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DANCE AS DECOLONIAL AND PARTNERSHIP PRAXIS
José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*, a ballet reworking of Shakespeare's *Othello*

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Abstract – Drawing from the decolonial perspective (Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2012; Mignolo, Walsh 2018) and the biocultural partnership-dominator model propounded by the anthropologist and social activist Riane Eisler (1987; Eisler, Fry 2019), this essay explores *The Moor's Pavane* (1949), one of the most successful dance adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* by the Mexican-American emigree, dancer and choreographer José Limón (1908-1972). In this paper I will draw a parallel between the Bard's text and Limón's dance composition to show how textual and embodied forms can merge and become a perfect medium for the displaying of all nuances in human 'nature', desires, and relations. In the world of ballet, the performance was revolutionary because it presented for the first time Limón's original technique, a complex re-working of Humphrey and Weidman's practices and a mixture of different dance-styles and tempos. The Pavane, a rigidly fixed court dance performed in Northern Italy around the Renaissance period, becomes the means through which Limón portrays the changing of order and stability of Shakespeare's plot, so as to debunk the hypocrisy of Elizabethan society and embody Othello's falling into Iago's trap. In my analysis, I will explore how Limón transposed and decolonised the Shakespearean tragedy through highly innovative *fall-recovery* movements, iconic gestures, and precise geometrical patterns. I will focus in particular on Limón's choice to reduce the intricate plot to a four-hand partnership dance between two different and yet parallel couples, Othello-Desdemona and Emilia-Iago. The aim of my analysis is to show how Limón slowly breaks up the Pavane's immutable tempo in order to provide a rhythmical crescendo of movements that express the tensions, disillusionment and final choices of the main protagonists.

Keywords: Shakespeare and dance; *Othello*; José Limón; decolonial studies; partnership studies.

1. Reading Shakespeare through the art of ballet: modern dance as decolonial and partnership *praxis* or action for transformation

This essay presents *The Moor's Pavane*, one of the most acclaimed dance-adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* by Mexican-American emigree, performer and choreographer José Limón. The ballet is analysed in a twofold perspective. First, through the "decolonial" lens, a theoretical framework propounded by Latin American scholars such as Quijano (2007), Mignolo (2003, 2010, 2011a, 2012), and Lugones (2008, 2010), especially in Limón's attempt to find new and alternative ways of reading and interpreting a canonical text from an *Other*[1] and anti-colonial point of view; and second, through the "partnership approach", a methodology proposed by the Jewish-American anthropologist and social activist Riane Eisler (1988, 1995, 2002, 2019), who recognised in the power of creative imagination an essential turning force for a "cultural transformation" (Eisler 1988, p. xvii)

[1] In this essay I rely on the concept of *Other* to designate other spaces of representation, meaning utopian contexts where a 'different' reality is possible. This assumption is drawn from Michel Foucault's notion of *heterotopia*, meaning the possibility of new and Other realities or spaces. Please see: Foucault, Miskowiec 1986, pp. 22-27.

which would dismantle a centuries-long history of patriarchal domination to be replaced by a more equitable and gender-balanced realisation of life.

In the history of dance (Testa 1988), stage producers and choreographers have largely drawn upon the Bard's world in order to deal with existential truths and human dilemmas, passions and desires, virtues and faults. Shakespeare has been one of the most prominent sources of inspiration for the transposition into movements and embodied gestures of some of the most praised ballet adaptations, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dreams* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (Wharton 2005). Indeed, as McCulloch and Shaw point out in their Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Dance*, "Shakespeare's relationship with dance is long-standing and extraordinarily varied" (McCulloch, Shaw 2019, p. 2). Dance and corporeal or embodied theatre in general are thus interesting platforms for challenging representations, unexpected experimentations, and transgressive outputs. In this sense, the arts and their creative expressions are powerful means in the path towards decolonisation for "[decoloniality] is a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice and praxis" (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, p. 5).

