

DANCE REVIEW

Detail a corps value

The Limón company shows its ability to convey nuance of thought and feeling in works of emotional pull.

By LEWIS SEGAL
Times Staff Writer

During his lifetime, José Limón was celebrated for his powerful, imaginative dance dramas: "The Moor's Pavane," for instance, which distilled Shakespeare's "Othello" to an elegant, pitiless quartet. Or "The Traitor," which compared reckless opportunism in a time of political witch hunts to the betrayal of Christ.

But 34 years after his death, Limón looks most of all like a master modern dance stylist. Certainly, that's the impression left by the 12-member Limón Dance Company in its glowing performances Saturday at the Ahmanson Theatre as part of the Dance at the Music Center series.

Both the suite from "A Choreographic Offering" (1964, to Bach) and "Missa Brevis" (1958, to Zoltán Kodály) are classic Limón abstractions with strong emotional undercurrents — the former a tapestry of motifs celebrating the choreographies of

Doris Humphrey (Limón's mentor), the latter a meditation on the survival of faith after the devastation of war.

The new productions on view proved revelatory not just for what they said but how they said it — especially the use of the hands and arms to sculpt the air, project the energy of the legs and torso high above the dancers' heads and convey every nuance of thought or feeling.

Way, way beyond what ballet does with the hands in complexity, delicacy and detail, Limón's extension of the body's expressive scale became especially luminous in Brenna Monroe-Cook's solo from "A Choreographic Offering."

But everyone had it, and it made this reduction from Limón's large-scale 58-minute original a striking index to the company's exceptional refinement.

For "Missa Brevis," guest professionals and students were added to bring the cast up to 22, and the occasion represented the return of former Limón company veteran Nina Watt after a 10-year absence. Now in her mid-50s, Watt can still slice the air as if it were in her way and strike a balance as if she dared anyone to

enforce the law of gravity.

But inevitably "Missa Brevis" belonged to Francisco Ruvalcaba in Limón's role of the outsider, who sees but cannot join the community of the faithful that surges around him and even cradles him in a moment of anguish.

In an interpretation of great nobility, Ruvalcaba made you feel the man's longing for connection and also the honesty of his isolation, just as the corps avoided false piety and seemed to bask in reflected spiritual radiance.

At the very opening, for instance, while Ruvalcaba watched from the side of the stage, women inside a tight cluster of dancers began to rise up into the air — lifted by unseen partners but seeming to ascend into the light on their own. Miraculous.

As a supplement to these Limón masterworks, the company performed "Recordare," subtitled "The Pageant of Ciudad de Santa Maria de los Milagros." Choreographed by former Limón student Lar Lubovitch, this 5-month-old novelty used Elliot Goldenthal music composed for "Juan Darien: A Carnival Mass" and evoked Mexican Day of the Dead entertainments.

In its own way, the work is beyond criticism: You can't complain that it's sloppy because it depicts improvisational amateurs. You can't complain that it's crude because sex and violence indisputably belong to this kind of folk celebration. You can't complain that it trivializes the Day of the Dead because that festival creates a cozy camaraderie between this life and the afterlife.

But if you performed "Recordare" on the same program as Martha Graham's 66-year-old "El Penitente," which also looked at Latino ceremonies through the prism of modern dance, you'd see Lubovitch's empty pictorialism and glib appropriation of cultural artifacts for what they are: too little, too late.

The reason we need major moderns such as Limón and Graham on our dance menus is not just because they're part of our artistic heritage but because they're often *better* than contemporary choreographers who attack the same scores, subjects or themes. If the Graham company is on the ropes, the millennial Limón dancers still satisfy and inspire — and Saturday was the proof.

