerpted versions of the piece. One version included the primary male figure; the other did not, although it did include the female solo, which I had the honor of

performing.

I was originally excited about learning *Psalm*, because it offered an opportunity to explore an aspect of José's style that I had first seen in *The Unsung*, an all-male piece, during my first year in the company. These movements are often percussive, angular and rhythmic, although the breath and weight fluctuation are still very much a part of it. Limón tended to use this style mostly for men, but in *Psalm*, the whole mixed-gender ensemble moves this way.

Given the short residency, how did you decide which sections to include?

First of all, the selections chosen needed to present a feeling of a complete piece, to have an arc of its own. I wanted the sections to contrast each other, to lead logically one from the other, and to have a dramatic evolution that reflected Limón's ideas. Secondly, the amount of learning for the students needed to be manageable in the time frame we had. Even with 'fast learners', a new style and the inherent sense of the piece had to be absorbed. In addition, the sections needed to be stimulating for both the audience and for the young dancers. Finally a consideration was whether or not the music could be edited in a reasonable way.

Over the years after Maxwell's first restaging, other *Psalm* suites have been arranged, by Jennifer Scanlon, Alice Condodino, Risa Steinberg, and Merle Holloman among others. I think that the Iowa staging may be the first to assemble this particular short suite: the original opening dance, followed by the female solo, concluding with the 'running dance' (used, as Maxwell had done in 1976, as the finale). I was very pleased with the results, and feel that it holds together well.

How did the students respond to the work?

They adore it. It isn't an easy piece to learn. We had the advantage of a residency with Limón technique classes as well as rehearsals, so we could address movement quality, and some exact sequences, in class. However, the repertory phrases are often in mixed meter, with weight shifts and arm gestures that are unusual. This group brought considerable skill and good work habits to bear on

the process.

There are four aspects that I think the dancers especially enjoyed: the expressive potency of some of the simplest choreographic moments; the challenging rhythmic complexity that gives each group a unique voice, and which drives the emotional level of the piece to a powerful unison culmination; the typical Limón balance of form and flow, in which both community and individual can express themselves; and finally, but probably of greatest importance, the innate spirituality of the movement. When I commented on this quality in one movement sequence, fairly early in our process, several students mentioned that this aspect had struck them already.

Were there any unexpected hurdles?

Not exactly unexpected. In order to do an excerpted version, the music had to be cut. For this, I used the original score. (In 2002, Maxwell commissioned a new score for *Psalm* by John Magnussen, which the present company production uses.) The old recording is not of good quality, but this score is more easily excerpted, and has a specific nature that I like for the piece. It was taken to a sound studio to unite the three sections we would use into a melded whole, and to try to clean the sound a little.

Another small hurdle came with attempting to add some extra dancers, giving more students the opportunity to participate, without damaging Limón's exquisite structure.

After so many years, how do you feel now about "Psalm?"

There are extraordinary gifts that come with restaging a work. Throughout the process - the preparatory research, the teaching of Limón technique and the sequences from *Psalm*, the interviews and discussions, and directing the completed dance - the reconstructor must bring forward salient aspects of the work. These revolve around both the how and the why. Transmission is through demonstration, through imagery, through concepts; it needs to permeate the details and the whole. This process opens new doors for the reconstructor. I feel that I always learn so much about a work when I am restaging it, even when it is a piece I have performed.

Psalm, like many of Limón's dances, is masterful in its use of rhythm, its play of stage space, the unfolding variations of both gestural and structural themes, and in its capacity to evoke such emotion with abstract movement. It was thrilling to revisit it, and to be part of these young dancers' experience of this masterwork.

The University of Iowa staging was a wonderful experience. The whole department was so supportive. Eloy Barragan, the project director and a Mexico native, has a special interest in Limón's work; Alan Sener, the Gala Program's director, danced with Louis Falco, who was the male soloist in the original *Psalm*; Rebekah Kowal, the department's dance historian, delved into background on the piece and on José, bringing her enthusiasm and expertise to bear on some wonderful interviews. I'm very much looking forward to the return trip for their Oct. 27th premiere.