The shift from traditional or canonical classical dance to modern and later contemporary movement and technique may be read as a challenging turn similar to those revolutionary innovations (see for instance the art of the Avant-Gardes of the beginning of the twentieth century) that altered and reformed Western 'aesthetics' in order to embrace a freer and more unconventional type of artistic manifestation. In this sense, modern dance brought performers and ballerinas back to the floor, thus discontinuing the longstanding search for immortality and sublimation through the use of the *pointe shoe*, in order to allow them to re-discover their true self, or sense of humanity and existence. It comes as no surprise that the first attempts towards an-other type of dance began first in the *margins*, namely those territories which were located far from the Western centre of domination. This is the case for seminal work of performers and choreographers such as Martha Graham, Mary Wigman and José Limón. Their ground-breaking work dismantled the premises of rigidly fixed patterns and embodied forms – typical of classical ballet – in order to propose a decolonial praxis that would re-work structures, ontologies and paradigms, with the final aim of displaying Other possibilities, sensibilities, and representations.

In a similar way, Mignolo and Walsh describe the ultimate aim of decoloniality:

> It is in the form, in the postures, processes, and practices that disrupt, transgress, intervene and in-surge in, and that mobilize, propose, provoke, activate, and construct an otherwise, that decoloniality is signified and given substance, meaning, and form. (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, p. 34)

The Moor's Pavane is a decolonial attempt to read Shakespeare's *Othello* from an original point of view and simultaneously introduce Limón's personal history as a 'different' artist or outcast in the 1950s North America. In this respect, the performance has been read by dance critics (Testa 1988) as an act of liberation and social transformation, a felicitous attempt to show a more inclusive and comprehensive type of performance. The key to success was also determined by Limón's own interpretation as the main character of Othello, a decolonising reading of the Moor that much had in common with his own identity.

Born in Mexico in 1908, José Limón moved to the United States when he was a young boy, since his family decided to flee their country because of the unstable situation determined by the Mexican class revolution of those years. Limón was a light skinned

child, and soon became aware that he had to come into terms with his divided identity, the love for his Mexican heritage and the need to adhere to the white American dominator system of life. To escape this hierarchical reality, Limón soon devoted himself to the arts. He trained first as a painter and then moved to New York, where he finally discovered and fell in love with the world of dance[2]. In the city, he was lucky to encounter Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, two pioneering modern dance innovators who introduced him to the world of spontaneous and ground-based 'natural' movement. As a basis of their technique the pair focussed on what they termed *fall* and *recovery* as antithetical principles to those of classical ballet, which instead relied on concepts such as stability, elegance and lightness[3]. After becoming one of the most celebrated and admired modern dance performers in America, in 1946 Limón founded his own company, creating a legacy that still exists today under the direction of Dante Puleio[4].

Amongst Limón's first productions, *The Moor's Pavane* remains his masterpiece and dance manifesto. Indeed, the work presented Limón's original and revolutionary praxis, which soon developed and detached from Humphrey-Weidman's *falls* and *recoveries* to include more elaborated concepts such as *balance* and *unbalance*, and *swing* and *sway*[5]. The production presented also Limón's thought-provoking and decolonising dramaturgy, which tended to favour existential dilemmas and texts, as much as re-reading of 'normative' couples, such as those of Judas and Christ or Adam and Eve[6].

In this essay, I focus on three salient features of Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*, analysing three extracts from the choreography to show the implicit interrelations between the Bard's textual source and Limón's transposition. I intend to demonstrate how the Mexican-American choreographer mediated between his revolutionary and imaginative forms of movements and the major themes addressed in the play. First, I look at the decolonial conception and adaptation of the dance so as to explain the presence of only four of the main characters from the story. In this section, I also examine Limón's choice to frame the choreography within the confines of a very simple Renaissance court dance, the Pavane. Second, I examine the beginning and final sections of the performance, in order to emphasise the crescendo of tensions expressed in the dancers' movements and Shakespeare's narrative. Indeed, Othello falls slowly into Iago's trap in a rhythmical climax that forces him into taking out his darkest and yet most vulnerable 'natural'

