

The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW

The Pleasure of Performers Transcending Their Material

The Limón Dance Company at the Joyce

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Published: June 20, 2012

The most welcome element of the program that the Limón Dance Company is presenting this week at the Joyce Theater is the way the group dances are performed. The dancers neither condescend to the old works by José Limón, who founded the troupe in 1946, nor present them as if they were the Holy Grail. They perform with a mixture of honest-to-goodness objectivity and what seems like a certain private pleasure. Two of the four pieces in the quadruple bill are by Limón, one is a work by another choreographer since his death in 1972, and one is a world premiere.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Limón Dance Company From left, Kristen Foote, Dante Puleio, Durell Comedy and Logan Frances Kruger performing Jiri Kylian's "Cathédrale Engloutie" at the Joyce Theater.

It's regrettable that the freshness of delivery given to the ensemble works is withheld from the most remarkable piece of choreography in the program, Limón's 1942 "Chaconne," set to Bach's Partita No. 2 in D minor for unaccompanied violin. This, a solo, has a weightily heroic quality. Apart from a few fast turns, the dancer's thighs are always kept apart, often in poses, as if braced for action. In one passage she extends a leg backward in arabesque and keeps bending and straightening the supporting leg's knee, as if experimenting. Diagonals are often emphasized, both in how the body faces when still and how it moves through space. A variety of statuesque arm positions gives the body an air of heightened dignity.

But Roxane D'Orléans Juste, the company's associate artistic director, dances the piece with a weary nobility that does it no favors. Though the music is played live by Kinga Augustyn, it's hard to tell what musical points Limón was trying to make. Neither the timing nor the dynamics of his choreography are made interesting here. The audience on Tuesday gave Ms. D'Orléans Juste an ovation nonetheless. (Two of this week's performances of "Chaconne" will be danced by Kathryn Alter.)

And it's unfortunate that the other three works are of little choreographic interest. Still, "Come With Me," the world premiere, offered plenty of good dancing. The choreographer is Rodrigo Pederneiras, who has worked with the Brazilian troupe [Grupo Corpo](#) since 1978; the score, by Paquito D'Rivera, is commissioned. The music, taped, is in a series of Cuban rhythms, accumulating in complexity; I wish it did not sound so formulaic. The dance is for six men

and four women, mostly in couples; the style combines, as Mr. Pederneiras says in a program note, Latin characteristics with jazz and classical technique.

This is the one dance of the evening that makes any serious use of footwork. The dancers are at their brightest and sweetest throughout; you can feel how this happy exuberance connects to the way Mr. Pederneiras uses the speed of their insteps to open up the whole of their legs and bodies. As an exercise in style it's appealing.

The problem is that Mr. Pederneiras keeps stressing a motif, as if to prove that this piece has really been choreographed. This motif involves one dancer (usually male) laying his hand supportively on the top of the spine of his partner (usually female) — not between the shoulder blades but higher up, behind the lower neck. It actually looks the opposite of supportive: it's as if the dancer wants to constrain his partner's upper body. Overused, the motif also constrains "Come With Me," reining in a work that's otherwise inclined to *pleasant* energy and charming changes of mood.

"The Emperor Jones," Limón's 1956 dance version of Eugene O'Neill's play, revived in a new production, is a plodding affair about tyranny, usurpation, paranoia and ignominy. The score by Heitor Villa-Lobos, commissioned and here played on tape, is coarsely effective; the dance spells out every dramatic meaning ponderously. Limón certainly had good theatrical ideas — like when the Trader drags the throne onto the stage while fanning himself with his hat — but he overplayed them. It's tedious fare, despite unpretentious performances, led by Daniel Fetecua Soto as the Emperor and Durell Comedy as the Trader.

The program also has a major revival of Jiri Kylian's "Cathédrale Engloutie," a dreary piece for two male-female couples from 1975. The program says that the music is Debussy's eponymous prelude from Book 1 of his piano preludes — one of the most marvelous items of that great collection, evoking a Breton cathedral drowned in the sea, rising occasionally, with its grand old liturgical music audible. But the program doesn't tell you that poor Debussy's music, played live by Anna Shelest, is chopped up into subsections and surrounded with recordings of taped waves. This is offensive; the choreography is simply dull.

Mr. Kylian starts and ends with his favorite format, the double duet, with male-female couples moving in unison, generally facing one way into the same wings, with a diagonal space between them. Most of what happens in between is single duets, which include a little discreet same-sex partnering. It's possible to imagine that some of the choreography depicts things washed or submerged by the tide; but no such imagery lasts or develops. The piece is schematically somber.

Because of the vitality of the dancers, the impression left by this Limón program is better than I have suggested, and in many ways it's the opposite of the one left these days by the Martha Graham Dance Company. Limón was 14 years younger than Graham; their companies have become the two foremost survivors of the heroic age of midcentury American modern dance. At Graham today the gap between the choreography and the performers seems immense, and everyone seems to be trying desperately to bridge it. Even if I don't adore at least three of the pieces here, the Limón dancers perform them with humility, unpretentiousness and faith. You leave wanting to see more of what they can do, and believing that they can do it.

The Limón Dance Company continues its New York season though Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue at 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-0800 joyce.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on June 21, 2012, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: The Pleasure of Performers Transcending Their Material.