

## José Limón's "The Traitor"

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The film of José Limón's tensely dramatic dance work, "The Traitor," was shot at the American Dance Festival in 1955 by Helen Priest Rogers. It captures the work splendidly, preserving definitive performances by members of the original cast including Lucas Hoving as the leader and Limón as the traitor.

### Limón's Judas

Limón derived his dance from the story of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. However, he seems to have seen the Judas character in broader terms, as a symbol of torment--a symbol which was particularly relevant to the mid-1950s when the work was choreographed. Writing about "The Traitor" in Juilliard Review in early 1955, Limón noted that accusations, and confessions, of treason were rather common "on both sides of the titanic antagonism at the time: the purges in the Communist world and the hunts for revolutionary Communists in the west brought for confessions (and denials) of treason.

The confessions and self-justifications fascinated Limón: "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." He quotes approvingly a comment of V.S. Pritchett: "The truly symbolical figure of our time is the traitor or divided man--it is Judas."

But in some respects the biblical Judas is *not* similar to the political traitors of the 1950s. As portrayed in the Bible Judas was a doubter who seems simply to have sold out his leader for money. The traitors of the 1950s worked for what they considered to be higher loyalties--that is, they felt they were true patriots, working for the good of the people and for a better, ideal, way of life; they sought, at great personal risk, to bring down the political structure in order to usher in what they devoutly believed to be a superior governmental and social system.

However, Limón didn't see Judas as a simple mercenary. He saw him as an anguished, divided being: "Judas, I used to weep over. How could he do such a thing? I never hated him, as I was supposed to. I was only sorry for him, more than I can say." Accordingly, the source for Limón's Judas is found less in the Bible than in the characterization developed in a 1939 novel, The Nazarene, by the Jewish writer, Shalom Asch. In this book Asch re-tells the story of Jesus and the crucifixion in a manner, it seems, that made *both* Jewish *and* Christian theologians uncomfortable.

Judas is a central character in the novel and he is a wretched, torn human being who is fanatically, sacrificially loyal to Jesus' higher destiny, to the redemption. In the days before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion Judas observes, "the Messiah knows that the Lord will not abandon or shame him. But why does he delay the moment?" It is because "In order that the Messiah may

know all the pain of man, God created him of flesh and blood. He is one of us. Nay, more: he feels all pain more deeply than any one of us." Therefore Jesus hesitates, "for his soul is in dread." "But there is no other path to salvation, save through the pangs of the Messiah. Therefore we must help him to come to them."

Because of Jesus' delay, Judas begins to doubt: "Why does he not bring the redemption?...the worm of doubt has reached the roots of my faith....My soul is famished for the redemption."

Finally Judas resolves, though his treason, to *force* Jesus to confront his destiny--and at the same time Judas will deliver himself from doubt. In doing this Judas knows that he, himself, will be condemned even as Jesus brings the redemption to the world. And so, in a statement from Asch's novel that Limón quoted on the program for "The Traitor," Judas cries out, "See, I go down into the nethermost pit, in order that you may rise in the highest to God."

Building from the biblical story--by way of Shalom Asch--and keeping in mind contemporary parallels, Limón structured "The Traitor" around the Judas figure. He is at once part of the group and separate from it, at once the leader's accuser and his most desperately loyal subject. At the end it is the traitor's torment, self-accusation, and suicide that takes center stage.

### **The choreography**

Limón's "The Traitor" is set for eight men: the leader, the traitor, and six men representing the disciples. The costumes, by Pauline Lawrence, do little to differentiate the characters--each is dressed rather drably in shirt, sleeveless jacket, and loose pants. It is the choreography that supplies the characterization.

As the work opens, the disciples are gathering on stage for what Limón calls a "clandestine rendezvous." His picture of the disciples scarcely resembles the calm, noble image often depicted in Bible illustrations. He sees them as hunted men, as fanatics. As they enter one by one or in pairs they dart around the stage and stealthily peer into the darkness about them, fearful they have been followed, inspecting the faces of their fellow conspirators to make sure no spies are present.

