

LIMÓN

Journal

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In Deborah Jowitt's introduction to *An Unfinished Memoir* by José Limón, she reaffirms that "his works remain among the glories of American modern dance." And yet, these works have often been seen in a virtual vacuum, without the context provided by a full range of writings about Limón and his creative output. That is changing at last with the release of two books and a video, with still more publications and film projects waiting in the wings.

Aside from the offerings spotlighted in these pages, upcoming projects include a video documentary by Ann Vachon, a comprehensive biography by Larry Warren and a young readers' biography by Susanna Reich. Still in print is Barbara Pollack's and Charles Humphrey Woodford's 1993 *Dance is a Moment* (Dance Horizons/Princeton Book Company), while Daniel Lewis's pioneering volume, *The Illustrated Dance Technique of José Limón*, is available only in libraries and used-book stores.

Meanwhile, this issue of the Journal offers glimpses of the revelations offered in Limón's unfinished autobiography, an anthology of commissioned articles on various aspects of his artistry, and the first commercial release of Limón dances on video. The heartwarming message of these new resources is that there is a continuing interest in the creative output of José Limón, an interest that seems to be growing with each passing year.

Norton Owen, Editor

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JOSÉ LIMÓN



AN UNFINISHED
MEMOIR

COVER DESIGN BY JOAN GREENFIELD FOR JOSÉ LIMÓN'S AN UNFINISHED MEMOIR. PHOTO BY GERDA PETERICH

THE MAKING OF CHACONNE

by José Limón



Excerpted from José Limón's *An Unfinished Memoir*, edited by Lynn Garafola

A *Studies in Dance History Book*, published by Wesleyan University Press ISBN: 0-8195-6374-9

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José Limón began writing his memoirs in the 1960s, when both he and his wife were terminally ill with cancer. He recounted his story chronologically, beginning with his Mexican childhood and ending abruptly in the 1940s, just before his choreographic career began to flourish. His unfinished 281-page manuscript, donated by Charles D. Tomlinson to the New York Public Library Dance Collection after Limón's death in 1972, has been microfilmed and preserved, but remained largely undisturbed at Lincoln Center for over twenty years. Ann Vachon transcribed the handwritten manuscript in 1996, and Malcolm McCormick later submitted a copy of her typescript to Wesleyan University Press.

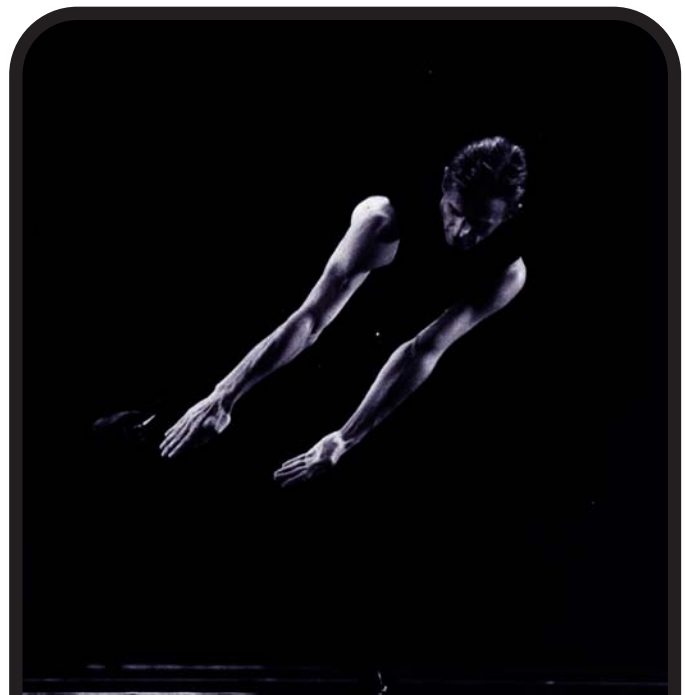
Wesleyan channeled the publication into its *Studies in Dance History* series, a project of the Society of Dance History Scholars. The book was nurtured into its final form by Lynn Garafola, who both edited and annotated the manuscript and added an exhaustively-researched chronology of dances. Garafola also added an unpublished Limón essay on Miguel Covarrubias and commissioned an introduction by Deborah Jowitt, a foreword by Carla Maxwell, an afterword by Norton Owen and a bibliography by Melinda Copel.

