

# Review: José Limón Festival Celebrates in a Transportive Way



Mark Willis and Elise Drew León of the Limón Dance Company performing at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan.

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By **BRIAN SEIBERT**

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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.