

Portland Jazz Festival 2012: Garth Fagan dancers still able to charm with a 21-year-old masterpiece

By Angela Allen
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Photo by Basil Childers

Portlanders were treated to a major event in contemporary dance Wednesday when [Garth Fagan Dance](#) unfolded its two-hour “Griot New York” at [Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall](#) as part of [Portland Jazz Festival](#)’s collaboration with [White Bird](#).

A colorful and emotionally exacting mixture of jazz, dance and art, the piece was performed by the 14-member Rochester, N.Y.-based company (plus a couple of apprentices). Choreographer Garth Fagan’s masterwork was created in 1991, and 21 years later, it stands up.

The eight-scene piece, divided into two acts, depicted scenes of African-Americans in New York City. Each scene was cued by sculptor Martin Puryear’s stark but oversized scenery, opening with a hanging upside-down jug and ending with a blank stage. “Griot” was scored by jazz composer and virtuoso horn-blower Wynton Marsalis, with plenty of solos for brass and reeds. The

music and dance explored the cacophony, conflicts, compromises and poetry of the cityscape, informed by radically different moods.

“Griot” could have been set in any city at any place. It is timeless, placeless, and the ubiquity of leotards infused a universality to the costumes that will never be dated.

A Marsalis fan, I can’t imagine the music, “Citi Movement,” without the dance. Though called melodic and haunting it is often discordant and strident, though not distracting. The dancers could stand alone, but the music would strain to please a crowd or patient listeners. The choreography is perfectly paced with and suited to the score, however, so the piece unwinds as a whole.

These handsome rubbery-bodied dancers, several with the 41-year-old company for decades, can do anything from high-wire ballet to the splits to off-center leg-extension balancing. They are energetic and fully animated, and even if they have performed this piece 500 times, they dance it with conviction. It seems plotless, and that it is, but it is easy to distinguish the emotions.

The lively choreography by much decorated Fagan, who grew up in Jamaica and won a Tony in 1998 for his whimsically original choreography of “The Lion King” on Broadway, plays with the dancers’ torsos, adds original arm movements and demanding leg extensions, and creates pas de deux and ensembles that twist and turn in surprising ways. Dancers unveil sadness, nervousness, claustrophobia, fear, and a show of affection, if only a brush of two brows. And there is nudity, but in only one dance.

Griot, the dance’s namesake, is a West African storyteller who passes history to the next generation through poetry, song and dance. The performance began with a poem and that was it for the spoken words. We all came for the dance, anyway.