The last of the group to enter is the traitor. Asch describes Judas as "a huddled, knotted figure" and Limón's traitor is tense, hunched, his head craning forward. He tries to join the others in their dance of gabbled unease, but he is distinctly separate from them, a misfit in this company of outcasts. They form a circle which breaks apart when he intrudes. He is shrugged off and they form another circle far away from him as he stands tensely in a corner.

Then to a calm passage in the music, all look expectantly toward an upstage corner and the leader enters. Limón's choreography for the leader is perhaps the single most remarkable aspect of the dance work (and it apparently was the most difficult to create--Lucas Hoving says Limón kept putting off choreographing this part of the work.) The leader, Limón says, should

"move in such a way as to appear not to touch the earth when he walked and he was to pacify and dominate the babble." But while the leader dominates the group, he is also dependent on it, needing its adoration and using it as a comfortable refuge from thoughts of his painful destiny.

While the traitor watches from afar, the followers form a corridor down which the leader progresses, tall, stately, authoritative. He makes a sharp gestural pronouncement and they react in instant awe and total acceptance. As he progresses across the stage, however, he seems less certain of himself and the followers dash forward to cluster in front of him in a tight, worshipful knot, giving him support.

As the second movement of the music begins, the traitor comes forward and directly confronts the leader. The followers fall away and much of the action for the next several minutes deals with themes suggested by Asch's account: the leader seems reluctant to confront his destiny and the traitor tries to approach him, pleads with him. Meanwhile the followers, ecstatic and unaware, furnish the leader with solace and uncritical devotion, giving him the strength to turn away from the traitor's urgent entreaties.

As the confrontation between Othello and Iago in Limón's "The Moor's Pavane" is filtered through a set of stately court dances, so the confrontation between Jesus and Judas in "The Traitor" is filtered, in this section, through what Limón calls "an ecstatic dance...a mystic rite, and an orgy." The followers "leap and whirl in frenzy...run wildly proclaiming their devotion." At one point the leader, his arms outstretched in a crucifixion pose, is carried by the traitor across the stage, but the followers come to relieve the traitor of his burden; they bear the leader off, set him down, and he joins them in a fraternal circle dance--although the circle has an opening in it which the traitor, hunched in the corner, refuses to close. Later the leader falls to his knees, his arms spread tentatively and the followers come devotedly to raise him up and he walks regally across their massed bodies.

Finally the traitor, rejected again and again, crumples in one corner as the leader is lifted high on the shoulders of the followers. Abruptly the leader falls from this dominating perch into the traitor's welcoming arms but then he turns again and is drawn, as if by a magnet, back to his position on his worshippers' shoulders. He is slowly borne off as the traitor falls to the floor in anguish.

The traitor's torment is expressed in a solo that opens the third movement. He is a "confused and twisted spirit," Limón writes, and in this solo we see "the awful dilemma of a man who loves so much that he must hate." The movements are heavy, turned in, trembling with tension. There is an elaborate mime passage that suggests money-counting, but he seems to turn away from that aspect in revulsion as he slowly exits.

The last part of the third movement is a "banquet," suggested by the Last Supper. The leader and his loyal followers enter and use a white sheet, held near the corners in various ways, to suggest the table. The use of this simple prop is most ingenious--its dimensions change as it is gathered and spread in different directions and at one point the leader seems to levitate behind it.

As before, the leader makes some abrupt gestural pronouncements and the followers react in uncritical acceptance. He blesses them individually in great solemnity and there is the suggestion of the breaking of bread or the sharing of wine. Toward the end the leader slowly bows his head down onto the table in apparent anguish, but he recovers, and the movement ends in great calm and communal serenity.

