



José Limón

Former José Limón Dance Company member Daniel Lewis offers personal and historical accounts of the life and work of this crucial figure in modern dance.

José Limón (1908–1972) was an elegant man, an artist and, in many ways, an aristocrat. He worked hard at being the best at everything he did, and he believed in the redemptive powers of art. As he explained, “I try to compose works that are involved with man’s basic tragedy and the grandeur of his spirit. I want to dig beneath empty formalisms, displays of technical virtuosity and the slick surface; to probe the human entity for the powerful, often crude, beauty of the gesture that speaks of man’s humanity.”

Born in 1908, in Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico, Limón was the oldest of 11 children in a middle-class family. His father, Florencio, was a musician of French and Spanish descent, and his mother, Francisca, was part Yaqui Indian. In 1915, at the height of the Mexican Revolution, the Academia de Música, where Limón’s father worked as a teacher and conductor, was shut down, forcing the family to emigrate to the United States, where they lived in Arizona, then California.

Limón’s father taught him to play the organ, and he continued his music studies throughout high school. Later on, he developed an interest in painting and went to the University of California, Los Angeles to major in art before heading to New York City to pursue a career as an artist. In 1928, however, Limón saw a dance concert by German choreographer and dancer Harald Kreutzberg that would change his life. Everything he had been trying to do with his paintings, but could not accomplish, was present on that stage. The dancers created a living canvas, with dimension, color and sound.

At the late age of 20, Limón began studying dance at the Doris Humphrey-Charles Weidman studio on 10th Street, where he met accompanist Pauline Lawrence, who would eventually become his wife, costume designer and manager. As one of only a small number of male dancers, Limón soon



Left: Limón and Letitia Ide in Charles Weidman's *As Thousands Cheer* in 1933; below right: Limón in *The Emperor Jones* in 1956

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Courtesy of Daniel Lewis

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found himself performing, with minimal training. To maintain control over his movements (he was more than 6 feet tall, with a powerful build), he employed a technique based on the concept of the human body as an orchestra, with the different parts of the body acting as the many instruments used to make the music of movement.

During the 1930s, Limón performed on Broadway in *Americana*, *Lysistrata*, *As Thousands Cheer* and *Keep Off the Grass*, choreographed by George Balanchine. At this time he also started choreographing, appearing in many of Humphrey's masterpieces, and developing a reputation as one of the top male dancers in New York, known for his pure movement, dynamics and phrasing. In 1942, he created *Chaconne*, which marked the beginning of his maturing as a choreographer.

Shortly after, his work was put on hold. During World War II, he was called to the army as a member of special services, where he collaborated

with composers Frank Loesser and Alex North to entertain the troops. When the war ended, his choreographic and performing career exploded. He formed his own company in 1946, with Humphrey as artistic director, and spent the next several years creating works of great importance to the modern dance world. During that time, he choreographed such masterpieces as his signature dance *The Moor's Pavane* (1949), as well as *The Exiles* (1950), *The Traitor* (1954), *There Is a Time* (1956), *The Emperor Jones* (1956) and *Missa Brevis* (1958).

He took over as artistic director of the José Limón Dance Company after Humphrey's death in 1958. By 1962, the dance scene in New York was focused on minimalism and the post-modern work of The Judson Dance Theater. Limón adjusted, whittling his company of 28 down to five of the newer members—Louis Falco, Jennifer Muller, Libby Nye, Sally Stackhouse and myself—and hired a new crop of

younger dancers, gravitating toward more abstract choreography and away from classical music.

During this period, he choreographed such works as *The Winged* (1966), *Psalm* (1967), *The Unsung* (1970) and *Carlota* (1972). In *The Winged*, Limón wanted to create a dance that would stand on its own without the need of musical accompaniment. He choreographed with the idea of making the rhythms and movement tell the story, so he gave musical director Simon Sadoff the task of creating incidental music or background sounds to be played under the dance. The background sounds were not danced to, but used to accompany the piece.

Psalm was a commissioned work,



Teaching Bruce Marks in 1969

with Eugene Lester writing the music and Limón choreographing the dance. Every day I would bring the counts to Lester and he would write the music. This went on for an entire summer. The work was brilliant—the dance dictated the music. Limón was choreographing movement faster than we could learn it.

The Unsung was a tribute to the unsung Native American heroes. This, and his last work, *Carlota*, were both choreographed and performed totally in silence. Once, a dance critic was interviewing me for a story on Limón and the company, and he ended by asking, “Who wrote the music for *The Unsung*?” I knew then that Limón had accomplished his dream of making movement the music of his life.

In addition to his work as a choreographer, Limón was an influential teacher and advocate for modern dance. He joined the faculty of The Juilliard School at the invitation of Martha Hill and remained until his death, teaching and choreographing for students. During his lifetime, he received two *Dance Magazine* Awards and the Capezio Award in 1964, cited as “a great dancer-choreographer... a man who fought for the art of dancing as a creative force.” He also received three honorary doctorates.

Limón passed away on December 2, 1972, as his company was performing in Hawaii. He had continued to work through his final days, and he left behind a repertory of 74 works, 20 of which are still performed today in major ballet and modern companies around the world. In 2000, the Dance Heritage Coalition named him one of “America’s Irreplaceable Dance Treasures.” Thirty-four years after his death, the Limón Company continues to perform, dancers continue to take Limón classes and audiences around the world are still enjoying his timeless work. **DT**

An internationally recognized dancer, teacher, choreographer and author, Daniel Lewis joined New World School of the Arts in Miami in 1987, as founding dean of dance. Most known for his association with the works of José Limón, Lewis was a company member from 1962 to 1974.