

ARTS REVIEW: 'LIGHTHOUSE/LIGHTNING ROD'

A Stunning Collaboration Comes Full Circle At The Brooklyn Academy Of Music



By: Roslyn Bernstein

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Garth Fagan knows talent! That is what he told the audience at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) at a talk-back session with Wynton Marsalis following the performance of their new collaboration, the world premiere of “Lighthouse/Lightning Rod.” “Talent’s something you know and you feel and the gods tell you,” he said.

On stage to discuss “Lighthouse/Lightning Rod,” their first collaboration since “Griot New York” in 1991, their BAM debut, the artists spoke of how they met, and how they worked together. Fagan heard Marsalis play an amazing gig in Rochester, where his company is based. “Later, I saw him walking down the street and I asked him if he was Wynton? He seemed down and I later found out that a member of his band had left. I took him to see my dancers and we raised his spirits,” Fagan said. Marsalis confirms the story. “They did a whole performance for me like I was a king,” said Marsalis and I was only 22 or 23 years old. I was humble and embarrassed.”

That was the beginning of their long friendship and of their creative collaboration. Fagan heard Marsalis play in New Orleans and when Fagan was asked to do “Griot New York,” he thought him the perfect person. “Wynton knows the roles and Wynton knows the big intellectual content,” Fagan said. “I sent him a poem – the poem that you all heard in the beginning of tonight’s performance of an excerpt from ‘Griot New York.’ It was about all the things the griot says – about slavery and the holocaust. He had a lot to stand on.”

Marsalis composed the score while on a tour of twenty-six European cities in 30 days and he sent it to Fagan whose technique is to listen to the music over and over again but to choreograph in silence. “When we rehearsed, I changed a lot of the music,” Marsalis said. “What I had written was not sophisticated enough. I saw that I had to go deeper.”

“Griot New York” was paired on stage with artwork by Martin Puryear, and it received a very good review when first performed from *New York Times* dance critic Anna Kisselgoff, who moderated the BAM Talk Back Session. In the four excerpts from “Griot New York” revived in this year’s BAM Next Wave Festival (September 27-30), Puryear’s griot head once again looms over the stage, towering above the dancers, and there is a grey chain whose links get bigger from one end to the other, and an oversize hoe or spatula. The Griot excerpts include City Court Dance, Bayou Baroque, Spring Yaounde, Waltz Détente and Oracabessa Sea.



In the new work, Fagan merely gave Marsalis the title. Marsalis wrote nine pieces and Fagan loved eight of them. For the art, Fagan turned to California artist, Alison Saar. He had bought a piece of her work earlier, “Inheritance.” Fagan told [Charlie Rose](#) that the piece has a strong effect on him because he had lost a three-year-old daughter in a car crash and the loss had remained with him all his life. He gave Saar the titles for the dances and was thrilled when her lighthouse turned out to be an 18 foot high woman clasping silver branches and holding her breast, instead of a brick building, and her lightning rod, the figure of a bronze/gold man whose legs were like roots of a tree. “What I look for in an artist, in a dancer, in a musician, is invention,” Fagan said. “Wynton plays notes I can’t find anywhere else. My dancers go a bit slower, a bit faster and they jump a bit higher. When I go to a gallery, it has to call me, pull me in. I am not going to go searching.”



Fagan does not encourage improv from his dancers and he definitely does not want the dance and the music to be linked rigidly. “In some concerts, every plink in music is a plink in dance,” he said. “That is musical visualization. I want something fluid and subtle—counterpoint.”

That counterpoint is definitely to be found in this collaboration, with an original score by Wynton Marsalis, performed live by the Wynton Marsalis Septet, comprised of Dan Nimmer, Piano; Reginald Veal, Bass; Ali Jackson, Drums; Victor Goines, Saxophone, Clarinet; Wess “Warmdaddy” Anderson, Alto Saxophone; Eliot Mason, Trombone; and Wynton Marsalis, trumpet.

In “Memories,” there is a fine solo by Norwood Pennewell whose performance includes explosive scissor jumps, followed a piece by dancers Natalie Rogers, Nicolette Depass and Vitolio Jeune, and a final section on the theme of racism and slavery that concludes with a servant’s being pulled off the stage.

But “Memories” does not have the power of “Lightning Rod,” the finale of the evening, which is truly electric. Here the dancers and the music come alive and featured dancers Pennewell, Rogers, Depass, and Jeune are joined by Shanon Castle, Lindsay Renea, Khama Kgari, Tere Lyn Jones, Charity Metzger, Sade Bully, Wynton Rice, Jeffrey Labbe’, Danielle Wilson, and Steve Humphrey.

After the performance, Fagan told the audience that he intended to change the choreography. “They danced around the man (Saar’s lightning rod),” he said. “Tomorrow, they will dance toward him—a kind of idolatry. I asked myself, why don’t they pay attention to him?”

It was a revealing moment. The words of a remarkable artist who is constantly rethinking and reshaping his vision.

All photography by [Brendan Bannon](#)