[2] In her review of Lynn Garafola's book titled *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir,* Doris Hering explains: "When José Limón, at twenty, was ready to leave the family home, which had been moved from Mexico to Los Angeles, he had a strange baggage. It consisted of an unsurmountable hostility towards his father that took years to resolve, a shaky plan to become a painter, and a vastly diminished affection for the Catholic Church. He was also penniless. After his arrival in New York City, a concert by the Viennese dancer Harlad Kreutzberg hit him with the thunderbolt of becoming a dancer, instead of a painter". (Hering 2001, p. 124)

[3] Classical dance aspires to reach infinite and intangible worlds in which dancers express an incorporeal state of 'lightness'. Apart from rare movements that stretch out towards the floor, ballerinas wear *pointe shoes* so as to convey the idea of uplifting towards another dimension. After World War II, in America an important number of dance innovators started to deconstruct the premises of classical ballet in order to conceive a more liberated movement that was based on floor work.

[4] https://www.limon.nyc (22.12.2021).

[5] Please see: Sergio Lo Gatto's essay titled *La Tragedia di Otello tra drammaturgia e invenzione coreografica*. https://www.academia.edu/8601052/Otello_tra_drammaturgia_e_invenzione_coreografica (22.12.2021).

[6] As Jill Johnston explains: "Limon emerged from the Humphrey-Weidman company with a unique style of movement that was fluid, weighted, aggressive and literal. […] Limon's image of himself derives from tragi-heroic visions of grandeur as he located in the baroque, the classical tragedies, the Bible and his own Mexican heritage, which combines the Conquistador and the Indian underdog". (Johnston 1976, p. 154)

emotions. Third, I focus on the fifth character of the production – and of the play, the handkerchief, which becomes both the symbol of betrayal and the reason for Othello's final defeat.

2. A concise partnership adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*

Limón conceives his reworking of *Othello* as a very structured and intimate court dance. In this sense, he draws inspiration from the Pavane, a Renaissance formal ceremony or ball from Italy which was performed by nobles and courtiers who wished to enter, or reinforce their position within, the higher ranks of society. As Hirota explains, the Pavane "derives its name from the Latin pāuō meaning 'peacock'" (Hirota 2002, p. 74). Indeed, Limón's dancers are acting as if they were nobles and proud winged animals. Moreover, this specific form of dance allows him to introduce the theme of appearance *versus* reality or false gaze, just as if his characters were playing a theatre within theatre, in which truths are concealed under the surface of a seemingly perfect "order"[7].

The Pavane was usually performed in couples because of its rhythmical "duple time" (Hirota 2002, p. 74) characterised by repetitive short steps[8]. Therefore, Limón decides to reduce Shakespeare's cast to include only four protagonists which he divides into two pairs: Othello and Desdemona – Iago and Emilia. This is emphasised also in Limón's decolonising choice of subtitling his adaptation *Variations on the Theme of Othello*. Working in this direction, the naming of his protagonists reflects the intention to focus on the dancers' internal characterisation. Apart from the Moor, in fact, the other characters listed in the production are "His friend", "His friend's wife" and "The Moor's wife". This apparent oversimplified reduction foregrounds Limón's "partnership" choice to attribute equal importance to the male-female presence and dancing expression within the choreography. In decolonising the misogynist depiction that pervades Shakespeare's description of female characters, Limón's dance brings to the fore the power of gender-balanced and courteous exchanges. Even though most of these egalitarian passages will later result in a well-known downfall, Limón was still able to portray an unpredictable narrative of flowing and peaceful interrelations, which are certainly connected with Eisler's notion of "gylany", a neologism meant to overcome persisting gender imbalances:

> *Gy* derives from the Greek root word *gyne*, or 'woman'. *An* derives from *andros*, or 'man'. The letter *l* between the two has a double meaning. In English, it stands for the *linking* of both halves of humanity, rather than, as in androcracy, their ranking. In Greek, it derives from the verb *lyein* or *lyo*, which in turn has a double meaning: to solve or resolve (as in ana*ly*sis) and to dissolve or set free (as in cata*ly*sis). In this sense, the letter *l* stands for the resolution of our problems through the freeing of both halves of humanity from the stultifying and distorting

