

Dance Review | Limón Dance Company

Revisiting the 1950s on Foot

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Limón Dance Company member
Kathryn Alter in *Rooms*.
Photo by Meems

The choreographer Anna Sokolow, who would have turned 100 last Tuesday, died in 2000, after a life long enough to see New York go through unbelievable changes. At times the city of her youth must have seemed all but vanished.

Or maybe not. Her “Rooms” (1955), featuring a jazz score by Kenyon Hopkins, still captures the sense of compressed lives, desires and alienation that help to give New York its singular energy. The work felt largely crisp and necessary on Wednesday night, when the Limón Dance Company performed it at the Baryshnikov Arts Center.

And what a difference live music makes to this work. The troupe at the premiere included Charles Mingus; we got a tight, sensitive performance by the Manhattan School of Music Jazz Ensemble and the conductor Justin DiCioccio.

“Rooms” is a portrait of strangled emotions, desperate outbursts and all-too-brief respites. The dancers, often seated in straight-back chairs and largely isolated by squares of light, thrum with unspoken need in a series of vignettes with titles like “Alone” and “Escape.”

Sokolow’s physical language is simple and stark, like Eleanor Bunker’s costumes: gray slacks and tanks or T-shirts for the men; long, body-skimming dresses for the women, sometimes hidden under sheer gray shifts.

The dancers’ coiled stillness is a counterpoint to Mr. Hopkins’s vibrantly (sometimes painfully) alive score. Rigid limbs scissor and stretch, bare feet slide rapidly back and forth, torsos spasm and curl. Performers spin rapidly, burst briefly across the stage or turn slow, taut cartwheels.

This is material that could easily lend itself to emoting, but Wednesday’s cast was remarkable for its restraint and dedication, largely saving “Rooms” from sentimentality.

Still, there were times when it was easy to date the work’s intense psychology to the 1950s. José Limón’s “There Is a Time,” which had its premiere in 1956, showed its age even more. The ritualistic dance, set to Norman Dello Joio’s yearning score and alluding to Ecclesiastes, is often heavy-handed in its soaring depictions of the human condition.

The full-bodied, heroic lines of Limón’s choreography, always either swooning into or regally resisting gravity, lend themselves to the sort of archetypes that today seem stereotypes. So, too, his flowing, interlocking patterns, often collapsing and expanding around circular structures.

And yet there are pleasures to be had, even if this earnest humanism feels naïve. As my date whispered on Wednesday, “It gets a bit maypole — but I like it.”