

La Opinión

MIÉRCOLES 22 de marzo de 2006, Los Angeles, California



Return of the Prodigal Son

Originally published in Spanish, translated into English

“Even before language was invented, man had the supremely instinctual urge and capacity to dance. There is a dance for every single human experience. All the joys, sorrows, doubts, terrors and uncertainties of modern life are our inspiration. Now, we know that not all of life is pleasant. Consequently we often deal with serious and even tragic subjects. To do this, we had to evolve a new vocabulary of gesture and movement.”

This strong and articulate voice belongs to José Limón, a son of Los Angeles whose forty-year career as one of modern dance's most important dancer/choreographers was cut short by cancer in 1972. Limón's nobility and magnetism on stage could be compared to that of his generational peer, Rudolf Nureyev, the ballet superstar who late in his life danced Limón's Othello-inspired role in *The Moor's Pavane*. As a pioneering modern dance choreographer, Limón unflinchingly examined life's thorniest issues, applying a highly readable body language to depict intense emotional states. This kind of art fell out of critical vogue even during Limón's lifetime, but his dance company has endured because Limon's transcendental humanism still connects with audiences today.

Limón's career took place in New York City, and because he was extremely reticent, if not purposefully vague, about his youth in Los Angeles, it is not widely known that this great artist grew up here, graduating with honors from Abraham Lincoln High School in 1926, and majoring in art at UCLA for one year.

Jose Limón's father, a musician, brought his young family across the border in search of a stable environment around 1915. The revolution had made things impossible at their home in the city of Culiacan, state of Sonora. Relocated to L.A. at the age of six, and already a veteran of chaos, violence, and death, Limón was a shy soul lost in L.A.'s big-city bustle. The family was constantly moving among L.A.'s scattershot immigrant neighborhoods. Limón's isolation deepened when his beloved mother died bearing her thirteenth child (only six survived). Alienated from his father and shattered by the loss of his mother, a rebellious Limón embarked out on a solo journey that spanned his entire life.

At Lincoln High School, Limón, a bright and engaged student, had displayed talent for drawing and painting. He gravitated into a circle of young men, all self-styled artists who embraced the East Los Angeles *zeitgeist* of left-wing bohemianism. Following his buddies to New York at age 19, Limón demeaned Los Angeles as a cultural wasteland to which he would never return. He subsequently reinvented himself as the "Mexico-born Jose Limón," in essence deleting the Los Angeles chapter from his biography.

In next weekend's performances of the Limón Dance Company at the Music Center, Los Angeles hopes to reclaim its native son.

One unforgiving Manhattan winter working as a janitor emptying sidewalk ash bins hastened Limón's sober self-assessment of his prospects as a painter. A chance encounter in 1929 with modern dance (a girlfriend bought him a ticket) rocked Limón's world. So powerfully did this sensitive and repressed young man relate to a non-verbal means of expression that he found his calling. He registered for classes the next week, and three months later made his professional dance debut.

Limón was for the next fifteen years a soloist with the Humphrey-Weidman dance company, then one of New York's premier performing groups.

He grappled with modern dance's challenges with varying degrees of success. A late starter at age 19, he'd been a distance runner, which had tightened leg muscles that for modern dance

execution should be loose and pliant. This called for brutal late-night stretching sessions in unheated dance studios long after fellow students had left.

Limón's traditional Mexican upbringing, with its cultural formality and modesty, made the public display of his body in form-fitting tights a real trauma. But something impelled him. New York audiences had never seen the equivalent of Limón, a tall, exotically handsome, and well-built male dancer. Their rapturous feedback helped mitigate his sensitivity.

The product of a machismo culture, Limón not only chose to work in a female-dominated field, but he was homosexual. He chose a career in which near poverty was nearly guaranteed; this conflicted with his strong Mexican work ethic; there would be no paychecks mailed home to L.A. Yet none of these hardships, conflicts, and even torments, succeeded in putting him off dancing ... or off making dances.

