

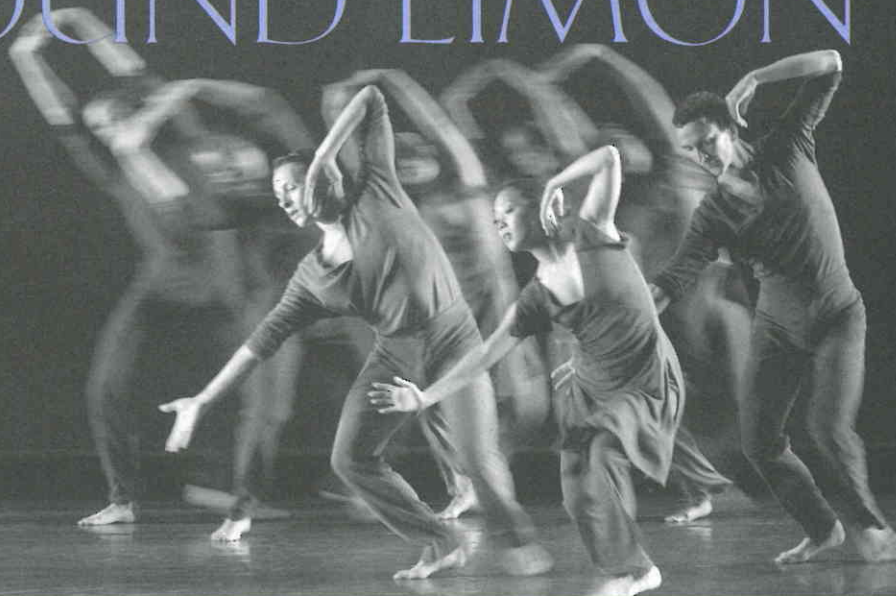
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LOST AND FOUND LIMÓN



the 1960s, *The Winged and Psalm*, both re-interpreted by Carla Maxwell, a member of the original cast, with entirely new musical scores composed by Jon Magnussen.

The dances examined here do not include every unconventional Limón staging. There has been an all-female version of the all-male *Scherzo*, group versions of the solo *Chaconne*, and a production of *Missa Brevis* that shifted the locale from war-torn Poland to the American Southwest. And we do not concern ourselves entirely with the off-beat in these pages.

Nina Watt explores one of the most often-performed Limón classics, *There is a Time*, and a comprehensive effort to document this work for future generations.

Perhaps the through-line in all of these projects is that there is no one way to preserve a dance. Likewise, there are multiple ways in which dances may be re-imagined, re-examined and re-constructed. We hope to continue utilizing all the resources at our disposal to make sure that the dances of José Limón are not just stored away, but truly kept alive where they belong – on stages around the world.

—Norton Owen, Editor

With a finite storehouse of dance works in its care — José Limón created just over 70 in his lifetime — the Limón Dance Foundation must continually concern itself with retrieving, renewing and preserving noteworthy dances. Sometimes this is simply a matter of getting a work back onstage in a form that is as close as possible to the original concept, as when *Sonata For Two Cellos* was performed again for the first and only time in forty years. At other times, it might mean paring a dance down to its essentials, as in the revival of *Dances (in honor of Poznan, Wroclaw, Katowice and Warszawa)*, which was presented in an abbreviated and re-designed format as *Mazurkas*. More radical revisions were made to two Limón works from

REDISCOVERING

It was the summer of 1958, and I was at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College and saw the premiere performance of Limón's *Dances (in honor of Poznan, Wroclaw, Katowice and Warszawa)*. Only a few months earlier José had completed the important ballet *Missa Brevis*, his heartfelt response to the religious faith of the Polish people in the face of such massive destruction. Limón had been deeply affected by what he experienced in Poland. Now here was this new work, more of a chamber piece, dedicated to these same people. And it was a box of jewels! The dancers in that original cast had all been on the 1957 European tour with José – a tour that was at times grueling and at other times transporting. This suite, set to ten Chopin mazurkas, seemed to be his way of personally thanking each one with a solo or duet especially tailored to that dancer's particular qualities.

It was the spring of 1984, and I was walking down Broadway and ran into Helen Priest Rogers.

I hadn't seen her in years, and told her about my Philadelphia-based company, Dance Conduit, and the current projects in which we were engaged, when out of the blue she said "Why don't you do the Mazurkas?" It was a magnificent idea! She herself had made a film record of it in 1958. She was an amazing individual who believed so fanatically about the importance of preserving dances that summer after summer she made 16 millimeter silent black and white films of as many works as her meager budget would allow. I remember some of those shoots – they would usually occur on the stage once the evening performance was over, when all the theater lights could be turned on to full brightness. Dancers were always exhausted if not injured, but we somehow sensed that they were important. Helen was also one of the pioneer champions of Labanotation.

So I checked with the Limón Foundation to see if I could have permission to undertake such a project. I contacted Charles Reinhart at the American Dance Festival, located by then at Duke University, and asked for a video copy of the film. I started to write grant proposals. I asked Ray Cook, a notator who had once danced with Limón, if he would be interested in working on the project with me, and make notes for a Labanotation score. I found an old recording of Artur Rubinstein playing the music, and arbitrarily attached that to the video, just to get the feeling of the different sections. And somehow or other I raised the money to bring my company of nine dancers to Bennington College for a four week rehearsal period during a Limón Company summer teaching residency. That meant the dancers could take daily classes in Limón technique and repertory, in addition



THE MAZURKAS

by Ann Vachon

to their rehearsals of the Mazurkas. Since most of the sections were solos or very small ensembles, we could work eight hours a day and not wear anybody out, except myself and Ray.

