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Learning from Limón

As one documentary film shows, being Mexican-American is part of the story of this modern dance legend

by Andrea Ordaz

The life of American modern dance pioneer José Limón is to be valued as a true American story. But oftentimes, I've found that José Limón's ethnic ties to Mexico aren't widely discussed in the Northern American modern dance world. I believe his ethnic identity is somewhat what glazed over because, during this lifetime (1908-1972), assimilation was often the goal for immigrants to the U.S., given the amount of oppression experienced by many of them.

The 2001 documentary titled *José Limón: A Life Beyond Words* highlights Limón's experience as a Mexican immigrant assimilating in America through some of the toughest historic moments in the 20th century. You get the chance to learn more about Limón's legacy and personal life, full of vulnerability and true humanness. The relationship between his corporeal experiences and his dance relates to the widely discussed notion of the mind and body's coexistence. In the first chapter of *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetic*, Sondra Horton Fraleigh says, "there are obvious connections between existential thought, the body, dance, and art in general, since they are founded in lived and experiential values." This same idea is echoed in the film when José Limón says, "All dance, all choreography is autobiographical, whether or not one knows it, likes it, or intends it."

The sensibility in José Limón's choreography and performances speaks to the complexities of human life as experienced through the body of a Mexican-American. Dance and life are tightly woven together, and for Limón, I think his Mexican aesthetic was translucent in American culture during a racialized climate in the era after the Mexican Revolution, The Great Depression, and World War II. Carla Maxwell, former dancer and now the Legacy Director with the Limón Company, writes that Limón was not only "battling for respect in the modern dance" with his choreography, but he seemed to "wrestle with his own personal demons."¹

When I think of Jose Limón and his journey as a modern dance pioneer during his time, I think about how, as a Mexican immigrant, he must have had to put his "Mexican-ness" aside to carry out the promised idea of opportunity and success from (white) America. But I wonder, is the promise of freedom ever fulfilled for all Americans? Or do we settle for limited freedom the way dancers sometimes do when they have to master technique and follow choreography? My mind goes again to Fraleigh's concepts when she describes the "free yet limited body."

I also think about how these ideas are not discussed in today's dance culture. Limón is evidently recognized as a famous dance figure, yet we rarely hear about his Mexican roots, which I think can make his legacy richer. As a Mexican-American female post-modern dance artist, I have many questions about the life Limón lived. I think about how perhaps Limón fought hard to proclaim his Mexican-ness, but only had the chance to do so in isolated moments, sharing only slivers of his identity with (white) America. Lucas Hoving, an original member of the José Limón Dance Company, who also appears in the film, states that "Limón was Mexican because of family and religion, became a sophisticated American, but was always that Mexican guy."

¹ Maxwell, Carla. Forward. *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir*, by Jose Limon, Wesleyan U, 1998, pp. vii- viii

Limón's journey isn't much different than my own or any "Othered" person assimilating to a different culture.

Limón's work *Missa Brevis* (1958) explains this well, exploring themes of isolation in search of hope and faith through community. Yet oftentimes in the process of assimilation, an immigrant and generations thereafter tend to lose cultural ties to the motherland. Juanita Suarez, author of *Spectres of Dark : The Dance Making Manifesto of Latina/Chicana Choreographies*, calls this "cultural amnesia." However, I think José Limón recognized in Europe what he recognized in himself; the harsh realities of the perception of Mexican-Americans as foreigners and outsiders in the United States of America during and after the second world war. He understood the notion of being an "Other" on a daily basis, yet he humbly recognized that dance speaks from the human spirit first and connects to culture, history, and conflict later. He recognized an opportunity for "all" through personal sacrifice, so he constantly translated his experiences into dances about universal truths. This reality is apparent in many oppressed groups. I think José Limón's personal story as a Mexican-American should be included in modern dance history, because he left so much for us to unpack.

Ultimately, I think it's important to remember that José Limón spoke to the notion of universal truth through the body of a Mexican-American and in the film a close look into that life is referenced. Questions about identity come up that I think are very applicable to today's society. I don't have any concrete answers, but I wonder how José Limón might define himself today... I recommend watching *José Limón: A Life Beyond Words* because I think if you're a Mexican-American you will relate to the film, and if you're interested in identity you'll question the relationship between lived experience and dance. And for the dancer, importantly, you'll learn about modern dance through an historical lens, which in turn will teach empathetic movement.

Andrea Ordaz is a dancer and choreographer scheduled to graduate with her MFA in Dance from University of California, Irvine, in June 2019.