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DANCE REVIEW | NEW YORK THEATER BALLET

## Restoring Luster to Two 20th-Century Dance Legends

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This year brings the centenaries of the births of two choreographers who loomed large in New York in the middle of the last century: José Limón, who died in 1972, and Antony Tudor, who died in 1987. Theirs are once-big names whose legacies seem to be shrinking. Plenty of today's dancegoers have never seen a single work by either. Special thanks, then, to the enterprising New York Theater Ballet last weekend for giving New York what I believe are the year's first staged revivals of either man's work.

Limón's "Mazurkas" — or rather, a suite that included all but four dances from that 1958 piece — is just the kind of revival that for many of us not only extends our idea of Limón but also repositions him within our view of dance history. These mazurkas are danced to Chopin; Limón choreographed them after his company had enjoyed huge success in Poland, where he had visited the home of Chopin's youth. Limón gave real value to the dance details of the mazurka while accentuating them with a certain rigor (itself charming) that we today recognize as an old-style modern-dance accent.

Chopin has prompted choreography from [Isadora Duncan](#) through to [Mark Morris](#). And of the piano mazurkas played here (by Ferdy Tumakaka), some are familiar from two of the most famous Chopin ballets: Michel Fokine's "Sylphides" and [Jerome Robbins](#)'s "Dances at a Gathering." Lo and behold here, in Limón's "Mazurkas," the very gesture that is the most famous single moment in Robbins's subsequent "Dances": a man slowly placing the palm of his hand on the (presumably Polish) ground. Since Robbins was good at watching a range of other choreographers' work, we can't help guessing he saw Limón's dance and, magpielike, stored it up for further use.

Three Tudor works followed. "Little Improvisations" dates from 1953, when Tudor was established in the United States; he created it at Jacob's Pillow. This male-female duet, to Schumann, employs simple props like a stool and a white shawl. The improvisations are the spontaneous-seeming games or devices the two people (here Rie Ogura and Mitchell Kilby) pursue, by turns, with each other, and whereby they pass through a great many different moods. Light though the overall tone of this duet is, it seems to take us through whole days and nights in the course of an adult relationship: very fresh and touching.

The other two derive from Tudor's first decade as a choreographer, the 1930s, when he was working in his native London. The program ended with "Judgment of Paris" (1938), a funny-bitter vignette to piano versions of well-known [Kurt Weill](#) songs about three aging floozies — separately armed with a fan, a hoop and a feather boa — taking weary turns to entertain a drunken customer who's falling asleep. (Tudor's female trio, which Robbins would often have seen, may have prompted another connection: the three "You Gotta Have a Gimmick" strippers in the 1959 musical "Gypsy," which Robbins choreographed and directed.)

The deep cynicism of "Judgment" — itself surely a riposte to another "Judgment of Paris," along more traditional lines, presented only one month earlier in London by [Frederick Ashton](#) — was handled by Tudor with dry

economy. And he was surely drawing on a rich tradition of the British music hall. As Minerva, Diana Byer, the New York Theater Ballet's artistic director, brought off the tart's creakiness with the best kind of manufactured roguishness.

The program's centerpiece was "Jardin aux Lilas" (1936), the most poetically eloquent ballet piece of Tudor's career. This is the fourth production of this work I have seen in 31 years, and it fascinates me that it seems different each time. Though the central story about Caroline, Her Lover, the Man She Must Marry and an Episode in His Past does not change, its wealth of dramatic detail always adds up to a new sum.

The company performed with the strict modernist objectivity that suits "Jardin" best. The movement says everything, the faces as little as possible. Often as the characters rush into a tableau or a striking position and then remain there motionless for more than a moment, Tudor creates the most powerful kind of paradox. They're not moving, but the music — Chausson's late-Romantic "Poème" for solo violin and orchestra, here on tape — surges on like the inner emotion they cannot show.

On Friday night, as Caroline (Elena Zahlmann), quietly, briefly placed a hand on one side of her groin, I recognized the source of the gesture that [Christopher Wheeldon](#) had given Sara Mearns in the premiere of his "Rococo Variations" only the night before at [New York City Ballet](#). With Mr. Wheeldon the gesture come out of nowhere and leads nowhere (even when it comes around a second time), but with Tudor it has the force of a revelation, like a key moment in a Bergman movie.

Touching the most intimate area of her body, in this context, is Caroline's passing hint of private trauma. I hope that the New York Theater Ballet can give us more Tudor and Limón before 2008 is out, but I would be happy to see this same program again.

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