[7] In his fundamental study on Elizabethan society and world picture, Tillyard explains how "the [idea of] order [meant] more than political order, or, if political, was always a part of a larger cosmic order. […] The Elizabethans saw this single order under three aspects: a chain, a set of correspondences, and a dance". Moreover, Tillyard adds: "If the Elizabethans believed in an ideal order animating earthly order, they were terrified lest it should be upset, and appalled by the visible tokens of disorder that suggested its upsetting. They were obsessed by the fear of chaos and the fact of mutability". (Tillyard 1963, pp. 7-26)

[8] As Hirota explains: "Pavane is originally a stately court dance in simple duple time; especially popular in Italy, France and Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries. […] The Pavane never became much more than a simple walking, with slight variations. It was danced in a slow tempo, by one couple or many couples". (Hirota 2002, p. 74)

> rigidity or roles imposed by the domination hierarchies inherent in androcratic systems. (Eisler 1988, p. 105)

In this sense, the "partnership perspective" is focal to understanding the corrosive processes that bring the characters back to their painful system of domination. Indeed, the choreography is fruitful to the plot, with Iago's slow and intricate corruption of Othello's integrity and reason. Moreover, the breaking of bonds and relationships orchestrated by Shakespeare's Iago are also mirrored in the deconstruction of the Pavane's pace. A similar crescendo of tones, rhythms and exchanges occurs in both the text and within the choreography, as I will demonstrate on the following analysis of the performance.

Figure 1
The première of *The Moor's Pavane* (1949) featured José Limón's in the role of "The Moor" (Othello); Betty Jones as "The Moor's wife" (Desdemona); Lucas Hoving as "His friend" (Iago) and Pauline Koner as "His friend's wife" (Emilia). N.d., *Shakespeare's Othello in music*. https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/latest/shakespeares-othello-music/otello-verdi-mario-del-monaco/ (22.12.21)

Through *The Moor's Pavane*, Limón wanted to emphasise not only his adherence to modern dance technique and revolution, but also the need to acknowledge his mixed heritage and foreground the torments and uncertainties of the human soul in general. In this sense, Shakespeare's Othello fails to accept the *authenticity* of his true self, which is evident in the caring relations he has built with those who truly love him, and allows himself to be dragged into the darkest sides of his persona[9]. This becomes clear in his own self questioning in Act III, when he starts believing Iago's lies:

[9] In his reading of Shakespeare's *Othello*, Terry Eagleton suggests: "Othello starts off with a wholly 'imaginary' relation to reality: his rotund, mouth-filling rhetoric signifies a delusory completeness of being, in which the whole world becomes a signified obediently reflecting back the imperious signifier of the self. […] From this deceptively secure standpoint, Othello is then pitched violently into the 'symbolic order' of desire, where signifier and signified never quite coincide. The problem, then, is how to recognize

OTHELLO
This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,
Of human dealing: If I do prove her haggard,
[…]
I'ld whistle her off, and let her down the wind,
To prey at fortune. Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd
Into the vale of years - yet that's not much -
She's gone, I am abus'd, and my relief
Must be to loathe her.
(*Othello*, III, iii, 262-272)[10]

Limón's choice to shorten the tragedy into a two couples' gathering or event is therefore explained as an effort to delve into the theme of the *double*. From a choreographic point of view, Iago and Emilia's duets and movements are far more fluid and sensuous than Othello and Desdemona's static and almost incorporeal *pas de deux*. At the same time, the four protagonists are engaged in an overwhelming partnership continuum of mirroring references that bring to the fore their analogies rather than differences. Othello and Iago are very similar to one another, especially in their temperament. They are both proud and strong, and would do anything to achieve their goals. Emilia and Desdemona are also each the image of the other, but they differ from their male counterparts in the ways they act, behave, and also think about their relationships[11].

