

LIMÓN

Journal

A P U B L I C A T I O N F R O M T H E L I M O N I N S T I T U T E

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The initial idea behind The Limón Journal when it was launched in 1993 was to highlight some of the lesser-known aspects of José Limón's legacy. But attention must also be paid to the dance that critic Walter Sorell referred to in 1975 as, "the masterpiece of the last few decades" – *The Moor's Pavane*. Its preeminence was recognized from the start, when it won a 1950 Dance Magazine

Award for "outstanding creation in the field of American modern dance," and much has been written about the work in the years since. The playwright and drama critic Eric Bentley once said that of all the works created for the American stage, *The Moor's Pavane* would be the one he would choose above all others to send abroad as a showcase for the arts in the United States. And German dance pioneer Mary Wigman called it "one of the great masterpieces of our time...; it is absolute, incontestable, you cannot add to it nor take anything away from it."

What we can perhaps add to the written record is a fresh look at writings by some of the dance's creators, collected here for the first time. Of course, seeing the dance itself is the best way to experience *The Moor's Pavane*, and fortunately it is now available on video with the original cast. (available from the Limón Foundation, or from Video Artists International at 1-800-477-7146 or www.vaimusic.com.)

Even more immediacy is possible through experiencing *The Moor's Pavane* in live performance, and it remains active in the repertory of the Limón Dance Company while continuing to be the Limón work most frequently requested by companies throughout the world. Soon after its premiere, Walter Terry referred to it as, "a theater piece of terrific impact," and that impact is still indelible even as this dance begins its second half-century.

Norton Owen, Editor

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JOSE LIMON, LUCAS HOVING, PAULINE KONER AND BETTY JONES IN THE MOOR'S PAVANE, CA. 1950 (PHOTO BY WALTER STRATE)



THE MOOR'S PAVANE

FIRST PERFORMED August 17, 1949 at the Connecticut College American Dance Festival, New London, Connecticut

CHOREOGRAPHY BY José Limón

MUSIC BY Henry Purcell, arranged by Simon Sadoff (from the suites THE GORDIAN KNOT UNTIED and ABDELAZER, or THE MOOR'S REVENGE)

ORIGINAL CAST - The Moor: José Limón, His Friend: Lucas Hoving, His Friend's Wife: Pauline Koner, The Moor's Wife: Betty Jones

JOSE LIMON

Born in 1908, José Limón made his first choreographic effort in 1931 and continued making dances until his death in 1972. His "Letter to Pauline, Betty and Lucas on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of THE MOOR'S PAVANE," excerpted below, was written at Limón's farm in Stockton, New Jersey on September 1, 1959.

A decade makes a neat package, and this round, easily comprehended sum of years has a way of going by very swiftly, almost before one is aware of its passing. It seems such a short while ago that the four of us stood on the stage at Palmer Auditorium in New London, waiting for the curtain to rise on a dance called *The Moor's Pavane*. I remember the acute nervousness and apprehension which takes possession of one just before the curtain. I remember thinking how beautiful you three looked, and knowing that whatever the outcome of the imminent ordeal, the spectator would see a very handsome and distinguished ensemble of dancers. I was more than usually shaken and insecure. This dance might prove, in the eyes of the public, to be an impertinence, an almost sacrilegious presumption. I know how hard I had tried not to make a "dance version" of Shakespeare's *Othello*. I had worked with all will and conscience to find a form which might prove valid and pertinent in terms of dance. I did not wish to infringe,

