

José Limón's 'The Moor's Pavane' revived

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A performing art dedicated to the newest and boldest, like modern dance, rarely dwells in its past. There's something a bit odd about maintaining dance's certifiable classics in the active repertoire.

So, when a genuine masterpiece like José Limón's 1949 "The Moor's Pavane" is performed on local stages twice within a six-week period, the opportunity to savor the work of a unique hero of American modern dance should not be missed. While this was the work that sealed the choreographer's reputation and still remains the most widely performed of his dances, it has been too long absent from stages hereabouts.



SjDANCEco's Raphael Boumaïla (left), Robert Regala and Heather Cooper in José Limón's 1949 "The Moor's Pavane." Photo: Bob Shomler / SF

Stock has risen

Limón (1908-72) deserves to be better known. For the past couple of decades, the choreographer's stock has risen noticeably in the Bay Area, thanks, in great measure, to Gary Masters. A former member of the Limón Dance Company, Masters, who is a tenured member of the San Jose State [University](#) faculty, is reviving "The Moor's Pavane," both for his own sjDANCEco as the highlight of its 10th anniversary season and for [Diablo Ballet's](#) fall program. Given Masters' history, these performances will boast the mark of authenticity: "I feel like I have been with Limón since I started."

Masters first met Limón in 1969 when he was a student at [the Juilliard School](#), where the choreographer worked until his death. Later he danced with the troupe and served as artistic associate between 1987 and 1994. Then he formed Limón West Dance Project in San Jose, a [Left Coast organization](#) that borrowed the best of the parent troupe. This fondly remembered company expired in 1998, a victim, says Masters, of long-distance meddling by the [New York board](#).

SjDANCEco arose from the ashes. A fully professional troupe of 10 dancers, it has kept Limón at the heart of the repertoire, but Masters commissions most of the fare. He promises three world premieres on next week's Shakespeare-inspired program. This revival will also feature New York's Raphael Boumaïla as the Moor.

A textbook analysis of "The Moor's Pavane" can be helpful. Limón mastered the fall and recovery technique pioneered by his colleague [Doris Humphrey](#), who served as his longtime artistic director. And he learned quickly how to use weight and weightlessness for theatrical purposes and to move symmetrically through space.

Intuition, fortune

But those facts alone can't explain why this 23-minute reduction of the Othello story (the characters do not bear proper names) casts such a potent spell. Some of the piece's success was a matter of intuition; arranging the piece in the form of an ancient dance was a bit of genius. Some was just good fortune: Humphrey suggested the Purcell music after the movement was made, though you'd never suspect Limón hadn't set the dance to that score.

If you can catch one of the original cast films of "The Moor's Pavane," you may be electrified by Limón's performance. Masters felt that current running through the rehearsal studio from the beginning.

"José didn't come to dance until his early 20s," says Masters. "Everyone who knew him said that when he was in the room, it was like a bull in a china shop. He just tore through space like so many young men who want to catch up quickly. José's sense of space is what sets his work apart."

"The Moor's Pavane" claims another distinction. It is one of the few modern dances to have been absorbed into the ballet repertoire. The list of distinguished interpreters through the years has included [Bruce Marks](#), [Toni Lander](#), [Rudolf Nureyev](#), [Erik Bruhn](#), [Natalia Makarova](#) and, more recently, [Faroukh Ruzimatov](#). Masters, who has set the piece on six ballet companies, welcomes the trend.

'Nobility of the body'

"I think that for the most part, modern dancers don't train the way they did back then; there's a little less sense of the nobility of spirit in their training today. Ballet dancers, however, work with a 400-year-old technique that retains that sense of the nobility of the body. In fact, that quality is built into the technique. No wonder they gravitate to the piece."

Learning "The Moor's Pavane" has tested [Robert Dekkers](#), who will dance Iago for Diablo. "In ballet," says Dekkers, "the dancer is oftentimes concerned with the shapes our bodies are making, the angles and lines we are creating in space. Limón was much more interested in expression through movement and not in the beauty of the movement, so the focus certainly shifts when rehearsing this work. The choreography feels very organic to me."

Should we expect something different from Diablo's rendering of "The Moor's Pavane?"

"I hope not," responds Masters. "The choreography is the thing. No matter where the dancers come from, a maturity of spirit and life are what count. The humanity of the dance holds up."
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SjDANCEco: "Shakespeare Dances." 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday. California Theater, 345 S. First St., San Jose. \$20-\$70. (408) 924-5042. www.sjdanceco.org. **Diablo Ballet:** Dances by Limón, Kelly, Nebraska. 8 p.m. Nov. 16-17. [Leshner Center](#) for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. (925) 943-7469. www.diabloballet.org.

Read more: <http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/Jose-Lim-n-s-The-Moor-s-Pavane-revived-3899665.php#ixzz28FsMaShs>