Being one of the major features of Limón's adaptation, the theme of the *double* is also very much present in Shakespeare's text already from the beginning when Iago states:

[…] others there are,
Who, trimm'd in forms, and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
And throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by'em, and when they have lin'd their coats,
Do themselves homage, those fellows have some soul,
And such a one do I profess myself, … for sir,
It is as sure as you are Roderigo,
Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:
In following him, I follow but myself.
[…]
I am not what I am.
(*Othello*, I, i, 49-65)

[…] that signs and illusions are structural to reality – that all experience […] has an inescapable dimension of fantasy and mystification". (Eagleton 1986, pp. 69-70)

[10] Shakespeare (2018), *Othello*. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

[11] In Limón's *The Moor's Pavane* the performers' colourful costumes are associated with their temperament and psychological development. As Carla Maxwell, former director of the Limon's dance company, suggests: "The Moor [wears] a deep burgundy costume, [the] colour of passion, strength [and] nobility. Desdemona [wears] a white dress, symbolising purity [and] translucence, [and] there is nothing duplicitous about her […]. Iago is in a kind of slimy gold and black [costume], like a snake, [and] he has these mixed colours, and his wife is in a burnt orange colour which is the colour of flame". See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rWVzMwRCD8&t=2161s (22.12.2021).

A final characteristic connecting text and choreography concerns the structure and choice of environment or setting. Shakespeare's *Othello* is mostly set in obscure and hidden spaces or locked rooms where concealed thoughts and relationships can occur. Similarly, Limón stages his performance in an enclosed and intimate space that looks like a temple. In this way, the dancers are fully absorbed by their intertwining and treacherous exchanges which will eventually lead them to be torn by tensions, fears and doubts. Taking the dance outside the comforts of theatre is in itself an act of insurgence or "disobedience" (Mignolo 2011b), or better, a way to re-think the borders of representation. It is a "decolonial" attempt in the path towards "learning to unlearn", to use the words of Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012). In this regard, the dancing characters/performers are isolated from the rest of society/audience, in a sort of undetermined and precarious cosmos that truly puts into question their assumed certainties. For Limón, re-establishing the fourth wall of life-stage does not mean to reduce his performance to a mere aesthetic exercise, but rather to fully immerse both dancers and spectators in the dynamics and complexities of Shakespeare's tragedy. Yet, this is also a way to de-construct and re-think anew the premises of canonical classical dance in order to propose alternative platforms for a new, more engaged and inclusive theatre and simultaneously remind us that "All the world's a stage".

3. A crescendo of tension and the breaking up of order, stability and structure

Limón's *The Moor's Pavane* is divided into what may be termed as ten parts or sections[12]. The choreography begins with a static and repetitive geometrical dance, a sort of formal introductory presentation of the main protagonists of the story. The male and female characters are facing one another, Othello and Iago in one direction, and Emilia and Desdemona in the other. They all hold hands in order to call attention to their intimate and dialoguing interrelations. As soon as the music begins, the dancers raise up their arms and start performing the same 'mirroring' steps. While Othello and Iago's dance is strong and expansive, with a series of *battement jeté en cloche*[13] and jumps, Desdemona and Emilia's

[12] The performance begins with a first movement or 'introduction', in which the main characters are presented, followed by a second section or *valse*, a swift exchanging of directions and poses between the two couples. The third part is characterised by dialoguing and separated *pas de deux* or duets (first, Othello and Iago, followed by Othello and Desdemona's encounter, Iago and Desdemona's duet, again Desdemona and Othello and concluding with Iago and Emilia's *pas de deux*). In the fourth part, the jealousy and treacherous plan of Iago-Emilia begins to develop while Desdemona keeps dancing with Othello's handkerchief. In the fifth part, spectators start perceiving the deconstruction of order for men's and women's dances are separated and the corruption begins. In the sixth part, Othello fights against Iago while the latter accepts to slow down his project. The seventh part is characterised by an exchanging *pas de trois* between Othello, Emilia and Desdemona. Towards the end of the dance, Desdemona loses possession of the handkerchief. In the eighth section, Othello and Desdemona perform a last painful duet in which the Moor starts believing Iago's words. At the end of the *pas de deux,* Iago bursts in and shows Othello the handkerchief. In the ninth section, the Pavane's order is finally demolished. The quartet performs for one last time the introductory dance refrain which soon splinters into scattered and dynamic solos or movements. In the last section, Othello kills Desdemona while Emilia and Iago take their places at the sides of the unfortunate couple.

