

DANCE

Limón Dance Thrives, Decades After Its Founder's Death

By **MARINA HARSS** SEPT. 30, 2015

Photo



Members of the Royal Danish Ballet in “The Unsung.” Three members of the troupe will perform the work at the Joyce with members of Limón Dance. Credit Costin Radu

The future of American modern dance — and the issue of who will carry on the torch — is very much an open question, particularly since the death of Merce Cunningham in 2009 and the closing of his company. What happens when the founding genius, the original voice, is gone? Martha Graham died in 1991, but her troupe survives, thanks to “contextual” presentations and new works by living choreographers; Paul Taylor, still actively producing work, is 85. His company, too, is making moves to [widen its repertory](#).

But the dance world often overlooks another company that has quietly gone about its business for decades in the absence of its founding choreographer, [José Limón](#).

In October, the Limón Dance Company will celebrate the start of its 70th season, the 44th since the death of its founder, with a [two-week festival at the Joyce \(Oct. 13 to Oct. 25\)](#). More than a dozen works will be performed, and dancers from companies as far afield as the [Royal Danish Ballet](#), [Coreoarte](#) in Caracas and the University of Taipei will take part. It is a very big deal for this small, scrappy troupe, which over the years has seen its share of lean times.

Photo



Stephanie Hancox, top, and Matej Urban of the Bavarian State Ballet in “The Exiles.”
Credit Wilfried Hösl

The festival is also the beginning of a long farewell for the troupe’s artistic director, [Carla Maxwell](#), who has been at the helm since 1978. Ms. Maxwell, who joined at 19, plans to retire once a suitable replacement has been found. “I’m tired of the problems,” she said of the struggle for funding, bookings and space, “but never of the work.”

It is a time of fresh starts for the company. After 14 years of traipsing from one rental space to another, Limón has a new home. Last year, [Dance Theater of Harlem](#) extended an invitation to share its headquarters, in an arrangement that benefits both companies.

Over the summer, the Limón dancers and administrators moved into their new digs. “It’s wonderful just to have a locker and showers, and our own studio,” said Kristen Foote, a striking dancer with an air of mystery who has been in the company since 2000. (At the festival, she will perform two solos — “Maenad” and “Primavera” — from a late work, “Dances for Isadora,” a tribute to Isadora Duncan, whom Limón considered his “dance mother.”)

The match between Dance Theater of Harlem and Limón makes perfect sense: Both companies were created by pioneers in their field, a black man and a Latin American claiming their rightful place within a mainly white, European dance tradition.

Limón, born in Culiacán, Mexico, just before the Mexican Revolution, emigrated with his family to the United States when he was 7. (A stray bullet had killed his maternal uncle while the family was eating breakfast. That and the constant threat of violence convinced the family that it was time to leave.) One of his most powerful childhood memories was of being mocked at a school in Tucson for his Spanish accent. “I was an alien,” he wrote in his [memoir](#), “an exile.”

His style, perhaps as a result, reflects a distinctly universalist bent, a concern with man’s nobility of spirit in a chaotic world. (Limón was a self-proclaimed atheist, but many of his works have a quasi-religious dimension.) Like Martha Graham’s sometimes over-the-top dramatic pitch, this lofty tone is the most recognizable feature of Limón’s dances, and also one of the things that can give them a dated feel.

Like Limón’s aesthetic aspirations, the technique, absorbed in part from his teacher and mentor [Doris Humphrey](#), is based on elemental ideas: bending, curving, falling, rebounding. “It delivers what is missing in ballet,” explained Ivan Liska, the artistic director of the Bavarian State Ballet, whose dancers will perform “The Exiles,” a 1950 duet, at the festival. “A connection to the earth, a sense of opposition, a struggle in the mind.”

It’s also what draws dancers to his work. It delivers moral clarity, a higher purpose. After a company rehearsal uptown, Francisco Ruvalcaba, one of Limón’s senior dancers, remembered learning “Missa Brevis” (1958) soon after beginning his studies at Juilliard: “We were holding each other up. Everyone was essential. And that’s what dance should be.” It made him want to join the company.

“Missa Brevis,” set to Zoltan Kodaly’s [choral piece of the same name](#), is still on the syllabus at Juilliard, where Limón taught for two decades. Every first-year student learns it. (At the festival, Juilliard students will perform in “Missa Brevis” alongside Limón dancers, and, independently, in “[Concerto Grosso](#),” a large-scale work from 1945.) During a recent Limón technique class at the school, the dancers were encouraged to “root” down into the ground, expand to the full width of their bodies (rather than pull upward, as in ballet), and use gravity, rather than muscular tension, to carry them through space.

The 15 works at the festival span the length of Limón’s career, from the sober, introspective 1942 solo “Chaconne” (set to Bach) to dances created months before his death from cancer almost 30 years later. Some, like “The Moor’s Pavane,” a distillation of themes from Shakespeare’s “Othello,” are quite familiar (it has been taken into the repertory of several ballet companies, including American Ballet Theater).

Others, like “The Unsung” (1971), an all-male ensemble set to the sound of the dancer’s footfalls and breath, and inspired by the spirit of Native American chiefs like Geronimo and Sitting Bull, haven’t been seen in the United States for years. The dance was revived in 2010 by the Royal Danish Ballet; three of the Danish dancers have been invited to perform at the Joyce alongside members of Limón.

The festival's inclusion of companies and academies from across the United States, as well as South America, Europe and Asia, hints at Limón's unexpectedly vast reach. Ms. Maxwell likes to refer to this diaspora as "Limón's extended family."

Terry Springer, a member of Coreoarte, is one of two dancers who will take on the notoriously taxing "Chaconne," a 13-minute solo set to part of a Bach violin sonata. Each step is deliberate, weighted, full of intention, reflecting Limón's own monumental way of moving. "It is one of the most challenging pieces I've ever performed," Mr. Springer said in a phone interview from Caracas. "But really, you just have to let go and dance it from inside."

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