



Garth Fagan Dance makes Miami debut

Maverick master choreographer Garth Fagan brings his troupe to the South Dade Cultural Center

By Jordan Levin
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I thought everyone in Miami with any cultural leanings would be at Sleepless Night, but seems the audience has gotten much bigger. When I made the trek down to Cutler Bay on Saturday to see the Garth Fagan Dance troupe, there were hundreds of people streaming into the South Dade Cultural Arts Center. Really seems that all those who said that there was an audience and community for art in deep South Dade were right. Not only was the 900-seat theater almost full for Fagan, but there was also a good crowd for Miami Acting Company's production of Sartre's *No Exit*.

And the audience was impressively mixed; black, white, Latino, elderly and middle-aged couples, families with kids, wide-eyed teens and 20-somethings. And people seemed very happy to be there. "It's a huge oasis, you can't miss it" said the Afro-chic young woman in line at *Will Call* behind me, giving directions to a friend. Nice.

Torn as I was at missing the early part of *Sleepless Night*, I felt I couldn't miss Garth Fagan's first appearance in Miami. Fagan has forged a unique and powerful dance language and repertoire all on his own in Rochester, New York – a genuinely original artist. He's got strong cross-cultural connections in Miami too. At Saturday's show were Danny Lewis, recently retired dean of dance at New World School of the Arts, which has hosted Fagan for various workshops and which had three graduates in the Fagan troupe (whose friends and family were also in the audience); New World master teacher Peter London, who's trained generations of students for Ailey, Fagan and other troupes; Brazilian-born Brazz Dance Theater director Augusto Soledade, who also studied with Fagan and whose troupe is now in residence at the South Dade Center. Fagan hugged and laughed and shook hands with all of them, three generations of dancers in Miami linked to him and his troupe, a multiplying creative network. Nice to see.

Prelude, a dance from 1981, showed Fagan at his best: powerfully physical choreography that doesn't look like anyone else's. It's not sleekly turned-out and balletic-looking, like so much modern dance these days. *Prelude* startled with contrasts: fast and slow, smooth and jagged, astonishing suspended balances and slashing limbs, pulsing Afro-beat torsos and lyrical curves. It was abstract, building power entirely through Fagan's masterly formal composition. That impact is made possible by dancers Fagan has trained; terrifically strong, ripped like Olympic

athletes, capable of impossible looking feats. Spinning across the floor, their arms whipped so fast they blurred in the air; they jump as if rocket-powered, bursting into the air without any visible preparation. Norwood Pennewell, one of the company's longtime stars, is 52 and looks half his age; at 59, grizzled Steve Humphrey needs no excuses. I particularly loved passionate, elegant Lindsay Renea, and the long-limbed, intense Amshel Padilla (one of the New World grads). Like the audience, Fagan's troupe is completely mixed, not only black, white and Latino, but from the U.S. and from the Caribbean (Fagan is from Jamaica, and he seems to have a liking for dancers with some of his island instincts and rhythms).

Another New World grad, Vitolio Jeune, looks to be Fagan troupe's next star. Jeune has an amazing story; orphaned in his native Haiti, he was a homeless teen who danced on the streets of Port-au-Prince for change, until he was taken in by Jeanguy Saintus, the visionary director of Hatian modern dance troupe Ayikodans. That led to a scholarship at New World, where Fagan saw him. Jeune did a stint on *So You Think You Can Dance?* in 2009, before joining Fagan – and while the audience may never approach what he had on TV, Jeune's astonishing gifts are much more visible than in the cheesy video-dance dreck he performed on *SYTYCD*. He was a virtuoso animal in the solo *Talking Drum*, exploding into the air to land in tensely suspended arches, dropping to the floor like a big cat on the hunt, intensely, vibrantly alive. Jeune riveted the audience for the entire minute solo, almost as important as his physical gifts. Watch for him.

Liminal Flux, Pennewell's debut as a choreographer, was well-made and entertaining, but showed a strong, and almost inevitable, influence from Fagan in the style and the composition. *Madiba*, a new work inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela, was unfortunately marred by the malfunctioning of its special video equipment – the video camera that Pennewell, the Mandela figure, wore on his head, which was supposed to show live, careening and close-up images of the stage and other dancers, didn't work most of the time. Too too bad. Pennewell's prison isolation solo, a trio with Jeune and Padilla, and a wonderful duet for the dark-skinned Renea and the white-skinned Shannon Castle, a beautiful display of physical and metaphoric co-dependence, were still powerful, but without the video cam *Madiba* didn't have the impact Fagan intended. Still, well worth the trip.