[13] A *battement jeté* is a dance "term meaning a 'large battement thrown'. *Grand battement jeté* is often used in the Russian school to better describe how a grand battement is 'thrown'. It is the idea that the working leg quickly gets to the top of the position as opposed to slowly". *En cloche* means literally "like a bell".

movements are more grounded, for they perform *rond de jambes en plié*[14] and frequently lift up their arms.

Figure 2
The beginning of the performance and the dance-presentation of the Pavane. Snapshot taken from YouTube, *José Limón - The Moor's Pavane (original version)*, Detail 1.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnmsSiMfMHw&t=441s
(22.12.2021)

At this point, the dance is impersonal and rigid, as if the protagonists want to emphasise the dominator "order and degree" (Eagleton 1986) typical of Elizabethan society, or better show how they need to conform to a system of conventions in which they are trapped and constrained. A sudden change of tone occurs when Othello takes out a white handkerchief of his belt. He solemnly offers the gift to his wife Desdemona who accepts it with pleasure. Othello soon drags her towards his chest and embraces her. The loving couple starts intertwining their hands and arms around the handkerchief in order to portray the strength of their bond. Iago peers from behind the lovers' shoulders and suggests to his partner Emilia to steal the handkerchief. As in Shakespeare's play, his goal is to drive Othello into madness making him believe that Desdemona has cheated on him. Emilia firmly disagrees with his plan and the couple returns to the formal pattern position shown at the beginning. Soon, also, the two lovers regain their places and the quartet performs once more the 'standardised' choreography of the beginning. Through this precise alternation of ordained structure, variation on the theme and again fixed sequence, Limón is capable of portraying the hypocrisy of Renaissance society, and in particular the treacherous tricks that lay behind the seemingly perfect attitudes and behaviours of the dancing protagonists.

This sequence thus highlights Limón's original technique which fuses 'normative' steps of classical ballet with more fluid successions of movements that conform to his concepts of "swing and sway". See: https://ballethub.com/ballet-term/battement-jete-grand/ (22.12.2021).

[14] A *rond de jambe* stands for "round of the leg or circular movements of the leg". See: https://ballethub.com/ballet-term/rond-de-jambe/ (22.12.2021). In this case, in order to emphasise the attachment to the ground of his female dancer-protagonists, Limón conceives them *en plié*. In ballet terminology, a *plié* occurs "when a dancer is bending at the knees". See: https://ballethub.com/ballet-term/plie/ (22.12.2021).

The sections of the dance that follow this first movement are characterised by a crescendo of suspicions and tensions. The breaking up of relationships, and consequently of the Pavane's repetitive dance, is slow, gradual and subtle. It starts with the appearance of a series of solos and duets in which Iago begins to put into action his nasty plan. First, he suggests to his double Othello to be aware of his wife through an awkward turning of the head around the Moor's neck[15]; second, he dances with his wife Emilia as to convince her to help him steal the handkerchief from Desdemona's hold; finally, he organises a confusing and dizzying gathering of exchanges in which the poor Desdemona inadvertently loses the symbol of Othello's love.

