history: lesson plan

Limón, Lucas Hoving and Pauline Koner in Limón's *Symphony for Strings*

José Limón

Imbuing modern dance with dignity

BY RACHEL RIZZUTO

The Work

Limón choreographed 74 works in his lifetime, several of which remain in the repertory of the Limón Dance Company.

■ *The Moor's Pavane* (1949): This moving adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, widely considered Limón's greatest piece, has been performed by several ballet companies and remained in Rudolf Nureyev's repertory for years.

■ *A Choreographic Offering* (1964): This large-scale ensemble piece was a love letter to Doris Humphrey, drawn entirely from movement of her past dances.

■ *Psalm* (1967): The score by Eugene Lester was composed in response to counts that Limón gave each day for company member Daniel Lewis to hand-deliver as the piece progressed.

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The Legacy Lives On:

The Limón Dance Company was the first modern dance company to survive its founder. Limón believed that one should "revere and conserve, but not embalm, the treasure of the past." He kept many of his own works in the company's repertory while also presenting new choreography. Former company members and Limón students who have created their own work include Garth Fagan, Pauline Koner, Daniel Lewis, Lar Lubovitch and Jennifer Muller.

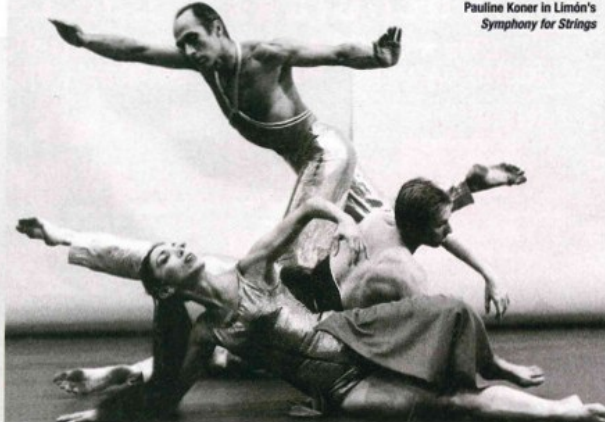The current Limón Dance Company performing his *There Is a Time*

Charismatic performer, prolific choreographer and model of elegance, José Limón (1908–1972) sought to humanize modern dance. Although it was never codified, his technique that incorporated Doris Humphrey's theories of fall and recovery with an emphasis on breath and weight is considered a crucial component of the modern dance lexicon.

Born in Mexico as the oldest of 11 children to a musician father (who taught him to play the organ), Limón and his family emigrated to the United States in 1915. After studying art for a year in California, Limón decided to try his luck as a visual artist in New York. One night, a friend dragged him along to a dance concert by German choreographer Harald Kreutzberg. As Kreutzberg bounded onto the stage, Limón felt himself transformed:

"I knew with shocking suddenness," he said, "that until then I had not been alive, or, rather, that I had yet to be born."

Limón spent 10 years studying with and performing for Humphrey and Charles Weidman, with occasional Broadway stints. In 1946 he formed his own company with Humphrey as the artistic director—an unusual move, since most choreographers are artistic directors of their own companies. His commitment to education was marked by summers in residence at the American Dance Festival and his key role in the newly founded Juilliard dance program. The Limón Dance Company continues to present both classic and new works under the direction of Carla Maxwell, who was a principal dancer for the company under Limón.

Fun Facts:

✱ During a 1931 performance, Limón was given the task of sitting inside an unsteady box so that Humphrey could perform her solo on it without fear of falling over.
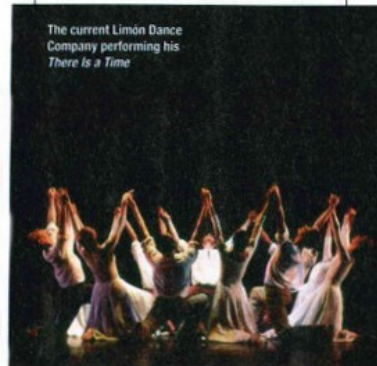
✱ Limón's first sighting of Martha Graham was from the wings, where he watched, mesmerized, as she performed a solo. After Graham had retired to her dressing room, the stage manager was dispatched to inform Limón that Miss Graham would not tolerate being viewed from the wings.

Resources:

PRINT:

"José Limón," by Daniel Lewis, *Dance Teacher*, September 2006

José Limón: The Artist Re-viewed, edited by June Dunbar, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000

José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir, by José Limón and edited by Lynn Garafola, Wesleyan University Press, 1999

VIDEO:

José Limón: Three Modern Dance Classics, production coordinator Allan Altman, Video Artists International, 2002 (DVD)

WEB:

Dance Heritage Coalition: "America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: The First 100": danceheritage.org

FRIDAY, JUNE 14, 2013

A young New Yorker gets a head start on dance lessons — with a free tutorial in Bryant Park.

LIMÓN AID

When you're dancing in the park, you never know who'll join in. Kids can't help but participate in the **free classes** the **Limón Dance Company** offers at **Bryant Park**, and Becky Brown, program director and one of the teachers, says "I've often felt like the Pied Piper, with a line of children following me."

The kids work separately; adults range from professional dancers to passers-by who impulsively kick off their shoes. One pupil was a woman who studied more than half a century ago with José Limón himself.

Accompanied by a drummer, the classes stress skills such as creativity and balance. "I tell them to stand straight, like the Empire State Building," Brown explains.

Free dance classes are **tomorrow** and Saturdays through Sept. 7 at 10 a.m. in the northeast corner of Bryant Park (weather permitting). More information at bryantpark.org or limon.org.   — *Leigh Witchel*

STEP RIGHT UP!