The following passage from the book comes near the end of Limón's narrative, describing events that took place in late 1942. Limón had recently married Pauline Lawrence, and he knew that he would soon be called upon to enter the armed forces.

My colleagues [May O'Donnell and Ray Green] returned to California. I stayed behind in New York to look for a home for Pauline and myself. We found a place on Thirteenth Street just off Fifth Avenue. It was minimal, but decent. Pauline decorated it in her superb, austere taste. We marked time waiting for the febrile summer to spend itself and allow us to get back to work. I took classes with Doris [Humphrey]. She knew that matters were uncertain for me and suggested that, in the interim, we work on a program to be given at the Studio Theatre in the fall. I was happy to join her in this, and work began. The project was an all-Bach program, to consist of one old work, the *Passacaglia* and *Fugue in C Minor*, and three new ones, *Partita in G Major*, *Four Choral Preludes*, and *Chaconne in D Minor*. Having danced



Mikhail Baryshnikov in Chaconne, photos by Gary Friedman



Passacaglia for a number of seasons. I was happy to be rehearsing it once more. After my fling at independence in the West, I was once again under the discipline of a great master, and I saw Doris in a new light. One neatly rounded decade had been lived under her tutelage. I had come as a young ignoramus of twenty-two. I had been molded, tempered, and tested. Breaking away had been a necessity. The perspective of time and distance had been salutary. Now, I was a man nearing his mid-thirties, and I was being treated no longer as a disciple but as an equal.

As proof and measure of my newly acquired status, I was given the responsibility of devising a substantial solo work of my own. I had lived with Bach's Chaconne for a number of years. It had been a constant and beloved companion. It had seen me through some dark moments, and I had come to sense the grandeur of its architecture and the sublimity of its concept. Composing a dance to it seemed an act of presumption, even impertinence. Nevertheless, the idea persisted, an ever-present urge and temptation. There were two abortive attempts, both abandoned when I saw that they weren't ready. Now, two cogencies, my time limit and the all-Bach program, drove me. It was now or never.

The first series of rehearsals were held in the living room on Thirteenth Street. By pushing chairs, tables, and other furniture against the walls, a not-too-constricted space was made available. I would set the phonograph, listen, and try movements. My first problem was to establish a seminal dance phrase from which the entire work would flow. In this I was following the style of the music, which is a series of variations on a theme. This theme persists throughout as the basis for elaboration and invention.

Bach's theme has a somber and austere majesty. It is also one of the master's most profoundly beautiful utterances, impeccably formal and elegantly baroque. Day after day I struggled to compose a phrase of

movements, eight bars in slow three-quarter tempo, that would somehow reflect what is in the music. It took a tremendous amount of sweat - not only of the body but of the mind - and intuition. There was no dramatic idea or story on which to lean. Here was the challenge that had to be met and transcended if totally abstract, formal beauty were to result.

After days of effort I arrived at a sequence that seemed to stand the test of those formidable eight bars and to flow in kinesthetic consonance with them. I had the choreographic premise, and from here all else had to emerge and develop.

There is a miraculous fecundity to the art of Bach. In this Chaconne, the fecundity seems inexhaustible. The work has a logic, radiance, and purity. Each variation creates its own perfect little universe, yet joins its successor to create a mighty impetus that ascends ever higher to regions of rapturous sonority. I met each variation with the utmost reverence and attempted to reflect in movement what the music seemed to imply. No, much more. Because, locked up in this room, with these sounds penetrating my sensibilities and my bones and tissues, the music took full command. At times I would abandon myself to a kind of trance, stand totally motionless, and say, inaudibly: "Tell me, tell me what to do here, and here, and there." Then, the will and the intelligence would take over, and what the intuition had gathered from the music was carefully and rigorously formalized to comply with the thematic premise. The dance emerged, formal, majestic, elegant, and above all beautiful.