Figure 3
Iago's turning of the head around the Moor's neck. Snapshot taken from YouTube, *José Limón - The Moor's Pavane (original version)*, Detail 2.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnmsSiMfMHw&t=441s
(22.12.2021)

The linear and geometrical choreography concludes when in the end of section eight another *pas de quatre* is performed. This time, looks and exchanges of movements are very different from the beginning, resulting in fear, anxiety and turmoil. The quartet embodies the pattern of a wheel characterised by expansions and retreats. Desdemona and Emilia keep falling on the floor, while Iago and Othello jump and throw their arms and legs up towards the ceiling. As is suggested in the play[16], Iago whispers again something in Othello's ear. The latter soon detaches from him for he is not able to hide the suffering caused by what he is being told. Finally, when Iago takes out the handkerchief, Othello cannot restrain his anger. He pushes Desdemona away, then dances with her a very

[15] Talking about the interpretation of "His Friend" in the first production of *The Moor's Pavane*, the dancer Lucas Hoving explained to Naomi Mindlin: "My part? Much lighter […]. Much more labile. The quality of whispering. [Hoving repeats the movement of his head, cocked slightly to the side, as he did it in the piece, behind Limón's back]. I always think of intrigue – making a statement without projecting it. […] Well, it was very often a sort of whispering. I whisper to Pauline, I whisper to José. That was so secretive, sneaky, a sort of snakelike thing. When I plant the seed of mistrust or whatever with this movement, I'm behind him, and I whisper in one ear and then look. Snakelike". (Mindlin 1992, p. 18)

[16] Indeed, in Act I, scene iii, Iago thinks how to trick Othello's trust over Cassio: "After some time, to abuse Othello'ear, / That he is too familiar with his wife". (*Othello*, I, iii, 394-393)

passionate last *pas de deux*. In the end, he takes his wife to the centre of stage. While Othello kills Desdemona, Emilia and Iago move in front of their counterparts so as to hide the murder. At the end, when Emilia learns that Desdemona has been killed, she denounces her husband, but it is too late. The Moor is now absent and filled with remorse and dies while embracing his lover. Emilia and Iago depart from the centre stage to position themselves at the sides of their counterparts, stretching out an arm towards the unfortunate couple. Iago has succeeded and the performance concludes with static and yet asymmetrical postures, which are direct reversals of how the protagonists were placed at the beginning of the choreography. The Pavane's structure is de-constructed and so it is the dominator order of Elizabethan life and society, since envy, passions and jealousy have finally prevailed over reason and love.

4. The handkerchief and other salient features

Along with the Pavane's structure and unfolding geometry, music also plays an important role in Limón's dance adaption of *Othello*. Indeed, the choreographer was inspired by the stressing rhythms and irregular pace of Henry Purcell's music, which is a direct reminder of Baroque melodies and tends to be divided into solemn allegros and calm movements[17]. Simon Sadoff, who was at the time of the première the conductor and pianist of Limón's company, arranged Pucell's score according to the crescendo of the movements and sequences of the choreography in order to emphasise the corrupting tensions that lead to Othello's defeat and help spectators identify the common musical refrain and, consequently, 'mirroring' corporeal movements. The revision and final rupture of the Pavane's order is thus accompanied by the breaking-up of musical unity, which is in turn a direct recalling of the deconstruction of Othello's language. Critics have emphasised how the Moor's crystalline and formally precise way of talking slowly collapses after he starts suspecting Desdemona's loyalty. Despite Othello's self-doubt in his own speech: "Rude am I in my speech" (*Othello*, I, iii, 81), G. Wilson Knight asserts that "Othello's [language] is music" (Knight 1969) for it represents the most refined and flowing way of talking of the entire play, when compared with the language of other characters.

Another important protagonist of Limón's choreography is Othello's handkerchief, which in Shakespeare's text epitomises the symbol of unbounded and trusting love between the main couple of the story. Othello offers it to Desdemona after having received it from his mother. In a tragedy in which the Moor is portrayed as a strong commander and is expected to be the hero of the Republic of Venice – despite his foreign and black origins – the white handkerchief becomes the means through which the Bard can portray his humanity and fragility, and his 'divide' between duties and desires. Moreover, from a partnership perspective, the handkerchief represents and embodies balance and comprehension between different cultures and worldviews. The token has been made in