This mood is brutally shattered as the traitor enters and, as the last movement of the music begins, throws himself across the table at the leader. The leader pushes him back and the followers devolve into a squabbling, confused rabble. They are finally aware, it seems, that the end is near and they become frightened and contentious, hauling themselves from the stage in bewilderment and fitful panic.

The leader stands deserted in the center of the stage, the sheet that had formed the table crumpled at his feet. With a deranged laugh the traitor lunges toward the leader, wraps one arm around the leader's head and points with the other to the sheet on the floor--the sheet has now become a symbol of the leader's destiny and the traitor demands the leader wrap himself in it and fulfill his mission. But the leader turns away. The traitor gathers the sheet up and offers it urgently. The leader finally takes the cloth reluctantly, but then drops it to the floor and performs an odd little stammering dance in which he alternately holds his hands out despairingly and then brings them in to cover his face.

Finally, however, the leader becomes resigned and he stops center stage, his arms spread out to the side from his body. Seizing this opportunity, the traitor scoops up the sheet and elaborately drapes it around the leader in a manner that suggests a biblical robe. The he places his hands, the fingers splayed, behind and above the leader's head, suggesting a halo.

The leader stands alone now, his head bowed slightly, and the traitor runs wild, ecstatic circles around him as six men enter. In this last, phantasmagoric portion of the work, these men variously represent, according to Limón's program note, "officers of the law," "executioners," and "creatures who plague and torment the betrayer."

There is a moment of calm. And then the traitor deliberately drags himself to the leader, pointing at him, kissing him on the cheek, and then collapsing wretchedly at his feet. Two men from the group immediately stride forward and bind the leader's hands by twisting the ends of his robe around his hands. As they begin to lead him off, the other four men rush toward the traitor, twisting him about and throwing him over backward. They seem to crucify him upside down--thus the traitor becomes tormented in his mind by the cruel death that will be visited upon his victim. Then, as he watches, the six men mime the torture of the leader and, splaying their fingers, seem to crown him with thorns.

The six men now turn on the traitor--and seem almost to tear him apart. He runs desperately toward the leader for the last time, but the men block his path, cutting him off forever from the redemption, and he collapses to the floor.

Three of the men slowly raise the leader, now delivered from his torment, and begin to carry him off regally. As they do so, the other three rush to the traitor with a rope; he wraps the rope around his neck and hangs himself as they raise him off the ground, a wretched reflection of the pose of the leader who is slowly being carried off in exaltation.

### **The music**

José Limón's "The Traitor" is set to Gunther Schuller's brilliant "Symphony for Brass and Percussion" which was composed in 1949 and 1950, some four years before the dance was choreographed.

Schuller's purpose in composing the work was partly didactic: he wanted to write music--and a symphony at that--which avoided the clichés and stereotypes usually associated with brass instruments: there are no fanfares and no heroic calls for hunting horns.

Limón's choreography fits the music remarkably well. He may have been initially attracted to the piece because brasses are sometimes seen to be "masculine" instruments and he was setting about to create his first all-male dance work. But the fit of music dance is much more profound than that. It almost seems as if the music were specifically composed for Limón's dance. Schuller writes of the music that "unity is maintained by a line of increasing inner intensity...that reaches its peak in the last movement." It's a comment that could apply equally well to Limón's dance work.

The musical performance on the film is, of course, the same taped performance that was being used when the dancers made the film in 1955. The music is capably performed, but the film should not be used as the only way of experiencing the music. Better performances of Schuller's fine work are available on commercial recordings.

### **History of the film**

Each summer from 1955 to 1962, Helen Priest Rogers traveled to the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College to make black and white record films of some of the major dance works presented there. Perched in the front row of the Palmer Auditorium balcony during performances, rehearsals, or special filming sessions, she recorded works by Doris Humphrey, José Limón, Paul Taylor, Anna Sokolow, Lucas Hoving, Merce Cunningham, Helen Tamiris, and others. Because money was limited, the films were all shot without sound.