There are things that one not only remembers but also cherishes with all fervor, for they are indispensable allies in the cruel yet splendid battle that artists must wage for their survival both as human beings and as artists. One of these is the moral support and regard of certain persons. For me Doris's regard was the "magnum desideratum." When my dance was ready, I showed it to her privately at the Studio Theatre. It was a long and demanding work. Performing a new dance is always exhausting, for one usually pushes too hard, and one's endurance is not ready to bear the double strain on the nervous system and the muscles. On concluding, I stood totally spent, and Doris was silent for a long time. Then, she left her seat, came to me, and said in her quiet voice, "This is one of the most magnificent dances I have ever seen. It is that for a number of reasons, but chiefly because it is a man dancing." I memorized these words, for I was to need them.

Pauline had seen this preview also. I have learned over the decades that in dance matters she is almost unbelievably difficult to please. "It's a good dance," she told me. But, she added, "It's much too long. It can stand cutting." She designed a most handsome costume that made me look like one of the somberly elegant Spanish grandees in the El Greco painting, "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz."

The all-Bach program met with a resounding success, beyond our most cheerful expectations. It was expected to run for three consecutive Sunday evenings. Instead, it ran for eleven Sundays to packed houses. ❖



RECONSTRUCTING LIMÓN

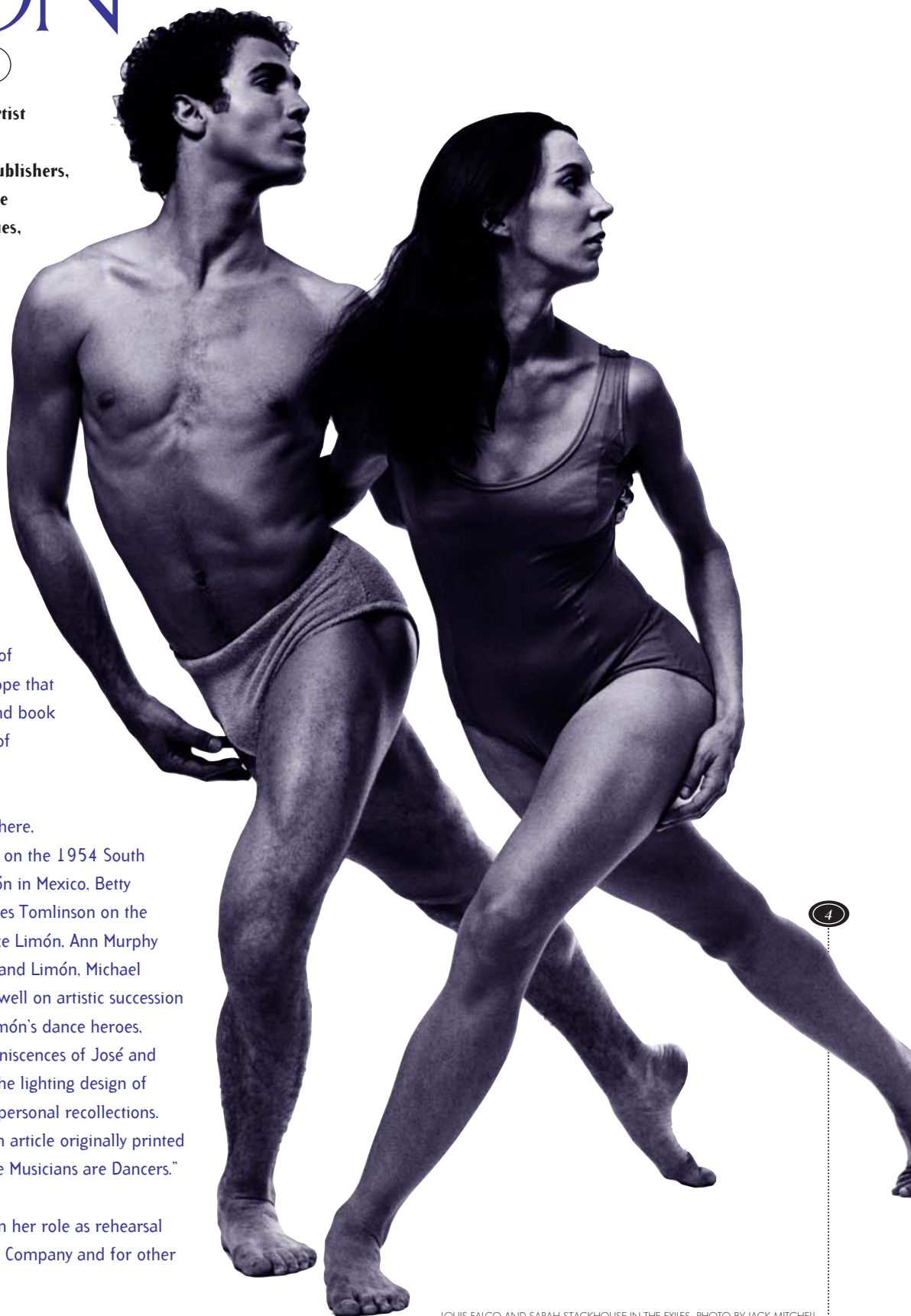
by Sarah Stackhouse

Excerpted from *José Limón: The Artist Re-Viewed*, edited by June Dunbar
Published by Harwood Academic Publishers,
