

Concert Review: Jessye Norman, Garth Fagan Dance at Kodak Hall

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There was something regal about Jessye Norman during Sunday night's concert at Kodak Hall. A certain calm, unhurried presence that gave her performance the exquisite touch that only a mature and self-confident artist can bring to her audience.

You could argue that the three-hour event went on too long. There were various introductions going into this benefit concert for the organization Action for a Better Community. There was the awarding of an honorary doctorate upon Norman. There were several changeovers that bordered on intermissions.

But the moments of Norman's singing and the collaboration of Norman's singing with Garth Fagan Dance were so extraordinary that one simply didn't want to reach the end of the program.

Norman performed 12 songs with pianist Mark Markham, and four songs with Garth Fagan Dance. Norman opened with "Oh, What a Beautiful City," and from the opening notes she was generous with her gift of song. There was a deep, spiritual theme to the programmed works, including "There is a Balm in Gilead," a breathtaking a cappella rendition of "Oh, Glory," and "Great Day!"

When Norman sang "His Eye is on the Sparrow," she was seated at the curve of the Steinway concert grand, her flowing caftan draped around her, and her humming was as soothing as if we were all her children. When the words came, they were intimate, tender, and sweet. Even when her voice unfurled its power through volume and the extent of its low range, Norman's technique was delivered with ease.

By far the most dramatic piece of the concert was "Another Man Done Gone." It was listed in the program as a traditional song. Its structure is simple and the lines repetitive. But Markham used the piano in a manner reminiscent of Helmut Lachenmann's "musiqueconcrèteinstrumentale," a sound world accessed by drawing sound out of instruments in ways one wouldn't expect. Markham pounded the fleshy side of his right fist upon that small flat space at the top of the keyboard while depressing the damper pedal. The unusual sound captured drum tones and bell tones, which, combined with Norman's voice, was a heartbreaking expression of oppression to the point of death.

Three of the four works performed by Norman with Garth Fagan Dance were an extension of that same emotional space. The first work in particular, "I Want Two Wings," combined three female and one male dancer, illustrating the futility of the emotions that trap and weigh us down. The dancers' movements were as bold and strong as Norman's voice, and their whirlings that failed to take flight reflected our own states when we are sad, angry, and frustrated.

The third combined piece, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," was a brilliant execution of tight, tense movements, akin to a troupe bound by leg irons. The dancers' bare-footed rhythms were like percussion instruments, while their hands and arms created visual wind instruments. Joining the performance was a cellist, creating a soulful and complimentary line (the cellist was unnamed in the program).

This amazing benefit concert for Action for a Better Community had some empty seats. All I can say is this: there is a reason certain artists become legends, and when they are in town, you need to make it a point to expose yourself to their gifts. You just might find that a little bit of magic travels out the door and onto Gibbs Street as you leave.