

Limón Dance Company: *The Traitor*

Friday, March 26

Grades 7–12

11 a.m.–12 p.m.

Curriculum Connections: American History, Contemporary Issues

National Standards for Dance: 1, 2, 3, 5, 7



photo by Beatriz Schiller

About the Program

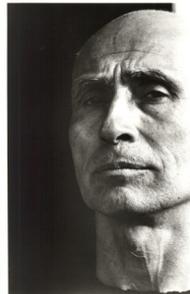
This program presents José Limón’s *The Traitor*, one of modern dance’s most significant works of the 1950s. *The Traitor* was Limón’s response to the McCarthy hearings and the climate of betrayal that haunted the arts and entertainment fields during this period. Against Gunther Schuller’s musical score of violence, passion, and tenderness, the tragedy of Judas and the theme of betrayal are portrayed in a detailed demonstration and explanation of the dancers’ movements followed by the full-length performance of Limón’s signature piece.

About the Company

The Limón Dance Company is renowned for its dramatic expression and technical mastery. Founded in 1946 by José Limón and Doris Humphrey, the dancers are now led by Carla Maxwell, who worked closely with Limón before becoming Artistic Director in 1978. The company pioneered the idea that it was possible to survive the death of its founder, setting an example for the entire dance field. Over the years, the company’s commitment to producing and presenting programs that balance classic works of American modern dance with commissions from contemporary choreographers has yielded a repertory of unparalleled breadth. The company is the living legacy of the movement technique and philosophy of theater developed by José Limón and his mentors, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, whose innovative works have been recognized as great masterworks of American dance. In addition, the company commissions new works and acquisitions from other master choreographers. The company has many accomplishments, including being the longest (63 years) continuously operating repertory contemporary dance company in America, the first company to tour under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State, and the first American modern dance company to perform in Europe.



photo by Beatriz Schiller



About José Limón

José Limón (Founder/Choreographer, 1908–1972) electrified the world with his dynamic masculine dancing and dramatic choreography. One of the 20th century’s most important and

influential dance makers, he spent his entire career pioneering a new art form and fighting for the recognition and establishment of the American Modern Dance. Born in Culiacán, Mexico in 1908, he moved to California in 1915, and in 1928 Limón came to New York and saw his first dance program. Of this performance, Limón said: “*What I saw simply and irrevocably changed my life. I saw the dance as a vision of ineffable power. A man could, with dignity and towering majesty, dance . . . as Michelangelo’s visions dance and as the music of Bach dances.*” Limón enrolled in the dance school of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman and, from 1930–1940, performed in works created by his teachers.

In 1946, with Doris Humphrey as Artistic Director, Limón formed his own company. Over the following 25 years, he established himself and his company as one of the major forces of 20th-century dance. Limón was a key faculty member in The Juilliard School’s Dance Division beginning in 1953 and continued choreographing until his death in 1972. Limón choreographed a total of 74 works, including *The Moor’s Pavane*, *Missa Brevis*, *There is a Time*, *The Traitor*, and *Psalm*. Limón’s autobiographical writings were edited by Lynn Garafola and published by Wesleyan University Press as *An Unfinished Memoir*.

The inspiration for Limón's *The Traitor* came out of the politics of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Turmoil swept the arts and entertainment industry in the 1940s and early 1950s as the House Un-American Activities committee (HUAC) began investigating the Hollywood film industry and other artists for alleged communist connections.

During this time, Limón felt himself drawn to the story of Judas Iscariot and the emotional landscape of the traitor. With this theme in mind, he developed the characters and actions of the dance – a traitor, the leader the traitor would betray, the devoted followers, a banquet, the moment of betrayal, the apprehension of the leader, the torment of the false friend, and the resolution. Limón writes: “As you can see, this was following closely the accounts in the New



photo by Beatriz Schiller

“I have great pity for these unhappy human beings, and for the anguish of spirit which they must experience and the torment in which they must live. And when I feel something very keenly, I have to make a dance about it.” – José Limón

Testament. But it was my intent to use all this only as it pertained to our own time.” The piece is danced by eight men – the Leader, the Traitor, and the six followers who also appear as officers of the law, executioners, and creatures who plague and torment the betrayer. Though *The Traitor* is informed by, and a response to, the political climate and story of Judas, Limón stressed that it is “first and foremost a dance, and a theatre piece. The important thing is, and should be, the movement. The idea is only the springboard, the pretext, for a dance.”*

Choreography by José Limón
Music by Gunther Schuller, Symphony for Brasses and Percussion
Staging and Direction by Clay Taliaferro
Costume Design by Pauline Lawrence Limón
Costume Consultation by Sarah Timberlake
Set by Paul Trautvetter
Lighting design by Steve Woods, executed by Joshua Rose

The Leader: Jonathan Fredrickson

His Followers (in order of appearance): Raphael Boumaila, Dante Puleio, Daniel Fetecua Soto, Ryan Mason, Ashley Lindsay, and John Beasant III.