The Netherlands (Volume 21 in the
Choreography & Dance Studies Series,
ISSN Nº 1053-380X)

Muriel Topaz, associate editor of the international journal *Choreography and Dance*, approached June Dunbar in 1996 about editing an issue devoted to José Limón. Dunbar performed in the Limón Company in the 1950s and taught Limón Technique at The Juilliard School, later spending many years as artistic director of the Lincoln Center Institute. She compiled a collection of thirteen articles, so impressive in scope that it was decided to create a clothbound book rather than the usual serial format of *Choreography and Dance*.

In addition to the article excerpted here, contributions include Melinda Copel on the 1954 South American tour, Ann Vachon on Limón in Mexico, Betty Jones on "Voices of the Body," Charles Tomlinson on the costume designs of Pauline Lawrence Limón, Ann Murphy on the partnership of Lucas Hoving and Limón, Michael Hollander on "Mazurkas," Carla Maxwell on artistic succession and leadership, Norton Owen on Limón's dance heroes, Charles Humphrey Woodford's reminiscences of José and Pauline Limón, Jennifer Tipton on the lighting design of Thomas Skelton and Dunbar's own personal recollections. Also included is a reprint of a Limón article originally printed in *The Juilliard Review*, "Dancers are Musicians are Dancers."

Sarah Stackhouse's article focuses on her role as rehearsal director, both for the current Limón Company and for other



groups performing Limón works. She danced with the Limón Company from 1958 to 1969 and served as an assistant to Mr. Limón in his classes and rehearsals at The Juilliard School and the American Dance Festival. Stackhouse's article, entitled "The Essence of Humanity," describes the energy, physical force and drive of Limón's dancing and dances.