We had developed a particular way of working together. We would watch the video, and then I would execute the movement while still watching. I could do this pretty easily – I was familiar enough with the style, and knew the original dancers so well that it came easily. But no sooner had I danced a phrase, than I totally forgot it. Meanwhile Ray would be watching me, and taking notes. He'd tell me which foot I had started on, which arm was lifted, etc. My body couldn't remember these things without his help. So we'd bring that material into the studio and show it to the dancers. As much as possible we avoided letting the dancers watch the video. There were several reasons for that. We didn't want them to follow the idiosyncratic differences (and occasional mistakes) of the original cast members. But sometimes, in order to get floor patterns established, we'd let them watch, and inevitably they'd become mesmerized and just stare open-mouthed. My dancers came to know and admire Ruth Currier, Betty Jones, Mike Hollander, etc., just as I had decades earlier.

Because we were working from a silent film, the musical decisions were the most challenging aspect. Of course we knew that traditionally a mazurka accents the second beat. But that didn't always provide a formula, and in some cases it took months before I would suddenly realize that something felt wrong, and move the phrase forward or back a count.

Fortunately we were able to work with two original cast members, Lucy Venable and Chester Wolenski. Lucy brought some scraps of notes she had made on two sections she had danced, and that was very helpful. She also had some wonderful insights on style for the dancers, and it was a privilege to work with her. But it was Chester's visit that was such a revealing experience.

I had four men and five women in the company – two more dancers than José had created the work on. Chester's solo seemed to me to be the plum of the whole opus. It is deeply introspective and constrained, and from my first viewing of it I had found it terribly moving. Chester was such a different dancer from Limón, yet when we watched this section in silence I was struck by how much it reminded me of José's own dancing, with so much weight and resistance. I wanted all four men to have the chance to learn it. I never liked to set up a competitive environment, so I determined that somehow each of them would get an opportunity to perform it, but eventually one would be chosen for the role. It was the same for the women – I double-cast the solos and duets, and eventually we included all nine in each performance, with rotating casts, and a finale that I expanded by two dancers.

The men had already learned a rough version of the solo when Chester arrived, and they were full of questions. Chester likes to be helpful, so he would listen to their questions but then be completely perplexed and unable to answer them. And he didn't really remember the dance. Until, that is, we played the music, and the four men began to dance it, with Chester following behind. As he began to do the movement, he provided answers to all their

questions. It was all stored in his muscle memory, and just needed the music to release those memories. I so deeply regret not having the foresight to videotape those rehearsal sessions; it was a remarkable process to watch unfold.

We worked on these dances for almost a year, showing it several times as a work-in-progress. We dutifully called it by the original title, *Dances (in honor of Poznan, Wroclaw, Katowice and Warszawa)*, which I think led some audiences to expect a dance about concentration camps. But we always called it *Mazurkas* among ourselves.

Lavina Nielsen had designed the original costumes, based on Polish military attire and aristocratic ball gowns. Our costume designer took the same approach, and created very elaborate outfits in jewel-like colors. Pauline Lawrence, Limón's wife and the company wardrobe mistress, had never really liked Lavina's costumes, and somehow or other they got flooded or burned or lost, and the Limón company eventually performed the piece on tour in black practice clothes, with skirts for the women and boots on the men. Our costumes never disappeared but I decided to retire them anyway, and when we performed the work in black practice clothes the dance emerged in all its glory.

A few years later Sarah Stackhouse became interested in doing a reconstruction of the piece. She worked on it with her students at Purchase, and was then invited to set it on the Limón Dance Company. I felt rather possessive of the work by then, and went to see the performance at Jacob's Pillow with very mixed feelings. Sarah had worked from the original silent film, and to some extent with Ray and his notation score. But she had also watched the work from backstage every night during a 1961 company tour, and performed part of it as well. So she had memories even more deeply ingrained in her muscles than I did in mine. Watching, I found myself surprised by certain 'discoveries' – oh, of course that's what that gesture meant, or how that lift worked. I came to 'understand' one of the duets and one solo that hadn't made much sense to me with our cast. The addition of a musical introduction was startling, and there were a few spots where I wanted to jump up and give rhythmic corrections to the dancers. But it was a treat to see the work performed so beautifully by these dancers, and to recognize what a remarkable piece of choreography it is.

I cherish the part I played to preserve *Mazurkas*, as the work is now called. The dancers in my company always referred to various sections by the names of original cast members – Harkie's solo, Lola and Chester's duet, Ruth's solo, etc. By learning the roles that had been created for those dancers, they received a special gift. The work is an exquisite set of jewels, and every dancer who learns part of it inherits a small gem that is a token of Limón's gratitude for the commitment of his dancers to his work.

Ann Vachon, Director of the Limón Institute and faculty member at Temple University, has been associated with the Limón Company since joining it as a dancer in 1959.

