

# Review: Limón Dance Company Celebrates Its Heritage

By **BRIAN SEIBERT**

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Photo Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

By 1972, a year after José Limón finished “The Unsung,” a dance he called a “paean to the heroic defenders of the American patrimony,” his sincere, high-minded, heart-on-its-sleeve style of modern dance was already out of fashion. Deborah Jowitt, in *The New York Times*, likened his status to that of [“a king in exile from a foreign country.”](#) That December he died.

But the [Limón Dance Company](#) lives on, now nearly 70, and its members remain heroic defenders of their patrimony, the work of a man who was born in Mexico but became part of the core of modern dance in the United States. On Friday, “The Unsung” opened Program B of a two-week [José Limón International Dance Festival](#) at the Joyce Theater.

The “heroic defenders” that Limón meant were Native American leaders like Geronimo and Sitting Bull. Performed to no sound other than the dancers’ breath and the slap of their stomping feet, “The Unsung” is a men’s piece. Tribal circles set up a series of valiant solos, each characterized through motion, one man (Mark Willis) bending and snapping like a mighty bow, the next (Kurt Douglas) churning the air with the spinning arms of his spinning body.

On Friday, the final three soloists were guests from the Royal Danish Ballet, present to demonstrate Limón’s international reach. Clean limbed and strong but less weighted

and higher gloss than the unaffected Limón men, they put a slight foreign accent on a Native American mode already made foreign by time.

The center of the program was Limón's best-known work, "The Moor's Pavane," his 1949 take on "Othello." Francisco Rualcaba invested the Moor with impressive violence, and Kristen Foote, with an innocently sensual pleasure, made the Emilia figure, who is sometimes played as a shrew, into a tragically unwitting accomplice. But on Friday's program, it was not the performances but the enduringly tight structure of the work, making meaning through form, that stood in contrast to the looser later pieces.

"The Winged," from 1966, is a 40-minute suite of dances on the theme of flight and feathered creatures. Like "The Unsung," it was originally choreographed in silence, but before the premiere Limón added music, which was replaced for the company's 50th anniversary by a flute-as-birdsong score by Jon Magnussen. Longer than it needs to be and over reliant on fluttering hands and quick-trilling feet, "The Winged" is nevertheless a feast of invention. There's even some welcome oddness: During a feeding frenzy of harpies, just the heads of the company's men stick out from the stage's wings.

The José Limón International Dance Festival continues through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-242-0800, [joyce.org](http://joyce.org).