The visual quality of her films varies, depending mostly on how well lit the stage was when the film was made. Those films shot with performance lighting tend to be overly dark, sometimes to the point of utter inscrutability; but most of the films are quite legible, and many of them preserve definitive performances of major choreographic works. In quite a few cases, in fact, these modestly produced films are just about our only remaining record of dance works that appear to have been at, or near, the masterpiece level--works like Humphrey's "Ruins and Visions" and "Dance Overture", or Limón's "Scherzo" and "Mazurkas," or Cunningham's

"Crises."

When I first had the opportunity to look carefully at these films during the summer of 1976, I was particularly struck by a film made in 1955 of Limón's "The Traitor," a work commissioned by the American Dance Festival and premiered there in 1954. The film captures the work superbly: The lens chosen was wide enough to take in the action, but close enough to capture considerable detail. And above all, the performances by members of the original cast, including Lucas Hoving as the leader and Limón as the traitor, were utterly masterful.

I set about trying to see if it would be possible synchronize the appropriate music to this historic film and then to put the resulting sound film into general distribution. The requisite permissions were obtained and funding was received from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project has now been successfully completed (it took a while), and the film, with sound and shiny new titles, was premiered last summer at the American Dance Festival under the approving eye of Lucas Hoving. It is now available for rental and purchase.

The task of matching sound to picture was rather complex and involved a considerable amount of trial and error. It was necessary, first of all, to find the exact recording used when the film was made. Various archives yielded four different recordings of the music, Gunther Schuller's "Symphony for Brass and Percussion," that might have been used in 1955. Each of these had to be matched with the film to see which was the right one.

Once the right recording was found, efforts at precise synchronization could be made. It was not possible simply to lay the sound recording onto the film, because there were subtle but significant speed variations in Rogers's camera when she recorded the work and because the tape recorder that was producing the music also probably varied a bit in speed.

Accordingly, many tests had to be performed before satisfactory synchronization could be obtained. These were conducted under the direction of virtuoso sound technician Neelon Crawford. Our chief dance consultant was Bill Cratty of the present Limón company, who has danced in the work and who helped mount it for the company last fall. Cratty brought to the project not only his deep familiarity with the work but also, from the Limón archives, a sound film of the work that had been shot for television around the time of Rogers's film.

The television film did not show the choreography nearly as well as Rogers's film but it was, of course, enormously helpful in establishing sync. Even then there were problems, however, because the television film was not danced to the same recording of the Schiller music as the Rogers film and because the precise way the dancers relate to the music will vary slightly from performance to performance, particularly when one of the performances is on a stage and the other takes place in the unfamiliar confines of a television studio.

As it happens, music and dance relate to each other in various ways in "The Traitor." There are some steps for which there are definite musical cues, while in other portions of the dance the performers are relatively free to vary tempos. The process of synchronization, then

involved precisely matching music and dance where there were definite cues and then shaping and re-shaping the music to fit the space between the cues so the match would make sense both musically and choreographically.

At the first pass, hardly anything fit right and Crawford's final sound track is a rather elaborate mixture. The music, or parts of it, was re-recorded several times at slightly different speeds--but not at speeds so different that the music's pitch would noticeably vary. Then different parts of different sound recordings were used in various portions of the film. Finally, to make everything match snugly, Crawford occasionally pinched or elongated sounds by a fraction of a second, or expanded or contracted silences between movements.

The resulting sound film does do justice, I feel, both to Schuller's music and to Limón's choreography. The relation of music to dance on this film probably should not be taken as definitive, but the film does approximate quite closely the choreographer's intentions.

Most importantly, the availability of this sound film allows contemporary audiences to experience a definitive performance of this remarkable dance work. And perhaps the film can stand as a kind of tribute to the efforts of Helen Priest Rogers who, decades ago, sought to preserve the best that modern dance choreographers were then creating.