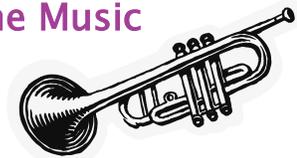
These dancers re-appear in the final scene as officers of the law, as executioners, or as creatures who plague and torment the betrayer.

The Traitor: Francisco Ruvalcaba

First performance: August 19, 1954, at the Palmer Auditorium, Connecticut College, New London, Connecticut, by the Limón Dance Company

This revival of *The Traitor* by José Limón was made possible by a National Endowment for the Arts American Masterpiece: Dance Initiative, administered by the New England Foundation for the Arts.

The Music



Gunther Schuller composed the *Symphony for Brass and Percussion* in 1950. The work highlights the expressive abilities of the brass family, defying musical stereotypes about the role of instruments such as the horn and trumpet. The piece includes four contrasting movements, each one designed to highlight a particular brass characteristic, including technical skill and expression.

* Limón's first-hand account of developing *The Traitor* is found in his 1955 article “Composing a Dance”: Limón, José. “Composing a Dance.” *The Juilliard Review*, Winter 1955. p. 17-23

Instructional Activities

Observe/Reflect

- ⇒ José Limón is known for his dynamic masculine dancing. During the piece, look for moves that illustrate the masculine nature of the piece. How does Limón express masculinity through movement?
- ⇒ Observe the characters of the Leader and the Traitor. How are their characters expressed through movement and choreography? What differences and similarities are there in the body language of the two characters?
- ⇒ The music is an essential component of the dance. How does Limón's choice of music affect the mood and movement of the dance?
- ⇒ The lighting, costumes, and scenery help complete the theatrical experience of the dance. How do these production elements affect your understanding of the piece? Do all the elements work together to support the movement and theme of the dance?



photo by Beatriz Schiller



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History/Research

- ⇒ Limón studied with Doris Humphrey, one of the first great modern dancers, who later helped to found the Limón Dance Company. Research the style of Doris Humphrey. How do you see her influence in Limón's work? How is their work different?
- ⇒ Research the history of the House Un-American Activities Committee and their investigations into the arts and entertainment community. Pay special attention to the use of the word traitor. Identify an individual working in arts and entertainment whose career was affected by McCarthyism and present your findings to the class.
- ⇒ Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was first presented in 1953, about a year and a half before the premier of *The Traitor*. Both pieces are responses to the political climate of the time and both have entered the canon of their respective art forms, but they are not the only performing arts pieces created during the time with a political influence. Research another, lesser known, performing arts piece of the early 1950s. Compare and contrast these works. What qualities have enabled *The Traitor* to stand the test of time? Why do you think the piece you selected never became as notable?

Create/Explore

- ⇒ To understand the process of planning, choreographing, and rehearsing a dance piece, pick an idea or theme you would like to explore through movement. Decide on the characters, story, or structure of the piece (not all dances have to tell a story). Then, select a piece of music and think of movements and choreography to express your theme or idea. Present your idea to the class – feel free to use movement, images, storyboards, or other methods to explain your idea.

Resources

Select Books:

Dunbar, June. *José Limón: The Artist Re-Viewed*. Routledge, 2002.

Lewis, Daniel. *The Illustrated Dance Technique of José Limón*. Princeton Book Company, 1999.

Limón, José. *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir*. Wesleyan, 2001.

Pollack, Barbara and Charles Humphrey Woodford. *Dance Is a Moment: A Portrait of José Limón in Words and Pictures*. Princeton Book Company, 1993.

Internet Resources:

limon.org

americandancefestival.org

Films/DVDs

José Limón - Three Modern Dance Classics (The Moor's Pavane/The Traitor/The Emperor Jones). Video Artists International, 1999.

Limón: A Life Beyond Words. Directed by Malachi Roth. Brooktrout Films, 2006