As one entrusted to set Limón's works, I continue to investigate the multi-layered expression necessary to bring them to fullness of life on stage. In a piece like The Moor's Pavane, a quartet based on the legend of Othello, the very personal, idiosyncratic styles of Pauline Koner as Emilia and Lucas Hoving as Iago, created evocative performances. They contributed detail to José's movement material. It is evident to me that trying to imitate their work would be a mistake and would fail. I have spent hundreds of hours studying the films of the original cast in order to understand José's choreographic intent and structure apart from individual performance and then to see what of those performances is transferable to today's dancers. Once I have a sense of the function of the four roles, their contrasts and how each varies the thematic material, I can guide new dancers in developing and bringing their individual qualities to these roles. Amazingly, each time I return to the films I find new information. I realize anew how rich was the illusion created by the movement of those dancers contemporary with Limón. That illusion moved far beyond the sum of the physical components.

Setting Pavane on ballet companies has been a particularly interesting challenge for me in discovering the essence of the movement qualities and textures of each role and learning how to transfer them. Most of the movement concepts that José worked with are quite different from the ways in which ballet dancers work. Although he didn't often articulate his ideas, they were unique to his dancing and very present in his choreography. José intuitively used resistance, bound flow and strong attacks which sustain the height of the energy reverberating in space to give massive power to his "Moor." His elegant musicality and phrasing and the way he transferred his weight allowed him to stretch out or compress the time and space and create an expression of overwhelming turmoil and grief. In many ballet companies the dancers do not lower the heel to the floor and usually carry their center of weight high in the torso. The learning process is arduous, but when the



JOSÉ LIMÓN IN THE MOOR'S PAVANE, PHOTO BY WALTER STRATE

dancers are excited by new ideas and willing to work with them, the transformation is miraculous to watch. They no longer have to rely on trying to act the part (few dancers have that training) but physically become the role and can rely on the beautifully conceived form of the choreography to feed them the expression.

In reviving Mazurkas for the Limón company, I studied the silent film of the original cast. I also brought to the surface my deeply ingrained memories of the piece I had watched nightly with most of the original cast during my second year of touring in 1962. By the end of the six-week tour I could have gone into any of the dances. José choreographed the solos, duets, trio, quartet dances as gifts to each of the dancers who had been with him on the 1957 tour to Europe. The work was also a tribute to the music of Chopin and the Polish people who had received José's work and company with unqualified warmth of reception. Several phone conversations with Michael Hollander and Harlan ("Harkie") McCallum of the original cast gave me a lively picture of their time in Poland. They described a piano concert in Chopin's home, and José's being profoundly moved by the vital spirit of the Poles who were still trying to rebuild their lives twelve years after the end of World War II.

Carla Maxwell and I had spoken often of reviving Mazurkas. Resources finally became available for the project in 1989. Again I studied the film over and over again, absorbing the dances - each so expressive and personal to that dancer: Betty Jones's - bright and clear like the ring of crystal; Ruth Currier's - decorating the space and inviting the pianist to dance with her; Harkie's - zesty and boisterous; Michael's - a last dance fling before leaving the company; Chester Wolenski's - painful with nostalgia and loss. After understanding the relation between the choreography and the original performers, I needed to dance the work in order to fully understand the subtleties, the phrasing, how the rhythmic patterning interlaced with the music and how the space and movement enhanced each other. By the time I began work with the company I had all of the material in my bones. Many of these dances, although tied to an older generation of performers, seemed to fit our dancers easily. They still required a great deal of coaching to integrate space and movement, the liveliness and character of the mazurka rhythms, and the roundness and richness of expression that transcends pretty dancing. The dances fell in place easily with the music. They were so logically and inevitably entwined with the wonderful Chopin score.