[17] Naomi Mindlin explains: "With costumes by Pauline Lawrence and music arranged by Simon Sadoff (conductor and pianist for the José Limón Dance Company) from Henry Purcell's *Abdelazar*, *The Gordian Knot United*, and *The Pavanne and Chaconne for Strings*, the work was quickly recognized as a major modern dance classic. Now more than forty years old, *The Moor's Pavane* continues in the repertory of the Limón's Dance Company, as well as in that of many ballet companies throughout the world". (Mindlin 1992, p. 13)

Egypt, the country from which Othello presumably comes[18], even though it is adorned with strawberries, which are direct reminders of the English countryside, as Korda acknowledges by referring to Ross' *The Meaning of Strawberries in Shakespeare* (Ross 1960, p. 226): "The strawberry plant [is a popular symbol] in English domestic embroidery. [It is] familiar and domestic [and also] exoticizing and strange" (Korda 2002, p. 125).

In light of this perspective, the handkerchief assumes an important function in Limón's adaptation. In fact, the most expressive and highly iconic moments of the choreography – if not the most reminiscent in the text – are embodied when it is taken out and stolen or even admired. In Emilia and Iago's duet, for instance, with its dazzling and shifting changing of directions and levels, the staring at the handkerchief becomes the only moment of statis, an evocative pause that acquires significance and strength in the unfolding of events.

Figure 4
Othello offers the handkerchief to his wife while Iago and Emilia peer from their back. Snapshot taken from YouTube, *José Limón - The Moor's Pavane (original version)*, Detail 3.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnmsSiMfMHw&t=441s
(22.12.2021)

Through the handkerchief Limón reinforces the strength and subtlety of Shakespeare's text, and simultaneously reconnects this powerful piece of dance with the complexities of Renaissance culture and patriarchal worldview. Indeed, at the end of the choreography, Othello reaffirms his possession of the token, thus, also acknowledging the impossibility to fulfill his desire: the need to be accepted and loved despite his black and foreign origins or complex 'identity'. For Limón, as choreographer and interpreter of his own story, it was finally accepting not being fully integrated in the strict and dominator structures of his

[18] In Act III, scene iv, Othello explains: "that handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give, / She was a charmer and could almost read / The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it / 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father/ Entirely to her love: but if she lost it, / Or made gift of it, my father's eye / Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies: she, dying, gave it me, / And bid me, when my fate would have me wive, / To give it her; I did so, and take heed on't, / Make it a darling like your precious eye. / To lose, or give't away were such perdition / As nothing else could match". (*Othello*, III, iv, 54-66)

newly adopted home. It is certain, nonetheless, that Limón's work paved the way to a new type of understanding and encounter between different movements, dance expressions and ways of being, leading the way towards a partnership awareness and proactive fusion of different expressions or techniques in the art of ballet.

5. Concluding remarks

José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane* is rightly considered one of the most innovative and successful dance adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The choreography slowly dismantles the boundaries and constraints within which both the Pavane and the Bard's text are framed. As I have demonstrated, the tragedy is based on rhythmical changes and disruptions, which are dictated and orchestrated by the bright and yet dark character of Iago, who can be easily identified as Othello's *double*[19].

Limón's choreography is also a tribute to modern dance, one of the first successful experiments in the renewal of classical ballet, and still today one of the most acclaimed examples of his original and ground-based technique. The success of Limón's expression and art may be traced back to his 'divided' background and creative insight, the ability to overcome dominator worldviews and embrace the power of otherness, diversity and variety. Limón was one of the first dance innovators to understand that the torso had to become the centering force from which performers would begin to employ expansions and closures, falls and recoveries, balances and unbalances. According to Limón, the torso is also the part of the body that fully expresses the emotions of the heart, the means through which we can embody and share our truest and most genuine emotions. In this sense, the choreography is a powerful "decolonial" attempt to rework Shakespeare's tragedy from an-*Other* perspective and at the same time challenge spectators or viewers with the possibility of a more caring and partnership direction.

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[19] In Act III, scene iv, while kneeling in front of one another, Othello and Iago perform a kind of marriage or fusion of 'being': OTHELLO: "now art thou my lieutenant. / IAGO: I am your own for ever". (*Othello*, Act III, IV, 485-486)

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