Nina Watt first worked with Limón as a student at UCLA, and was invited to join the Company in 1972. She has been recognized for her outstanding performances in Limón works and the Company's diverse repertory. In 2003 she was awarded a Bessie in recognition of sustained achievement in dance. Ms. Watt has performed as a guest artist with Annabel Gamson, Martha Clarke and Doug Varone. She has taught at the University of Wisconsin/Madison, Arizona State University, and Southern Methodist University, and has staged Limón choreography on numerous professional companies and university dance groups.

For more information about the University of Iowa performances and to buy tickets, [click here](#).



photo: the Limón Dance Company performs in José Limón's *Psalm*. Photo by Doug Cody. Click on photo to see video.

Meet Katherine McDowell Patterson, Costume Designer for *THERE IS A TIME*

What inspired your costume design?

At my first design meeting with Carla and Roxane, they spoke about the need to update the costumes while staying true to the original design. As inspiration, Roxane shared a beautiful book of Impressionist paintings that conveyed the feeling she wanted to incorporate into the dance. We observed the quality of light, and how several daubs of different colors blended together to create a unified picture. The images were not flat, but textured, and they seemed to vibrate. It was not just the technique and quality of light, but the subjects of the paintings that interested Roxane. The Impressionists were great observers of nature and captured various seasons, types of weather, and times of day on their canvas, not unlike the various moods Limón portrayed in choreographing *Time*.



photo: sketches of new costume designs by Katherine McDowell Patterson

The Impressionists were great observers of nature and captured various seasons, types of weather, and times of day on their canvas, not unlike the various moods Limón portrayed in choreographing *Time*.

How were you able to translate the qualities of the paintings into dress?

It was a challenge to figure out how to translate those shimmering images into fabric and clothing. As it happens, I came to be a costume designer via a fine arts background, and I have always thought of costuming dance as creating a large, living canvas of colors and movement. I was pleased that Roxane had chosen

paintings as a starting point for the project. She wanted to convey light and translucence, warmth and community, and variety within uniformity. In a more tangible sense, we both felt the designs should have a softness and drape and move with a flowing quality like water.

What, if any, influence did the original costumes have on your design?

Carla opened the original costume design book, or bible, as it's known in the business, and we pored over Pauline Lawrence's original designs from 1956. We discussed what parts seemed to work (the dresses functioned well and moved beautifully), and what needed updating (the men's outfits seemed dated, especially the knee pants and vests).

What other factors influenced you in the design process?

I needed to go to the source- the choreography, for further direction. The dance itself is beautiful, deep, and varied, and the constantly shifting theme and mood is reflected through costume changes and styling. I had two films of the dance from different decades- 1987 and 1996- each with a different set of costumes. The earlier version was quite similar to Pauline's original designs, while the later was a re-design by Thomas Keller in which the costumes had been streamlined and modernized. Though the costumes had changed with the times, Limón's dance was timeless.

Did you want to create designs within a contemporary, or timeless, framework?

Neo-classicism is the adaptation or reinvention of something from an older time. I thought about how to honor the initial idea of the costumes while making them more contemporary, possibly through use of fabric and color. I decided to maintain a simple, uniform silhouette for the group while adding depth and individuality by giving each dancer their own creamy earth tone. This variety within uniformity would also create a subtly shifting color palette that would change under light, creating a painterly effect. We had chosen one particular painting as a guide for the palette, and I looked within its gestural paint daubs for color swatches of my own. They ranged from creams, skin tones, and pastels to sienna, umber, and chocolate, with a smattering of greens and brick red.

Can you describe your final design?