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nor paraphrase. From the moment when Mrs. Louis (Betts) Dooley, a few years previous to this evening in August 1949, had first put the idea into my very receptive mind, I had sought not a "retelling" of Shakespeare's *Othello*, but a dance based on the old Italian legend. "Betts" had given me not only the impetus, but the form. She suggested using the four principal characters: Othello, Desdemona, Iago and Emilia, and unfold the tragedy in dances suggestive of those of the High Renaissance. As is my custom when some kind and well-meaning friend comes to me with "just the idea for a dance for you and your company," I listened courteously, meaning to give it consideration, and then go on to my own ideas. But this one hung on. *Othello* had always had a profound and powerful attraction for me, but I had no idea how to proceed other than to resort to a "choreographic version," and this I had no desire to do. Movement, gesture and pantomime were not enough – a form was needed, a form strong and distinct enough to justify the whole effort. It took about three years of brooding. The four principal protagonists, yes. That drastic removal from the play was an important step. But how to bring forth all the passion, grandeur, beauty, all the tragedy with only four dancers? The three years were an intense and incessant search for the answers. They came slowly. There was the usual turmoil and ferment. There were periods of great exaltation, when the solution seemed imminent, or even accomplished. This, as you might know, was almost surely followed by the disappointment of knowing that what had seemed resolved the day before was a mere delusion, and I had to begin all over again...

You, Pauline, you, Lucas and Betty, plus myself and an idea, are the ingredients which compose the dance whose tenth anniversary we have so recently observed. What each of you is as a human being and an artist has gone into it and made it what it is. I have no way, not being good at statistics or calculations, of knowing how many times we have performed it. I think you will remember with me that it has been active in our repertory on almost all of our yearly tours in this country. We have taken it with us to Mexico, to Canada, to Brazil, Uruguay, Puerto Rico. It has gone to England, France, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Portugal. Audiences have liked it very much.

But that which makes me most happy and proud is that this unique, really rare and select group of artists has held together to perform this work for one decade. I think it speaks well for all of us, when you consider how transient and ephemeral artistic associations tend to be in general, that the four of us, with our divergencies in background, training and individual temperaments, have managed to fuse and weld ourselves to each other. I think it is because of a faith, a belief. We believe powerfully in the dance. I could not possibly admire each one of you more. I prize you as only a fine artist and dancer is prized. To me there is nothing more wonderful than a dancer, and a dancer such as you are is doubly wonderful.



JOSÉ LIMÓN AND LUCAS HOVING, CA. 1950 (PHOTO BY WALTER STRATE)

LUCAS HOVING

Lucas Hoving (1912-2000) was a Dutch-born dancer who performed with Kurt Jooss and Martha Graham before joining the Limón Company in 1949. He remained with the Company until 1963, and returned as a guest artist in the 1980s. His memories of THE MOOR'S PAVANE were the subject of an interview with Naomi Mindlin that appeared in Dance Research Journal, Spring 1992, published by the Congress on Research in Dance.

Pavane has a real script. And a lot of detail. The *Pavane* was a major operation. We read the book. I knew the story but then we went back to it again. But both José and I are the kind of people [who] worked through our bodies, really. In fact, Doris [Humphrey] probably talked more about some of the aspects of the piece than José did. José could talk beautifully about anything, but not about his dancing. We sort of looked at each other. I looked at him first: what kind of thing does he want, and how does he use his body, his weight. Then he let me do it. And then he looked at me again and tried to make the adjustment. [But] there was actually very little talking about the book with José.

I think Pauline [Koner] and I talked [with each other] more than we talked with José. I know we rehearsed together. You see, Koner's a real perfectionist and we had to [work] forever [with] the handkerchief, and the skirt, and the lift and how close [we should be], and that sort of thing. I think that

suits me. I'm not very verbal about dancing either. Oh, yes, I can be in teaching, I realize, but I'm never about the creative things so much...

You realize that the third choice of music became it? The first one [which] I was very unhappy with was modern music. It was being composed, and every now and then we heard little bits and pieces and I didn't go for it at all. And then José found other Purcell music which we worked on, which from my feeling was already much better. But then again he rejected [this music] and selected new pieces. So before the actual music score came about, we had already spent quite a lot of time on [the piece]. And for me, I'd almost forgotten that.

All I remember is that when we started the opening of the final music, I said, "This is it." That felt right and it was beautiful. And I remember I told Pauline [Lawrence] Limón and she was so happy because she trusted me. I came [to her and said], "He found the music." And from then on I feel that the piece went almost by itself.

