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Innovator of Dance Celebrates 40 Years

By Felicia R. Lee
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Guy Solimano, *The New York Times*



At 71 this ponytailed, Tony Award-winning choreographer of “The Lion King” moves as if he had wings on his shiny, green-trimmed black sneakers. On a recent warm day here at the downtown headquarters of [Garth Fagan Dance](#) he splashed into a high-ceilinged, bright studio to watch his troupe rehearse the work “Madiba,” to be given its premiere on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater in New York. This is the first time Mr. Fagan has injected technology into his abstract choreography.

“O.K., darlings, here we go,” he said, as the dancers twisted, thrust side to side, moved forward, jumped in the air and extended their legs.

“Madiba,” a celebration of the life and ideas of Nelson Mandela, is signature Fagan: it has elements of modern and Afro-

Caribbean dance as well as ballet, performed with elegant athleticism by dancers of varying body types. A piece of about 25 minutes, it includes a sensuous ballet-inflected duet and a modern version of a South African circle dance.

Norwood Pennewell, a longtime dancer with the company who portrays the Mandela figure, will have a small high-definition video camera attached to his head at times. It will allow him to film the other performers while he dances, with the images projected onto a screen.

Set to music of the South African jazz composer Abdullah Ibrahim, those images are meant to suggest Mr. Mandela’s perspective and memories of friendships, love, incarceration, Mr. Fagan said. He expects the camera to work just fine, he said, but in case it does not, he has a Plan B: without it.

“It’s a new direction for me,” he said of the camera. “Madiba,” he added, like much of his repertory, is focused on ideas and relationships and is decidedly nonautobiographical and nonnarrative. But he has included a quotation from Mr. Mandela in the program to guide the way: “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that reflects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Spending even a sliver of time with Mr. Fagan, who is talkative and easygoing, suggests that he too is taken with the notion of a more inclusive world. A great-grandfather who likes cooking, poetry, painting, music and collecting art, he rails against bias of any kind. One of his big dreams is to perform “Madiba” for Mr. Mandela, whom he has met several times and admires greatly.

“I want ‘Madiba’ to be an inspirational piece for survival, for change,” Mr. Fagan said in his mellifluous Jamaican accent. “I do not want this to be a documentary of his life. I’m interested in the strength, the perseverance, in uniting his country. That’s why I’m not naming people, and I’m calling it ‘Madiba,’ ” the name of Mr. Mandela’s clan.

“It’s a community of people,” Mr. Fagan added. “It’s more than one person.” Mr. Fagan trained his attention on a duet in which a male dancer picked up a young female dancer, turned her upside down and they spin around. “This is a youthful romance from Mandela’s perspective,” Mr. Fagan said to a visitor. “Ladies, you can jump and have a man to catch you, and it’s O.K..”

“You seldom see black male-female relationships onstage that are warm and flirtatious,” he added.

“Madiba” is not the only new dance in his troupe’s Joyce run, from Tuesday through Sunday.

Mr. Fagan is in the midst of a two-year celebration of the 40th anniversary of the founding of his company, and Mr. Pennewell, with the company for more than 30 years and the only other person to have choreographed for it, will introduce his “Liminal Flux,” set to music by Miles Davis and Chancha Via Circuito. Also in the mix will be “Thanks Forty,” Mr. Fagan’s tribute to the company’s history through many iterations, beginning with the teasing name the Bottom of the Bucket but ... Dance Theater in 1970.

The programs also reach back in time with “Translation Transition” from 2002, with a score from Jazz Jamaica All Stars (an exploration of traditional Jamaican music and jazz) and “Memoriam,” created in 2001 to honor the victims of the Sept. 11 attacks and their families.

Mr. Fagan, who has racked up a bouquet of awards over the years, has created nothing less than a new branch of modern dance, said Judith Jamison, the former dancer and for many years artistic director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company.

“He’s not Eurocentric,” Ms. Jamison said. “It’s Caribbean, it’s polyrhythmic, it’s about sculpting space in a different way. He goes outside the boxes that are used, that dictate that we should look a certain way and move a certain way.”

Or, as Mr. Fagan says, he is jazz-influenced, sometimes moving his dancers with the music, sometimes against it.

His work manages to combine a “rich physicality and deeply human context,” said Virginia Johnson, the artistic director of the Dance Theater of Harlem.

This 40th anniversary is also a time for new work, culminating in a collaboration with Mr. Fagan's close friend the composer and trumpeter Wynton Marsalis at the Brooklyn Academy of Music next September. It comes two decades after his first collaboration with Mr. Marsalis, "Griot New York," a project Mr. Fagan called one of the "great blessings" of his life.

He and Mr. Marsalis cooked up "Griot," with a set that included pieces by the sculptor Martin Puryear, in 1991. An abstract distillation of the black experience that had its premiere at the Brooklyn Academy, it was acclaimed by critics. Over the years in which Mr. Fagan has continued to explore new pathways in dance, pushing back against those who sometimes found his work hard to define, his company of seven men and seven women has toured throughout the world.

The former Knights of Columbus building here is [home to the Garth Fagan Dance School](#), a three-week summer institute and administrative offices. The walls are dotted with poster-size reviews. Mr. Fagan began his career as a dancer, studying with Martha Graham, Pearl Primus, Alvin Ailey and José Limón and later creating work for Ms. Jamison, Dance Theater of Harlem, Limón Dance Company and the New York City Ballet. His own dancers receive a salary and benefits; they do not work under contract, as they do in many companies.

"He really nurtures us so much that he can tell exactly what each dancer needs to stretch them," Mr. Pennewell said. "His legacy is his standards. He is a very hard-working person who has never, ever rested on his laurels. You have to take it to the wall every day."

Mr. Fagan has been known quietly to aid students and young dancers without resources, said Ruby P. Lockhart, the executive director of the company. Its dancers draw audiences and the company receives generous financial support from local sources and foundations, but Mr. Fagan lamented that he remained a large contributor.

"Everybody's having problems" because of the economy, he said.

"My curse is I love details, and I could eat, sleep and dream this," he said at the end of the workday, sitting in his home in a quiet residential area where the only sound came from the cries of his 10 pet birds. "I love the process of going for perfection."