

DANCE PREVIEW: Garth Fagan Dance

By Casey Carlsen
November 23, 2011



PHOTO BY GREG BARRETT

Garth Fagan is an uncontested great in the field of contemporary dance, a choreographer whose body of work will retain lasting impact in the world of dance. Throughout his life, Fagan has surrounded himself with greats from other artistic spheres; he counts the late painter Romare Bearden and jazz musician Wynton Marsalis as close personal friends. His kinship with other such influential artists has fostered ongoing opportunities for creative and intellectual exchanges of ideas, as well as artistic collaboration.

In his latest work, "Madiba," Fagan pays tribute to his personal icon, Nelson Mandela. The piece, which highlights Garth Fagan Dance's home concert season in Rochester, running November 29 through December 4, is inspired by the life and work of the South African leader. The title refers to Mandela's clan name and is a term of endearment used by those who know him best, according to Fagan.

"What I found interesting is the man, the human being who came out of prison empty of malice and retribution. What interested me was painting an image of this world-class humanitarian who suffered and overcame it, and went on to heal his country and, by extension, the world," Fagan recently told City, speaking from his Park Avenue-area home.

Fagan had just flown in from Washington, D.C., where the evening before he had received yet another award to add to his impressive and extensive list: the Marcus Garvey Award for Lifetime Achievement awarded by The Institute of Caribbean Studies. Fagan is originally from Jamaica and still has the melodic lilt in his voice to prove it.

"It would be our greatest honor to perform the piece in South Africa for Madiba someday, 'mon," Fagan says about presenting his new piece to Mandela himself. "Our greatest honor."

It is Norwood Pennewell, a 32-year-veteran of the 41-year-old company, who portrays the Madiba figure in the dance, a physically and emotionally grueling role that demands enacting the exacting requirements of Fagan's choreography. Pennewell possesses the ability to pull it off brilliantly.

Look, too, for the playful, yet staggeringly powerful duet between dancers Vitolio Jeune and Tere Lyne Jones in the first section of "Madiba." Jeune has only been dancing with the company for three years, but he's already earned the hard-won respect of Fagan, who compares him to seasoned veteran Pennewell.

"They both dance the full music. Whatever I give them they go for it until they get it right. They're not chicken," Fagan says. "The great dancers go for the movement and understand what I'm trying to do. They're technically well trained, talented, vulnerable, and not afraid to chase the difficult and impossible. They don't just keep doing the same old, same old. All my Bessie winners have had these qualities."

Five company members have earned Bessies, also known as New York Performance Awards: Fagan, Pennewell, Steve Humphrey, Natalie Rogers, and Sharon Skepple. Fagan's most recognizable award is undoubtedly the Tony he won for his choreography in the Broadway hit "The Lion King."

The emotionally rich new work, set to the music of South African jazz composer Abdullah Ibrahim, has already premiered in New York City and Miami. Reactions to the piece have been mixed, some reviewers familiar with Fagan's repertoire suggesting that Fagan slighted the full expression of his own masterful choreographic voice by foraying into technical experimentation that may cloud the clarity of "Madiba." The piece features live video footage of the action on stage as filmed by a video camera strapped onto the head of Pennewell. According to Fagan, the stream of images is representative of Mandela's memories: memories of when he was young and free, memories of old close friends, memories of romantic relationships.

"Garth puts a lot of attention into detail, making the movement say all that needs to be said," Pennewell says. "My job is to recreate the movement while keeping myself in the mind of the person that I'm portraying. I have to find a balance between passion and technique."

"I just love that I get to do this solo in this stage of my career. I'm losing a little of my spring and pliancy, but I have the emotional maturity to put into something of this depth," he says.

Again and again over his three decades with the company, Pennewell, 53, has transmitted Fagan's choreographic vision onto the stage. "PJ," as he is known, also serves as Fagan's rehearsal director and personal assistant. Significantly, Fagan invited him to choreograph a piece for the company last year - the first time that someone other than Fagan had ever done so. It was also the first time that Pennewell had choreographed a piece by himself. This season he is presenting his second work, "Liminal Flux," set to music by Miles Davis and Chancha Via Circuito.

Pennewell remembers first hearing the music live when Fagan took him and a few other dancers to Syracuse to hear Davis perform years ago. This is typical Fagan. Museums, concerts, theater - Fagan makes sure that his dancers' cultural awareness goes beyond the world of dance. When the troupe tours abroad, a day off for the company to sightsee and visit local cultural establishments is de rigueur in every contract.

Pennewell is as modest in his evaluation of his early forays into choreography as he is lavish in his praise for his mentor's work. Last year, the critics responded with measured approval to Pennewell's piece "Hylozoic," invariably focusing largely on how closely the piece did or did not resemble one of Fagan's. But Pennewell was unfazed.

"Historically, protégés' work resembles their mentors until they find their own voices," Pennewell says. "The Fagan technique is in my DNA. I'll come up with my own inventions, but it will be in his technique. While I'm figuring out how to tap into my own aesthetic, it's a luxury to be able to use Garth's as a springboard."

Fagan says this is an invaluable period for Pennewell as an artist, because he is both dancing and choreographing. "What he needs right now is the tension of both," Fagan says. "I think he's eventually going to be performing less and choreographing more, but he can learn a lot from doing them simultaneously."

The Rochester run of performances will also feature revivals of "Until, By & If" and "In Memoriam," as well as last year's "Thanks 40." Students from the Garth Fagan School of Dance will also be performing "Cuwinicu," choreographed by Garth Fagan Dance Artistic/Administrative Liaison Bill Ferguson, at both matinee performances.