I admired Pauline's original dress design, which was streamlined, flowed smoothly, and revealed colored underskirts at times. I maintained the basic dress shape, but dropped the neckline at the back to make a more romantic line and invented a new way to pull back the overskirts to create a puff rather than a drape. The result was Pre-Raphaelite, or medieval, rather than Roman, or biblical. The new colors for the underskirts are inspired by a patch of colors, both earthy and luminous, in the Impressionist painting we loved.

The men's costumes are more similar to the redesign from '96. The flat front,

straight legged pants were classic and flattering, so I created a new set of brown cotton twills based on the earthy palette we had discussed. As for the shirts, I maintained the idea of a front closure that could be open or closed as the dance dictated. I liked the idea of adding movement by using strings or ties as closures, and this would also constitute a period detail that corresponded with the style of the women's dresses. Once again, each dancer would have their own flattering hue of shirt and pants.

The sections *Laugh* and *Embrace* require their own unique costumes. I maintained the basic original colors and shapes because they work so well with the spirit of Limón's choreography. To make the *Laugh* dress more youthful, I decided to use layers of transparent pink and orange mesh instead of organza and added bows and a shirred detail to the bodice. For *Embrace*, I chose coral lycra and created a long, columnar wrap dress that complements the dancer's body. The male partner in the duet at one time wore a shirt that matched the dress, so we decided that we would reinstate the coral shirt to unify the dancing couple.

How do you then execute the design?

The production process consists of several stages. In order to refine the designs and ensure their proper function, we first make a sample costume for both a man and woman. After any kinks are worked out, the costume shop will have fittings for everyone to make the clothes fit the individual dancers, followed by second fittings and a line-up to make sure they work well as a group, and that hems and necklines are consistent. Finally, the dance is rehearsed in the studio to see the costumes in action, and final changes will be made as needed. Sometimes a garment looks great when a dancer is standing still, but shifts or becomes distracting when the person is dancing full out or partnering someone.

Opening night is exciting because everything comes together- choreography, lights, and costumes. The great thing about theater is its collaborative process. The whole team, from dancers and artistic directors to technicians and designers, put forth their best. I look forward to seeing Roxane's remount of Limón's great work, *There is a Time*. I thank Carla and Roxane for asking me to collaborate on this wonderful project, and I anticipate seeing my costumes among the mix of artistry on the stage.

Limón Celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month at Flushing Town Hall

Hispanic Heritage Month began on September 15, celebrating the anniversary of independence for five Latin American countries—Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. In addition, Mexico declared its independence on September 16, and Chile on September 18.

In celebration, the Limón Dance Company will be producing two special programs at Flushing Town Hall in New York. On Sunday, September 27 at 2:00pm, the program includes an interactive telling of Limón's life story developed specifically for young audiences, a repeated biographical film showing and reading of the children's book, *Limón, Born to Dance*, and participating workshops that highlight his unique dance vocabulary and techniques.



photo: the Limón Dance Company performs in José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*. Photo by Beatriz Schiller.

On Saturday, October 24 at 2:00pm, the company will give a performance of José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*, considered Limón's masterpiece and his signature work. The program will introduce the audience to Limón's work, the foundational elements of his distinctive choreography and specific means of storytelling in *Pavane*. Come experience why José Limón is one of America's "irreplaceable dance treasures"

WHERE: Flushing Town Hall, 137-35 Northern Boulevard (at the corner of Linden Place) Flushing, NY.

WHEN: Sunday, September 27, 2:00pm. Tickets: FREE
Saturday, October 24, 2:00pm. Tickets: \$6-\$12

[For more information, click here.](#)

Join the Limón Dance Company on Tour to Beijing, China, Nov. 28- Dec. 7

The Limón Dance Company has been invited to perform at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, China and you are invited to go on tour with us! This will be the Company's inaugural trip to China, and will include four performances of two different programs featuring live music performed by the Chinese Musical Conservatory. This unique travel package includes accommodations in a five-star hotel, sightseeing trips and "behind the scenes" events with the Company.

[Click here for more information.](#)



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