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Review: José Limón International Dance Festival at the Joyce Theater



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.

PAULA LOBO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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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.