THREE LIMÓN CLASSICS ON VIDEO

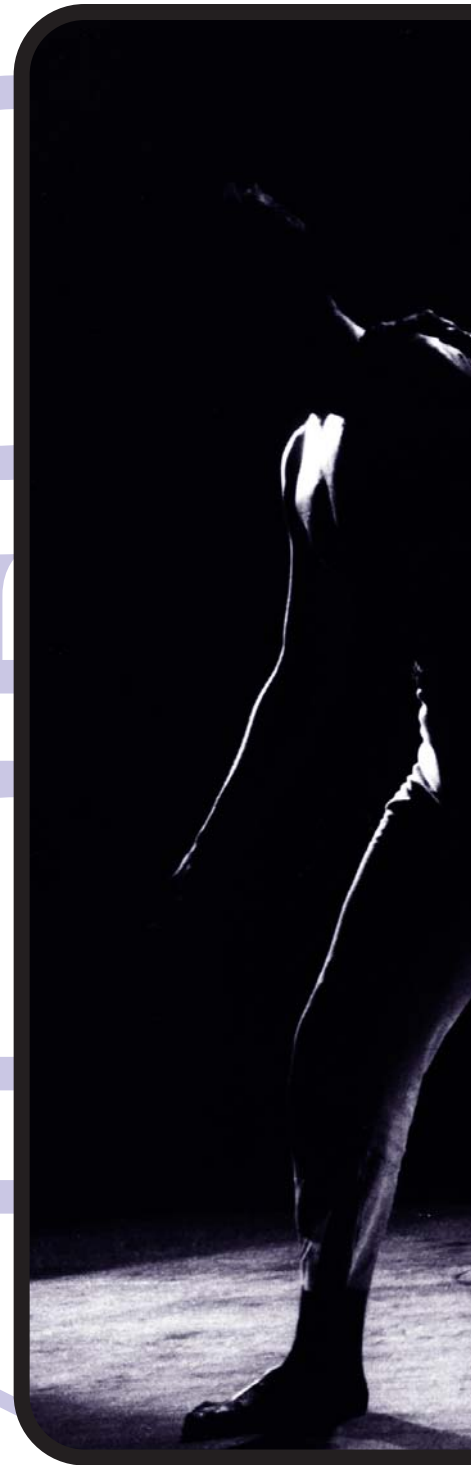
In the mid-1950s, three dances by José Limón were filmed by the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) for broadcast in Canada on a television series called "Scope." The Limón Foundation has now entered into a partnership with the CBC and Video Artists International (VAI) to release these dances for viewing in homes and schools. Included are complete performances of The Moor's Pavane, The Emperor Jones and The Traitor, all presented on one tape with their original casts. While Pavane is frequently performed by the Limón Company as well as by other groups around the world, the other two dances are less well-known and very rarely revived. The significance of this video release, then, is to provide easy access to three of Limón's most significant works:

The Traitor (1954) was Limón's response to the McCarthy hearings and the climate of betrayal that haunted the world of arts and entertainment during that time. Against a music score of violence, passion and tenderness (by Gunther Schuller), the tragedy of Judas is portrayed as if it were taking place in modern times.

The Moor's Pavane (1949) is considered by many to be one of the great masterworks in the modern repertory. In the form of a Renaissance dance, Limón distills the legend of Othello into a taut, 20-minute human drama with music by Henry Purcell. Joining Limón in this classic are Lucas Hoving, Pauline Koner and Betty Jones.

The Emperor Jones (1956) is based upon the play by Eugene O'Neill wherein a fugitive from a chain gang sets himself up as emperor of an island domain. He becomes a tyrant, and his mistreated subjects eventually rebel and hunt him down.

In addition to this video release, the music commissioned for The Emperor Jones by Heitor Villa-Lobos has recently been issued for the first time on compact disc by Et Cetera Record Company in a recording by the Symphony of the Air (formerly the NBC Symphony Orchestra), conducted by the composer. The only known tape of this performance was discovered in the archives of the Limón Foundation, and has been digitally remastered for release on CD with the expertise of Villa-Lobos scholar Alfred Heller. The catalog number for this recording is KTC 1216.❖





JOSÉ LIMÓN AND COMPANY IN THE EMPEROR JONES, PHOTO BY GJON MILLI

I feel it's important to give up any idea of trying to make one of José's dances work in the way it was first performed: to try to imitate the "original" or to do it "right." That would be the death of his vision and could not be further from his way of working. Having spent years with him as assistant in classes and rehearsals and as dancer, one of my strongest convictions is that José created and recreated his works to breathe and remain in flux. He didn't want museum replicas, or perfectly embalmed dances without life and spontaneity for that brief moment that they were on stage. He disliked neatness, precision, academic, overstudied dances and dancing. I think he liked seeing chaos which would resolve into some contrasting beautiful form. Often subsequent settings have tried to organize and neaten up areas that he meant to be dissonant precisely for the great sense of relief when a beautiful consonant form would appear.

