

San Diego Arts

Limón Dance Company at the Birch North Park Theatre

Dance Deja-vu

By Kris Eiland

Posted on May 03 2008

Last updated May 11 2008



For 62 years, the Limón Dance Company has been a revered American modern dance institution. It's famous for its repertory of classics and commissions from contemporary artists, and it's dedicated to preserving the work and style of its founder, the dance pioneer Jose Limón. But when the company performed one night in April at the Birch North Park Theatre, there were grumbles that the dances were more weird than wonderful, and too familiar and dated. From a historical perspective, that *deja-vu* feeling is precisely what made the evening so enjoyable.

Thirty-six years after his death, Limón's work is relevant and his company exudes a sense of spirituality. Like Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey and a few others, Limón is a part of America's dance DNA. His movement and themes are historic building blocks that helped make dance the exciting art form we know today. To say the program felt dated was hardly fair, as all three works on the program were Limón classics, and what better way to appreciate the expansive movement and dramatic presentation that Limón is known for.

The program opened with "Dance for Isadora," a tribute to Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), the "Mother of Modern Dance" who rejected traditional ballet and morals of the time. Set to music by Chopin, the piece featured five dancers to recount five stages of Duncan's tumultuous life. Ruying Wang, in the first section "Primavera," was a flutter of green silk against a black background. More a celebration than a dance, Wang captured Duncan's free spirit and technique with an uplifted torso and joyful scooping arms.

Limón is remembered for his commanding presence and ability to express emotion with subtle gestures, and after more than 40 years, artistic director Carla Maxwell continues to embrace his style with great success. In the final section "Scarf Dance," Maxwell used every part of her body and captivating facial expressions to relive Duncan's final days. Her strong shoulders were graceful, yet rooted. Even if you didn't know that Duncan died in a freak accident - of a broken neck when her silk scarf wrapped around the wheel of a Bugatti sports car - Maxwell had you floored. Exquisite understated lighting by Kevin Scott added greatly, particularly the silhouette.

Limón's dances reflect his rich life; his biography could be added to a history curriculum. Born in Culiacan, Mexico in 1908, Limón and his family moved to Arizona and East Los Angeles to escape the Mexican Revolution. He wanted to be a painter and briefly studied art at UCLA, but headed east. After seeing a dance performance in New York, he quickly signed up for classes with Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. Within a year he was dancing their works professionally and also on Broadway. He became known as a strong dancer with "brooding intensity" and created works with Mexican and Spanish themes. His work "Danzas Mexicanas" debuted in 1939, the same year Steinbeck published the "Grapes of Wrath." But like so many young men, Limón was drafted into the army, and his career

was put on hold. Discharged in 1945, he formed his own company with his mentor Humphrey, a partnership that would last until her death.

By 1950, Limón was teaching at Juilliard. Americans were enjoying the post-war years. Millions watched Milton Berle and Howdy Doody on television. Aaron Copland composed "Quartet for Piano and Strings." Jackson Pollock painted "Blue Poles," his masterpiece of Abstract Expressionism. But there was trouble brewing. North Korea invaded South Korea and Senator Joe McCarthy was on his anti-Communist witch-hunt.

Out of that age of abstraction and anxiety, Limón choreographed "**The Traitor**" (1954), a dramatic meditation on Judas' betrayal of Christ. Originally Limón cast himself as the conflicted Judas. This evening Francisco Ruvalcaba took the role and Limón would have been pleased with his power and angst as he contorted in agony. Ruvalcaba, a seasoned company member and Juilliard graduate, has also starred as the Moor in Limón's famed "Moor's Pavanne." (He has a local connection. Turns out he trained with ballet guru Kathryn Irej at Stage 7 Studios in San Diego for his Juilliard audition, and Irej was in the audience.)

The storyline is biblical, and once your eyes moved beyond the men's spacey costumes - plum, orange, red and olive green velour uniforms that could have come out of a Star Trek episode on the planet Zork - you could appreciate the fantastic design. The stage became a giant canvas to hold a moving painting. Arches conveyed ancient Jerusalem, and symbols abounded. The Leader (Jesus), danced by Jonathan Frederickson, manipulated a white cloth to symbolize the Last Supper. Dancers stretched the cloth into illusions of tabletops, beds and deathly slabs, and the Leader finally grew into a **giant white martyr**.

Throughout the evening, one was keenly aware of the company's musicality and reverence for their dancing. This was especially true in "Suite from A Choreographic Offering," a tribute to Humphrey. Limón's mentor. Set to Bach's "A Musical Offering," it's a collection of motifs from 14 of Humphrey's dances. The company appeared in odd half-and-half variations of plum and chocolate, and for about a half hour, it seemed that every dance sequence you'd ever seen had passed before you: circles, entwined arms in and out of lines, and that ever-popular "arm-led vertical hop that shoots the body down to the floor" move. Unison sweeps and spirals were all performed on silent feet. Most memorable were bursts of Flamenco rhythms, deer-like runs, and the only lift - where a dancer seemed to fly on a bicycle over the heads of other dancers like Mary Poppins. At times the dance felt courtly, but most often it was simply beautiful.

Much of today's audiences squeal at daring acrobatic lifts and beg for extensions that border on contortionism, but the seven sections in this piece instead offered a distilled view of dance at its core. It had no story, but explained the evolution of Limón's technique. There were moments when it felt like a classroom study only because his movement vocabulary has become vernacular. Young choreographers would do well to keep that in mind. If you think it's a new idea, chances are, Limón already thought of it.

The La Jolla Music Society presented the program, and ironically, there were a few sections performed in silence, which had a few

heads spinning, wondering if there had been a technical glitch. Nah, it was just an old Limón and Humphrey trick. Both experimented with silence, so as to liberate movement from ancient musical forms. Limón once said.

So there should have been one contemporary work on the program. In other cities, such as New York, that can sell a two or three-day run, programs can be mixed or balanced with old and new on different nights. But now we've had the full historical introduction. When the Limón company returns, they need to bring a true masterpiece, such as "Moor's Pavanne" and a few contemporary pieces.

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Dates : April 18, 2008
Organization : Limon Dance Company and La Jolla Music Society
Production : Dance
Type : Dance
Region : North Park
URL : www.limon.org, www.lajollamusicociety.org
Venue : Birch North Park Theatre 2891 University Ave., San Diego

About the author: Kris Eitland's critiques and features have appeared in Dance Magazine, Dance San Diego Magazine, San Diego CityBeat, sandiegotheaterscene.com, and sandiego.com since 2006. Her writing career includes stints in both commercial and public radio news. She studied dance extensively at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and SDSU and holds a journalism degree. More by this author.