As a child, I was an exile in a strange country. My life's work would be to perpetually translate within myself my father's tongue of Castillo with that of the Anglo Saxons. And to reconcile many contradictory cultural habits.

Returning to New York in 1946 after serving in World War II, Limón launched his own dance company with Doris Humphrey as artistic director and mentor. From this platform Limón spun a life's work of more than seventy dances, including four masterpieces: *The Moor's Pavane*, *There is a Time*, *A Choreographic Offering*, and *Missa Brevis* (on view in Music Center performances).

Significantly the first group dance Limón made for his new company was the Mexico-themed *La Malinche* (1949), based on the story of Malintzin—the Indian princess who was mistress to Cortez. Limón turned often to Mexican themes, exposing and educating American audiences to the history of our continent in its totality. Other Mexican-themed pieces included *Danzas Mexicanas* (1939), *Ritmo Jondo* (1953), and *Carlota* (1972).

In 1951, artist Miguel Covarrubias, then the head of the Academia de la Danza of the Institute Nacional de Belles Artes, hosted Limón in Mexico City where he received a royal homecoming as a great artist and mixed with the who-is-who of the Mexican art world. It had been 35 years since he left Mexico. Limon created several major works to music by Carlos Chávez and sets by Covarrubias. One was a choreographic setting to Chávez's *Los cuarto soles*, a massive symphonic work based on Aztec myths of the creation of the world. None of these works survived except in photograph. *Recordare*, a new work we will see in Los Angeles by choreographer Lar Lubovitch, pays homage to the lost works Limón's time in Mexico City.

Lubovitch, who studied modern dance with Limón at the Juilliard School of Music in the sixties, says: “José’s direct emotionalism speaks to me. Feelings are portrayed for what they are, without the distancing techniques of irony or cynicism. Today’s modern dance is in the grip of an irony that I believe is overvalued.”

San Diego-born dancer Pablo Ruvalcaba went to high school in Tijuana and also attended the Juilliard School. He will dance Limón’s leading role in *Missa Brevis* in L.A. this weekend: “No choreographer out there is creating works with the passionate content of *Missa*,” says Ruvalcaba. “Dancing Limón’s haunting lead role of The Outsider in *Missa* is the reason I stay in the company,” he says, referring to a highly moving solo considered to be a quintessential José Limon moment.

Missa Brevis, set to music a mass written during the Nazi occupation of Hungary by composer Zoltán Kodály, concerns Europe’s reconstruction after World War II and was inspired by Limón’s visit to Poland. Yet Ruvalcaba says: “I actually find in it Mexican mysticism. It’s in the humility and respect, the acceptance of God and yet the defiance about the condition of man.,” he adds, “José accepted his Mexicanism, he absorbed it, and he took it to the next level. He became a creator of works that truly speak to all mankind.”

Carla Maxwell, a former Limón lead dancer and now company director agrees: “José absolutely saw himself as an American. He served in the U.S. military, and he created *The Traitor* (1950), a protest dance about the McCarthy witch trials and he made it while they were taking place, not fifty years afterward,” she says. “The Limón Dance Company was the first to tour Asia, Europe, and South America in the U.S. State Department’s Cultural Exchange program in the mid-sixties. Of all the applicants, Limón was picked. He represented our country at the highest level, and danced at the White House for President Lyndon Johnson,” she says.

“On the other hand, José Limón’s work transcends nationality and race. He choreographed about humanity at its deepest level: the meaning of being an outcast and a stranger, the meaning of being at odds with your own fate, and what it means to have nothing to offer the world but your own sense of worth as a human being. This guy had every reason and excuse to drop out of society, but he chose every day of his life to do the opposite. He contributed.”

A fine way to experience Limón’s life and art is through the documentary film, “José Limón: A Life Beyond Words” (prod: Ann Vachon, dir: Malachi Roth, 2001) available on DVD. Another is by reading Limon’s autobiographical “An Unfinished Memoir” (Wesleyan University Press, 1999). This article relied on both sources.