Oh God, you could work for days and days on a piece. I don't remember that we did that on this piece. Because finally, when the music was there, we had already enough preparation I guess, [and] I felt it came very easily. Within the six summer weeks. And several weeks were wasted on experimenting, so it was probably in about three weeks, maybe, that we did that piece.

PAULINE KONER

Pauline Koner (1912-2001) embarked upon a performing career in 1928 and appeared as a regular guest artist with the Limón Company from its first performance in 1947 until 1960. Also a renowned choreographer, she has entrusted the perpetuation of her works to the Limón Foundation. This remembrance was included in an article entitled "The Truth About THE MOOR'S PAVANE", published in Ballet Review, Volume 5, Number 4, 1980, later included in Koner's autobiography, SOLITARY SONG.

It was spring 1949. José announced a new work based on *Othello* – José as Othello, Lucas Hoving as Iago, Betty Jones as Desdemona and I as Emilia. Though José preferred in the program listing the titles "The Moor," "His Friend," "The Friend's Wife," "The Moor's Wife," in rehearsal we always used the actual names. He decided for the sake of clarity to use only the central plot – Iago maliciously planning

PAULINE KONER, CA. 1950 (PHOTO BY WALTER STRATE)



to prove Desdemona's infidelity by producing her handkerchief which he claimed to have discovered in another man's possession.

Rehearsals started in New York. Unfortunately, I had other commitments. José decided to begin without me... We would work on my sections when I arrived at New London. He planned the work in a most fascinating way – a suite of formal court dances broken by incidents which revealed both the characters and the plot.

When I arrived, he showed me what he had blocked so far. Somehow what I saw did not convince me dramatically. The handkerchief motif was not clearly defined. That evening, after rehearsal, José and I sat on a large rock at the entrance of Connecticut College and analyzed the matter. We traced a series of dance moves which would create a dramatic sequence.

1. Betty would drop the handkerchief during one of the formal dances, and I would find it.
2. I would then do a short solo highlighting the handkerchief, bringing it into sharp focus.
3. This would be followed by a duet with Lucas, showing him the handkerchief, teasing him, flirting with him, till he would snatch it away.
4. Now he would have the proof (which Emilia does not realize) to show to José, in a duet, where he would produce the handkerchief, convincing Othello that Desdemona has betrayed him.
5. Finally, when Emilia accuses him of murder, he (Othello) would show her the handkerchief.
6. With the realization that Iago was the source of the villainy, she would denounce him.

In the play Iago kills Emilia but José used only a symbolic approach leaving the figures of Iago and Emilia as players pointing up the tragedy to the audience. Now, even in the capsule version of *Othello*, the handkerchief theme was logical and convincing and could motivate the dramatic climax needed to make the ballet credible. I took the handkerchief speech from the play, as a key to Emilia's character and as a motivation for my solo and began work.

Emilia: *"I am glad I have found this napkin:
This was her first remembrance of the Moor:
My wayward husband hath a hundred times
Woo'd me to steal it: but she loves the token,
For he conjured her she should ever keep it,
That she reserves it ever more about her
To kiss and talk to. I'll have the work ta'en out,
And give't Iago: what he will do with it
Heaven knows, not I;
I nothing but to please his fantasy."*

We then worked on the duet with José choreographing Lucas' role while I, using the character as a point of departure, filled in my parts. There were experiments, many discussions among us about the characters and, of course, as always, changes. Finally we were near the end of the work. Time was running out. José was suffering from the usual summer session fatigue, the studio was hot and inspiration had run dry. At this point Doris Humphrey, our artistic director, with her extraordinary sense of dramatic timing and creative genius, came up with a brilliant solution. The murder would not be revealed. Facing the audience, Iago would spread Emilia's skirt as a screen to hide the act. Then wheeling about, she would suddenly discover Desdemona dead.

