

Dance

The Secret to Their Staying Power

Age Hardly matters in Fagan's Dance troupe

By Gia Kourlas

Dancing past the age of 40 is hard enough. But what about 50? Or 60? At Garth Fagan Dance, the burning question, from one season to the next, is simple: How do they do it?

While there are young dancers in this modern dance company — Mr. Fagan, the artistic director, desires variety — three are dance-world anomalies. Steve Humphrey, at 61, is an original member with more than a lingering physical prowess intact. The dashing Norwood Pennewell, who turns 55 this month, joined the group in 1978 and remains indomitable. And Natalie Rogers, 51, persists as a technical dynamo, which is all the more remarkable because she took off eight years — a lifetime in dance — to raise her daughter. At 50, she decided she wanted back in. She shed 20 pounds in two months.

It's one thing to want to continue dancing; it's another to have a place to do so. The Fagan veterans are part of the company's season at the Joyce Theater beginning

Nov. 12, and they will be in fighting shape. "The Joyce is like our Super Bowl," Mr. Pennewell said. "You do not want to show up shabby at the Super Bowl."

For Mr. Fagan, the Tony Award-winning choreographer of "The Lion King," the allure of an older dancer comes down to one word: "Vulnerability," he said, his Jamaican accent dancing through the syllables. "They work hard, they have tried and failed at different things, and they know that to get that extra step, that extra movement, that extra shape and that difficult rhythm into stillness, takes work and trust and nuance and subtlety. That only comes with time. You have to instruct it and nourish it until it blossoms."

Mr. Fagan refers to Ms. Rogers as his good daughter, Mr. Pennewell as his bad son — though more naughty than truly bad — and Mr. Humphrey as his baby brother. "He's 12 years younger than me," Mr. Fagan explained.

At this point, Mr. Humphrey chooses his own repertory.

"He has earned that right," Mr. Fagan said. "I don't want to push him into anything he's not comfortable doing. He'll be on payroll, as hard as times are, until the cows come home, because he's given me that

through the years. I don't discard people after they've given me a lifetime of great work."

When it comes to his dancing, Mr. Humphrey said: "The short answer is that the story isn't over yet. This has been a journey, and I've seen it from the beginning." He laughed. "I can still make some moves."

Mr. Fagan's technically demanding work requires dancers to have a strong core from which to spring effortlessly into fast turns or remain serene in grueling balances. The contrast between stillness and speed, a hallmark of his pieces, requires heroic athleticism. The dancers all credit Mr. Fagan's technique classes, which he said he developed "to keep the body nourished from more of a yoga perspective," for maintaining their bodies past their prime.

"You can't just walk through it," Mr. Humphrey said. "You've got to do your warm-up to the point where it's like you're performing the actual movements in a dance. That way, when you get out there to do the movement, there's a freedom because you're not worried about pulling something. You can dance it."

Ms. Rogers, who describes the training as therapeutic, said: "There is no way I could stop class. Otherwise I would not be here."

At home in Rochester, the company runs on a peculiar schedule. There are two technique classes a day, one in the morning and one at night. Rehearsals generally don't begin until after the evening class. In the early days, this was done out of necessity because dancers had day jobs. Mr. Fagan said he has stuck with it because he believes that rehearsal time should mirror performance time for optimal effect.

While the schedule does make it impossible for Ms. Rogers to put her daughter to bed at night, her return to dance, she said, has mainly benefited her offstage life. "There's so much more I can do without so much stress, because I'm dancing again," she said. "I have a handle on things now, and that's really surprising. I thought it would distract me from my life, but it's done the opposite. It's just the body. I wish it were younger. You can't have everything. My brain and spirit are absolutely soaring right now."

Those qualities are also apparent to both Mr. Fagan and Mr. Pennewell who, this season, feature Ms. Rogers in their new dances. She regards her solo in Mr. Fagan's "No Evidence of Failure" as a portrait of her life. "My character, this woman he's talking about, is doing 50 things at once — it's how she handles every item and still comes out shining," she said.



Garth Fagan, wearing a vest, with his longtime dancers, from left, Natalie Rogers, Norwood Pennewell and Steve Humphrey, at the troupe's headquarters in Rochester.

Brendan Bannon for The New York Times

"He's making an expression about the modern woman."

In Mr. Pennewell's "Gin," his third work for the company, Ms. Rogers's solo is the dance's centerpiece. "She can do anything, but she can also do anything really slowly, so she pulls you right into her world, and then she hits you with a change of dynamic," he said. "It just blows you away."

Originally a drama student, Mr. Pennewell, who is also Mr. Fagan's assistant and rehearsal director, discovered dance while in college. After seeing a performance by Mr. Fagan's company, he was electrified by the athleticism and theatricality.

"At the same time, I was thinking, 'Oh my God, if this is what I have to prepare myself for, I'm never going to be able to do this,'" he said. "Because what I wasn't really able to get a grasp on was the spiri-

tual depth that was moving me beyond the physicality."

In the end, that's what has made Mr. Pennewell want to remain with the company. "Garth's strategy for developing dance artists is very savvy," he said. "Time passes, and then you get to the stage where you just can't stop, because you're always striving: How can I make the turn not just go longer but subside right at the perfect place musically, so that it really becomes an arresting moment in dance and not just a technical feat?"

He laughed and added, "That's the trick that Garth played on us: He developed this thing where we want to start becoming more mature. The more mature you are, the more you're going to be able to bring it to your performance. We take it to a different level. We go beyond the physicality."