There are instances in which I have done some mixing of different versions which seems to do justice to the context and allow some beautiful material to float back to the surface. Of course my judgment jumps in here. I have to be present as a mind, memory, experience and recreator, in order to even make the first move. I try to take the cues from José. From the films I see what he changed and try to understand why. In considering the two film versions of The Exiles, for instance, I recognize choreographic reasons for changes made by José beyond those of personal artistry and body form. There were spatial incongruities in the version with Ruth Currier. At times the movement phrases become unnecessarily convoluted and block the flow of the dance's kinesthetic and spatial logic. He was the dancer and could not provide the external perspective. The spatial logic of the version with Louis Falco and myself is stronger. In reconstructing this dance I feel we need to let it evolve further as José would have. Keeping that clarity of the spatial design and recapturing some of the spontaneity of the movement phrases from the previous version enriches the fabric of the whole.

For most of the works we have only the rawest of work films: some with no sound; some with such poor light that much of the detail is obscured; most made before the works were seasoned and matured. Often filmed in a space so small that there were changes made to accommodate. Some dances such as The Visitation (a trio with Limón, Hoving and Koner) were not filmed and are tragically lost. These films that existed were old and degraded when finally translated onto video. The process of remounting a work from film can be frustrating. Yet I

Suppliers:

All resources mentioned in this issue of *The Limón Journal* are available through the José Limón Dance Foundation, phone 212-777-3353, fax 212-777-4764, <http://www.limon.org>

Or contact the following directly:

Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England,
phone 800-421-1561
Harwood Academic Publishers c/o PPT, Phone 800-326-8917
Video Artists International, phone 800-477-7146
Et Cetera Record Company, B.V. Voorstraat 5, 2964 AH
Groot-Amers, The Netherlands
Princeton Book Company, phone 800-220-7149

find the process of understanding and bringing new life to these works is one of endless fascination.

One of the early Moor's Pavane films made in postage stamp space, however, holds some wonderful clues to bringing out the spatial tensions. The close-ups and angle shots helped me understand how José had focused the viewer's eye by the placement or subtle movement of the inactive dancer(s) on stage. I was more aware of the way in which he shifted attention by contrary stage movement, blurring some dancer(s) to bring others into focus. Another boon from the cramped space of filming was, as Lucas Hoving reports, that José made a crucial change in the last scene in order to fit both Koner and Hoving in the frame with himself (Othello) as he pursues Jones (Desdemona) to kill her. Hoving and Koner slowly and symmetrically move from upstage to downstage on an inward angle like a trap closing on the pursued. The previous version had Hoving upstage right and Koner already downstage left in a pose which drained attention from the climactic moments of the piece. José saw how effective the new device was and changed it.

"What would José think of my reworking of his choreography?" I have to answer myself that he would like seeing the beauty of his works being given the great care and devotion, intelligence and artistry that I have seen in the dancers who have chosen to perform his work. The enthusiasm with which these artists bring his work to the stage and with which his work is now being accepted have allowed him to transcend his time. His work is modern, vital now as when he conceived it. I think he wouldn't care that it be done as it was but would see that it is being recreated with the driving force of life itself, with the supreme energy, passion, spirit and humanity that he envisioned and with which he endowed his work. ❖



JOSÉ LIMÓN AND BETTY JONES IN THE MOOR'S PAVANE, PHOTO BY WALTER STRATE