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Garth Fagan Dance group makes Miami premiere on Saturday

By Jordon Levin
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Though he has lived in the United States for half a century, choreographer Garth Fagan's Jamaican accent is loud and clear.

"Yeah, mon," Fagan says, with a booming laugh. "I used to try and suppress it. I thought it was pretty much gone. But if I get happy or I get mad it comes out."

His Jamaican heritage is one of many characteristics that sets Fagan, 71, apart in the world of dance. Instead of living in a cultural capital such as New York or San Francisco, he is based in Rochester, N.Y. He invented a technique for his choreography and company — a combination of ballet, classic modern and Afro-Caribbean dance — that looks like no other style in the dance world. And although his Garth Fagan Dance troupe, which makes its Miami debut Saturday at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center, has been acclaimed in the concert dance world for 40 years, Fagan is most famous for his only commercial effort, his Tony Award-winning choreography for the Broadway hit *The Lion King*.

On this recent weekday afternoon, in fact, he has just returned from Spain, where he helped stage a production of the popular Disney musical there.

"The last I heard was 62 million people had seen it," Fagan says. "People around the world of different cultures and races have enjoyed it. So I am very proud of it."

But he is even prouder of the singular artistic path he's forged. Fagan first came to the dance world's notice in 1974 when his company — a group of Rochester teens called the Bottom of the Bucket, But ... Dance Theatre whom he had trained for just four years — debuted at the august Jacobs Pillow Dance festival in Massachusetts.

New York Times' dance critic Anna Kisselgoff gave him "one of my greatest critiques ... she wrote that I was an original," Fagan says. "Not that the other stuff wasn't great, lord have mercy. But I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do something different."

That quest has taken determination. Fagan has accumulated a long list of accolades and awards, but he is still his company's biggest financial backer (largely thanks to the 14-year-old *Lion King*).

Thanks Forty, which Fagan created for his company's 40th anniversary shows in New York last year (it will be performed Saturday), was made to thank the dancers and colleagues who have

helped him over the years. But it includes a solo called *MUSE-work*, about the challenges of artistic self-help.

“Some people not in the arts think you sit down and the muse tells you what to do and that’s it,” Fagan says. “The muse may tell you what to do. But then you have to get into the studio and get to work.”

His latest work is *Madiba*, inspired by the life of South African leader Nelson Mandela, which premiered in New York City in October and is on the Miami program. It features Fagan veteran Norwood Pennewell dancing with a small video camera on his head, so that dizzying live footage of the stage and dancers is part of the performance.

Fagan thought the stream of images from the camera was similar to the flow of memories he imagined going through Mandela’s head while he was in prison.

“I haven’t been incarcerated but I assume if you get your head hit your head will spin around,” he says. “If you’re in prison you will have a tune that you will play back to yourself, you will remember those things that happened to you.”

As a young man, Fagan toured with the troupe that would become the National Dance Theater of Jamaica. But his iconoclastic journey was sparked by a rebellion against his father, an Oxford University graduate who was the chief education officer of Jamaica.

“He was very British, very demanding,” Fagan says. “I had to be a paragon of perfection, and that wasn’t in my DNA. I just had to leave Jamaica — the island wasn’t big enough for both of us.”

He escaped to attend Wayne State University in Detroit, where he discovered modern dance, dancing with Detroit groups and studying with pivotal figures such as Martha Graham, Jose Limon and Alvin Ailey in New York City.

The crucial event that would set Fagan on his independent path came in the summer of 1970, when he taught a group of untrained, so-called disadvantaged students at the State University of New York at Brockport, near Rochester. The university invited him to stay.

“I thought I’d be there two years,” Fagan says. Instead he found the community of dancers and the seclusion that would foster his art.

“I love solitude before I choreograph a piece or listen to the music,” he says. “And I fell in love with the dancers that came.”

Some of those early arrivals are still with him, including Steve Humphrey, 59, and Pennewell, 52, whose second dance for the Fagan troupe, *Liminal Flux*, is on Saturday’s program.

Fagan is proud that, in a dance world obsessed with technique, youthfulness and a single, idealized body type, his 14 dancers range in age from 21 to 59, with a variety of shapes and experiences.

“In all the other art forms you learn so much as you get older,” Fagan says. “What do you know when you’re 30? Steve is on his second marriage now, he knows something he didn’t know before. I want to see that.

“I have a community of people dancing, and I love that. I love different body types, the tall and lanky, the middle height and even the short little plumpish ones. When you go down the street that’s what you see. One of my big ideas was to have people dancing, as opposed to dancers portraying people.”

Three of Fagan’s dancing people are Miamians including Vitolio Jeune, a New World School of the Arts college graduate who was a homeless teen in Port-au-Prince before he was taken in by Jeanguy Saintus, director of the Ayikodans dance troupe. Fagan discovered Jenue, who will perform the solo *Talking Drums* on Saturday, while setting one of his pieces at New World in 2007.

“I saw a quality dancer and human being,” Fagan says. “My first thing is intelligence. You can always find dancers with wonderful technique, lovely extensions, all that stuff. But a dancer with the intelligence to understand what this dance they’re doing is about, then you get into an entirely different frame of reference.”

Fagan’s dances may be abstract, but they’re imbued with the perspective he’s gained in his own long, rich life. He was inspired to make *Madiba* by his admiration for the way Mandela overcame the bitter experience of imprisonment and racial animosity to lead South Africa.

“That says so much to me ... you forgive and move on,” Fagan says. “Bad things happen to all of us.”

Part of Fagan’s choreography for *Lion King* was inspired by a terrible event in his own life, the death of his daughter in a car crash.

“I thought it was the end of the world, but then you move on and you move forward,” he says. “You do dances for her. She loved cats, and I’m not a cat person. So the lioness dance in *Lion King* I did with her right in front of me all the time and I said ‘Baby, this is for you.’ ”