I always got gooseflesh at these final moments. José showing me the handkerchief, my taking it and burying my face in it, the realization, the accusation of Iago, a final lament over the body of Desdemona, then (again a suggestion of Doris') the sudden wheeling away of Lucas and myself to opposite downstage corners – to be drawn back with a gesture faintly reminiscent of prayer to the prostrate figures of José and Betty – the sudden drop of body and hand to chest, a sob – then the slow reaching forward of the arm to the audience, the inner anguish, the open palm saying – "This is the Tragedy."

THE MOOR'S PAVANE IN REHEARSAL, 1949 (PHOTO BY LAURA BEAUJON)



BETTY JONES

Betty Jones joined the José Limón Dance Company in 1947 and continued with it for 20 years, later guesting in 1970. She last performed the role of The Moor's Wife in a special presentation of THE MOOR'S PAVANE honoring Lucas Hoving's 80th birthday in 1992, and she continues to teach throughout the world with her husband, former Limón dancer Fritz Ludin. The following memories were compiled by Betty Jones especially for this issue of The Limón Journal.

The Moor's Pavane, the highlight of the 1949 American Dance Festival season at New London, Connecticut, was the piece Ruth Page, Chicago-based choreographer and dancer, wanted to present with her dancers as part of Les Ballets Américains at the Champs-Élysées Theatre in Paris in 1950. José said no - he didn't like the idea of having his work performed by ballet dancers. But he was dying to go to Paris for the first time himself, and to perform in the very theater where Vaslav Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring) created such a scandal.

José and Ruth Page struck a deal in which José's company would dance *Pavane* while also performing in Page's works, eliminating the need to hire additional dancers. José called and told me, "Get your pointe shoes out - we're going to Paris!" José performed not only *The Moor*, but also the King of the Ghouls in Page's *The Bells*, in which he disguised himself with heavy makeup, hoping that nobody would recognize him. Pauline Lawrence Limón and I performed as Salvation Army Ladies in the Ruth Page-Bentley Stone ballet *Frankie and Johnny*. This role gave me a solo line to sing, but I couldn't hear the orchestra over the audience's incessant booing. Darius Milhaud, the composer of *The Bells*, got wheeled into the orchestra pit to conduct his work. There were more boos, and when the curtain came down he didn't wait for the wheelchair, running as fast as he could. *The Moor's Pavane*, the last piece on the program, stabilized the chaotic situation. Who would have expected any correlation between *The Rite of Spring* and Les Ballets Américains other than the Champs-Élysées Theatre! The next day, the program order was reversed and *The Moor's Pavane* opened, setting the evening's tone for the rest of the season.

I love the short silent interludes between Purcell's music sections, where José conveys moments of personal insight, emotions of tenderness and consternation, before leading the plot to the next level of intensity. Actors from the Comédie Française expressed their astonishment backstage, impressed with our ability to deliver Shakespeare's story in twenty minutes while it took them an entire evening.

BETTY JONES (PHOTO BY ZACHARY FREYMAN)



Eighteen years after the premiere, President Lyndon Johnson and Lady Bird invited José to the White House for a command performance of *The Moor's Pavane*. The occasion was a state visit by the King of Morocco and his sister. José assembled the original cast, and Simon Sadoff, who had arranged the music and conducted the premiere at ADF, conducted the Marine Band. Before the performance, we waited downstairs while all the guests were feasting upstairs to the tune of "Hello, Dolly!" Tea sandwiches were provided, and José remarked that he felt just like Mozart waiting for his moment to entertain royalty.

The stage was in the East Room where a huge chandelier (a gift from Rebekah Harkness) hung exactly over our opening circle, posing a challenge for Lucas and José to avoid entangling their hands in the crystals overhead. We had been told that after the performance we were to come forward for one bow only, and then wait for the President, Lady Bird and their guests to come up and be introduced to us. Lady Bird told me that she hoped all the way through that I would "win." The President gave José the ultimate Texan compliment, shaking his hand and saying vociferously, "Boy, oh boy, oh boy!"



