

## Dancers explore life of Nelson Mandela



Photo by Brandon Bannon

By John A. Shaffer  
February 02, 2012

At the downtown Rochester office of Garth Fagan Dance, proclamations from mayors and legislators cover the walls like family photographs. Promotional dance wear, part of the stock-in-trade for successful touring companies, is sorted into piles across the end of the room. Every sweatshirt is imprinted with a succinct critique of Garth Fagan's artistry: "Unfailingly original!"

It takes originality and some merchandising skill as well, to keep a modern dance troupe in business for four decades. Only a few (names like Alvin Ailey and Paul Taylor top the list) have enjoyed such longevity. So Fagan is justified in celebrating his 40th anniversary season for a few extra months. As audiences revel in his expressive and often exuberant creations, nobody's really counting.

Fagan brings a program of ambitious new work and repertory classics to the State University College at Oswego's Waterman Theatre at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 10. Among them is the festive suite "Thanks Forty," which launched the anniversary celebration at Manhattan's Joyce Theater in November 2010.

Those attending the Oswego performance also will experience Fagan's deeper, more reflective touch. "Madiba," his new homage to the courage, resilience and humanity of South African leader Nelson Mandela is a project with special meaning for Fagan.

“In 1998, I met Mandela during his visit to Jamaica,” he says. “The power and the peace of the man were absolutely awe-inspiring.”

Mandela’s story is complicated — affected by the volatile history of South Africa and the conflicting interests that buffeted it throughout the 20th century. The details of his life as a young activist, a prisoner on Robben Island and a national reformer will spawn controversy and challenge biographers for years to come.

By calling the piece “Madiba” (Mandela’s less-familiar clan name), Fagan deliberately softens the focus. His interest is the figure who emerges from unimaginable hardship without bitterness and ready to forgive — “ripped open to empathy” as a fellow South African, Bishop Desmond Tutu, has expressed it.

Fagan divides “Madiba” into two sections, “Before and Then” and “Then and Now,” set to a single repeated track by South African jazz composer Abdullah Ibrahim. Pressed to define the ambiguous “Then,” Fagan says it corresponds to Mandela’s long incarceration. The midpoint of the piece is a solo by veteran Fagan dancer Norwood Pennewell, performed in striking silence.

“Madiba” employs familiar Fagan elements like lyrical duets, as well as bold technical innovation. Near the transition, a video camera strapped to Pennewell’s body allows simultaneous projection of the other dancers he encounters onstage — like flashbacks from captivity to the circle dance of youth.

Recent studies suggest that when we experience an engaging performance, the sections of the brain associated with ego temporarily shut down.

When asked what he hopes might remain when the houselights come up again, Fagan answers, “The possibility of overcoming adversity and meeting each other beyond race, religion and difference. What a world that would be.

“If half of that comes through, I’m a very happy man,” he says.

### **The details**

What: Garth Fagan Dance performance.

When: 7:30 p.m. Feb. 10.

Where: Waterman Theatre, Tyler Hall at the State University College at Oswego.

Tickets: \$12, general; \$10, seniors, non-Oswego State students, Oswego State staff and faculty; \$7, Oswego State students. To purchase, call 312-2141 or 312-3073 or go to [tickets.oswego.edu](https://tickets.oswego.edu).