DANCE REVIEW | 'LIMÓN DANCE COMPANY'

Keeping a Flame Burning for the Past, While Embracing the Future

By JOHN ROCKWELL
Published: November 16, 2006

It may not be the most famous or well-endowed troupe around these days, but the Limón Dance Company serves as a model for American modern dance in two ways. It is a repository of mid-20th-century classics, both the dances and the even earlier techniques necessary to perform them. And it is an example for other companies devoted to the repertory of long-gone great names, demonstrating how to keep themselves alive.

For the opening program on Tuesday of a two-week run at the Joyce Theater, both these agendas were very much in evidence. In celebration of its 60th anniversary, the company has invested in several important revivals. And there is a lively commission for Lar Lubovitch, as well.

The Limón company may be named for its founder, José Limón, the Mexican-American dancer who died in 1972, but it has another powerful choreographer to draw from in its revivals. Limón studied and danced with Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, and after the demise of their company in 1945, Humphrey became the Limón company's first artistic director. She died in 1958, but has a strong body of work still well worth reviving too.

One big Humphrey revival is scheduled for the second program, which alternates with the first: her "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías," first done by the newly formed Limón company in 1946. It will be flanked by Limón's "Choreographic Offering" (1964) and his signature piece, "The Moor's Pavane" (1949). Tuesday's program had Limón's "Dances for Isadora" (1971), Humphrey's "Day on Earth" (1947) and the New York premiere of Mr. Lubovitch's "Recordare," first seen in Boston a year ago.

"Dances for Isadora" is, of course, a homage to Isadora Duncan, a dominant influence on the American modern dance of Limón's time. It consists of five solo dances evoking facets of Duncan's style, with whatever degree of detailed accuracy no one can completely know, given the lack of filmed evidence.

The first four dancers, all commanding in their different ways, are dressed in nude leotards and colored flowing fabric and are accompanied by Chopin: Kristen Foote, Ryoko Kudo, Kathryn Alter and Roxane D'Orléans Juste. The fifth, in black fabric and dancing in silence, is Carla Maxwell, a former Limón dancer who has guided the company since 1978. This style of dancing, with cantilevered bodies, heaven-reaching arms and soulful, angst-ridden posing, can look dated. But it also breathes honorably of another era and hence remains well worth seeing.

"Day on Earth" is a psychodrama with a Man, a Woman, a Young Woman and a Child. Their sometimes tortured, sometimes loving interactions again look out of time, compared with dance abstraction or contemporary, nonnarrative theatrical dance. But the performances, by Raphaël Boumaïla, Ms. D'Orléans Juste and Ms. Foote as the adults and Morgana Cragnotti as the child, are all superb. Who can say how the 10-year-old Ms. Cragnotti will evolve, but with her charming, self-possessed stage personality, she's already a professional in the best sense.

"Recordare" finds Mr. Lubovitch offering a comic take on a Mexican Day of the Dead fiesta. Here the full company, abetted by a colorful physical production from Anne Hould Ward (costumes), Ken Foy (set design) and Jack Mehler (lighting), brought Mr. Lubovitch's inventions to vivid life. The music was selections from Elliot Goldenthal's "Juan Darién," which suited Julie Taymor just fine in the past but serves Mr. Lubovitch equally well in the present.

The Limón Dance Company continues through Nov. 26 at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-0800 or joyce.org.

Correction: Nov. 21, 2006
A dance review on Thursday about the Limón Dance Company at the Joyce Theater, citing information provided by the company, misidentified the city where Lar Lubovitch's "Recordare," performed at the Joyce, had its premiere. It was Cleveland, not Boston