Marcia B. Siegel has made substantial contributions to the written record of Limón's work, particularly in her definitive biography of Doris Humphrey, *DAYS ON EARTH*. The following excerpt of a comprehensive analysis is from Siegel's *THE SHAPES OF CHANGE: IMAGES OF AMERICAN DANCE* (1979, still available from University of California Press).

Limón translated the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* by going to the play's basic dilemmas rather than by trying to duplicate its actions. He saw the individual tragedies of the various characters, each doomed by his or her flawed personality. But he also saw that much of the explanation for the tragedy could not be shown in a dance - not Iago's political plotting, nor his manipulation of people and events, nor the reasons for his hatred, nor the other characters' vulnerability. The dance concerns itself not with states of jealousy and envy, not with specific deeds of betrayal, but with a process of deterioration, perhaps several interrelated processes. Limón described it as being about "the destructive power of jealousy." This development, or disintegration, of character can be and is depicted in the dance movement. Doris Humphrey fashion, Limón chose his images so that they would work on several levels - the spatial form of the dance, as well as its internal order, undergoes a gradual breaking apart while the closely dependent relationships among the characters are also disrupted.

Louis Horst described the preclassic pavane as a dance of "ceremonious dignity, splendor and grave pride," consisting mostly of walking steps, and according to the great aesthete of baroque dance, Thoinot Arbeau, this "honorable" form was used mostly for processions and displays of magisterial splendor. The form is ideally suited as an ironic ceremony within which Limón's characters destroy themselves through their own passions. His pavane, even in its initial presentation, seems less a closed, set ritual than a series of ideas by which the group formally asserts and describes itself. Events of plot significance take place during and between figures of this courtly dance, so that we get the impression the pavane is always going on - like the protocols of courtly power - defining the terms of rivalry and defense rather than being a separate event they enjoy when not engaged in more serious pursuits.

We first see the characters as a group, a quartet inextricably linked by clasped hands and clustered close together facing the center of its own circle. A moment later the Moor breaks this image of solidarity by circling his leg out behind him along the floor, and the other individuals follow suit. The group separates into pairs, the men and women addressing each other, then the married couples. This acknowledgement of the individual bonding relationships takes the form of bowing, nodding, and other formal recognition patterns and of advancing and retreating - initiated by the pelvis - in straight lines toward the person opposite. The pavane is never seen in quite the same form after the first time. Each restatement of these motifs - the inward-facing cluster, the mutually supporting handholds, the circling and approaching-in-a-line floor patterns, and the bowing-dipping acknowledgments - casts them in increasingly fragmented or disturbed form.

At first, the movement is very slow and smooth, the pauses and suspensions very secure. The predominant shape of the dancers' hand and body gestures is round, especially when they scoop and gather into the space between them, enlarging on the claspings of interdependence. But even as early as *Othello*'s first leg thrust, small motions poke through the pavane's even surface. Iago gestures furtively toward the Moor, drawing his hand across the center of his body as if tugging at an invisible rope or invoking a silent spell. Emilia refuses Iago's first hint that she steal Desdemona's handkerchief by jerking her arms upward and twisting her head away.

The tight clump into which the quartet had first been gathered spreads out into space, the dance becoming more expansive, the dancers presenting themselves more grandly to each other, the movement overflowing into big spirals, turns, and falls, and into a big crossing pattern from one side of the space to the other. The earliest form of this sweeping advance is cut off: the dancers rise on the balls of their feet and halt their forward motion by withdrawing the pelvis, as if they've run into an invisible waist-high barrier. Later, the circular path and the long, straight, crossing path seem to become confused and intermingled, and in the last pavanés the dancers swoop erratically out to the farthest ends of the space in zigzagging runs that end in tight turns back to the center or huge, whole-body falls to the ground. Toward the end, they return to the center and cling together even more tightly while leaning outward. The stress of this figure, where the dancers have to hang together all the more strongly because they are veering away from each other, eventually breaks the group apart and they fall violently outward. Spacings that had been even and measured become either uncomfortably close or very distant. The dance that was once smooth, connected, and placid becomes clashing, jagged, increasingly random in its pattern, until it has disintegrated entirely.

