

Monday, January 19, 2009

Big effect from 14 Limon talents

Jean Battey Lewis

The Limon Dance Company, celebrating the 100th anniversary of Jose Limon's birth, brought his distinctively heroic take on life to the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater Friday and Saturday.

The center's inspired dance series this year is painting a vivid picture of the scope and genius imbedded in modern dance. Already we have seen the searing passion of Martha Graham's "Clytemnestra," the cerebral invention of Merce Cunningham's "Xover" and the painterly power of Shen Wei's "Re-" and "MAP." Still to come are the companies of three other highly individual artists - Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor and Bill T. Jones.

Of them all, Mr. Limon (1908- 1972) is the artist who seems least inclined to reflect the passing scene. Not concerned with the trivia of modern life, the three dances on the weekend's programs are large scale, towering works whose themes deal with eternal verities.

Remarkably, this large scale effect is achieved with a company of just 14 dancers. The choreography is fluid, with dancers sweeping across the floors in shifting patterns, creating an effect grand in scope.

In terms of programming, the evening was unbalanced with three works all emphasizing large group patterns that marked the later years of Mr. Limon's creative life and bypassing such stellar works as "The Moors Pavane," set for four dancers of "La Malinche," for a trio.

The opening "Suite from a Choreographic Offering" set to Johann Sebastian Bach's "The Musical Offering" skims across the stage in constantly shifting patterns, using movement motifs from the works of Doris Humphrey, Mr. Limon's teacher and mentor and a seminal figure in modern dance.

"The Traitor" a searing account of the betrayal of Jesus, was followed by a finely wrought reconstruction of "Psalm by Carla Maxwell, the company's artistic director, who commissioned a haunting new score by Jon Magnussen.

I'm sure Miss Maxwell is a strong artistic director, based on the performance she gets from her dancers, but it was clear from a post performance talk that Mr. Limon's dances themselves inspire and speak directly to company members who never knew him.

"I reach for demons, saints, martyrs, apostates, fools, and other impassion visions. I go for inspiration to the artists who reveal the passion of man - to Bach, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Goya, Picasso, Orozco," Mr. Limon once said.

Mr. Limon's work doesn't sound like today's keep-it-cool generation, but truth to tell, Mr. Limon seemed out of step with the times back in the days when the New York scene was debunking heroics of every kind. Yet the Limon Company has survived, 37 years after his death, a striking record among modern dance companies.

President-elect Barack Obama has said he wants to put more emphasis on the arts, and the Kennedy Center certainly was doing its part over the weekend. Besides the Limon Company in the Eisenhower Theater, the Mariinsky Ballet was performing its lavish "Don Quixote" in the Opera House. After a disappointed opening night earlier in the week, the Mariinsky hit its groove, and the Saturday Matinee I saw was entrancing, led by Evgenia Obraztsova as Kitri and Vladimir Shklyarov as Basil whose high spirits and dazzling dancing sparked the whole performance.