

'Watching Paintings Move'

The work of former Tucsonan and modern dance icon José Limón will be celebrated at Centennial Hall on Sunday

By Margaret Regan on March 21, 2013

José Limón, giant of modern dance, began life as a refugee.

His family fled Mexico for Tucson in 1915 to escape the Mexican Revolution, and 7-year-old José began his schooling in the Old Pueblo.

"I didn't know one word of English," he told his biographer back in 1955.



Though he moved on from Tucson to Los Angeles and then New York, and won fame and acclaim for his innovative choreography, Limón retained a sense of exile all his life, said Carla Maxwell, artistic director of the Limón Dance Company,

It's one reason he responded to the music of fellow exile Frédéric Chopin.

"José loved Chopin," Maxwell said by phone from New York last week. Just as Limón and his family had fled war-torn Mexico, Chopin left his native Poland for Paris after Russian troops crushed an uprising in Warsaw. As an exile himself, "José had maybe a subconscious connection," to Chopin's work, Maxwell said.

Limón set his "Mazurkas" to a series of 10 short Chopin piano solos; that 1958 dance will be the first piece performed in the Limón Company's concert at Centennial Hall this Sunday, March 24.

Limón composed “Mazurkas” to honor the Poles’ struggles to recover from still another war. It was inspired by a trip to Poland that he and his company made in 1957.

“It wasn’t too long after the end of World War II,” Maxwell said, “and he was moved by the devastation. He saw the beautiful courage and energy of the Poles. He asked why they weren’t sadder. They said, ‘We have no time to be sad.’”

The big group work uses all 12 of the company’s dancers’ they move back and forth from solos to duets, trios and group dances.

“‘Mazurkas’ is a treat for the dancers,” Maxwell said. “It’s lyrical, beautiful and profoundly simple. The dances are little moments of joy.”

Until its revival earlier this year, the work had not been performed in about 15 years.

Limón founded his company in 1946. Not all dance troupes survive the death of a charismatic founder, but Limón’s company has soldiered on since he died of cancer in 1972. Maxwell was a principal dancer for Limón during the last seven years of his life, and when she became artistic director in 1978 she used her firsthand knowledge of his aesthetics to guide the company.

The troupe remains the “living embodiment of his vision,” she said, and the Tucson concert with two Limón dances and one new piece by a Brazilian choreographer – reflects her effort to keep a balance between old and new.

“My mission is to revive old works and commission new works” by living choreographers, she explained. In the Centennial Hall show, “each piece is entirely different, but they all have spectacular dancing.”

While some Limón dances – like “Mazurkas” – are restaged only occasionally, his best-known works are always in the repertory. “The Moor’s Pavane (Variations on a Theme of Othello),” a 1949 work to be performed in Tucson, is “his most famous piece,” Maxwell said. “He danced in the Moor, of course! It was a signature role for him and he danced it until three years before his death.”

Though it’s a narrative work, “Pavane” is spare and simple, with just four dancers, no props and no scenery. The dance is a stripped-down version of the Othello story of jealousy and murder, set to the formal court music of Henry Purcell, and English composer of the 17th century.

“It’s so powerful,” Maxwell said, “José’s use of diagonals onstage, his rhythm and musicality, are so beautiful. It reminds me of watching paintings move.”

“Come with Me,” the final dance in the concert, made its debut in 2012. The company’s most recent commission, the full-company work was created by Brazilian choreographer Rodrigo

Pederneiras and Cuban composer Paquito D’Rivera music played by the composer himself and his musicians.

“Paquito D’Rivera is a great Latin jazz musician. Clarinet and sax are his main instruments but he can play anything,” Maxwell said. “Rodrigo is with Grupo Corpo, a Brazilian troupe that looks at how dance can reflect the melting-pot culture of Brazil.”

Pederneiras has been with Grupo Corpo since it began in 1974, moving on from dancer to company choreographer. His style is different from Limón’s – more percussive, Maxwell said.

“When I commission a new work, I look for a mature artist who has some aesthetic connection with us. But this piece is very different from anything we have ever done. The music is so rich. It’s a beautiful collaboration. The dancers speak by moving.”