ANALYSIS OF A CLASSIC



REVIEWS THROUGH THE YEARS

A survey of dance criticism concerning **THE MOOR'S PAVANE** yields a somewhat repetitive display of superlatives. The following digest includes a single quote from each of the decades since the premiere of *The Moor's Pavane*.

1940s "The action is close-knit, intense, without a wasted gesture or an unnecessary development, yet there is a great variety of mood and movement and a steady building to the inevitable climax. The individual characters have the utmost clarity and their movement is extraordinarily evocative under the dark, rather smothering atmosphere which envelops it."
— John Martin, *The New York Times*, August 21, 1949

1950s "The slowly moving, shifting patterns of Limón's choreography are exceptionally interesting. All his dances are tersely articulate, with an economical spareness about them. He never wastes two gestures if one will do. The purely decorative element in his dance, both here and elsewhere, seems to be concentrated on the horizontal plane, so that he retains steps of elevation for his emotional coloring, appearing to use jumps only rarely for their visual effect. The style of acting he requires is rather impersonal, and would have more in common with Brecht than Stanislavski."
— Clive Barnes, *Dance and Dancers*, November 1957

1960s "Mr. Limón disclaims any direct derivation from Shakespeare. Yet his composition seems to wear as well as the play of *Othello*: and partly because all its performers not only dance but act so superbly. The unspoken distillation of tragedy, with Tintoretto overtones in its colors and convolutions, is as incredibly gripping as ever."
— Louis Chapin, *Christian Science Monitor*, January 8, 1966

1970s "One of the things that makes *The Moor's Pavane* a constant masterpiece is that it is not simply a dance about jealousy and love. Within the framework of a formal dance, the actions are those of pursuit and evasion. Like the Shakespeare play it is based on — *Othello* — *The Moor's Pavane* is essentially a series of two-person scenes: Iago with Othello, Desdemona with Emilia, Othello with Desdemona. Underneath the anguished curves and lunges of the dancing, the plot moves as ruthlessly as a blade."
— Deborah Jowitz, *The Village Voice*, September 5, 1974

1980s "It was Limón's genius to realize that Shakespeare's *Othello*, a play as messy in its emotions as any, could be distilled with pungent simplicity. He chose a dance form — the pavane — as a poetic conceit, to symbolize his human drama. When the pavane's formal patterns break sharply apart onstage, we sense the disastrous crisis among the characters. And when we see the four main characters dancing in their symmetrical and formal patterns, we know that the societal facade merely conceals the swirling passions underneath."
— Anna Kisselgoff, *The New York Times*, February 1986

1990s "Although Shakespeare's cast includes 13 named personages, plus miscellaneous attendants, there are only four people in *The Moor's Pavane*. Mr. Limón obviously did not wish to duplicate Shakespeare's panoramic sweep. Rather, he focused on the way tragic events touched four specific lives. Moreover, by having his characters express tumultuous feelings while performing steps evoking dignified Renaissance court dances, he demonstrated that good manners may not always suffice to prevent the outbreak of violence. *The Moor's Pavane* does more than retell *Othello*. It reinterprets it. Like Taglioni, Ivanov and Saint-Léon before him, Mr. Limón was not afraid to change literature for good choreographic reasons."
— Jack Anderson, *The New York Times*, August 26, 1990

2000s "For pure dramatic art, there is nothing quite like *The Moor's Pavane*, the 1949 signature work of the Mexican American modern dance choreographer, José Limón. Set to the music of Purcell and inspired by the two principal couples in Shakespeare's *Othello*, it is a masterpiece of storytelling and characterization, with superb color-coded costumes by Limón's wife, Pauline Lawrence."
— Hedy Weiss, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, March 24, 2000

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