

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## Sculptural force with subtext



Proud formalism: Nicolette Depass and Vitolio Jeune in 'Mudan 175/39' Paula Summit

### DANCE

#### Garth Fagan Dance

Joyce Theater, New York

Since founding his company four decades ago, Garth Fagan has lived and worked upstate, impervious to the fret and ferment surrounding novelty that absorbs our local choreographers. The resulting palette of often refreshingly *démodé* moods and methods is prominently on display this year at the Joyce (until Sunday), perhaps because of the subdued character of the season's premiere and featured repertoire.

Shades of calculatedly guileless cheer or gloomy anomie dominate contemporary dance; Fagan – who mounted annual seasons downstate for years before achieving broad acclaim with a 1998 Tony for his *Lion King* choreography – prefers an easy, friendly cool.

The Jamaican émigré treats his wide array of music – jazz, ska, fusions of western and eastern classicism – as neither mood thermostat nor metronome but like a lover or brother whose drift he knows so well that he can dip in and out in unhurried conversation. Many dances today stop only long enough to implode; Fagan's can be brazenly slow, with the dancers becoming a garden of stone before they calmly carry on. He does not forgo steps for vectors of energy; he likes his shapes. A "Y" tilted off its axis, a body hinged forward or back at the hips, split leaps: he angles limb to torso in clean geometries. Most of the time, the shapes don't speak except to say "shape". Fagan is a proud formalist.

This year, I found myself wishing he were less proud – that he would throw us a few more bones of connection between his dance lexicon and the giddy social dances the scores evoke, and between the dancers. Late in *Mudan 175/39*, the

season premiere, the lithe company veteran Norwood Pennewell lifts the fiercely self-possessed statuesque newcomer Lindsay Benton off her feet without disturbing her bent-legged form and rocks her back and forth. As with the 2006 *Senku's* playful, tender interlude *Talk: Ms/Mrs* between Nicolette Depass and Lynet Rochelle, or the simultaneous solos of Pennewell and Rochelle in 2002's *Translation Transition* in which each responds to the other without benefit of touch or gaze, the *Mudan* duet adds subtext without diminishing the dance's sculptural force.

*Mudan* moves like wind chimes on a mercurial day. Pennewell and Benton merely anchor that blustery, then tranquil, spirit to human experience so it stays with us after the curtain falls. ★★★★★

Apollinaire Scherr