

A new chapter for Garth Fagan Dance

Written by Anna Reguero
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Dancers from Garth Fagan Dance perform a dress rehearsal for the world premiere of *Madiba*, a work inspired by Nelson Mandela, at the Joyce Theater in New York City. /TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/Getty Images

Something about the atmosphere in New York City's Joyce Theater says this is a place for serious dance — and this night's offering should be a regular date on your annual calendar.

It's in the impatient way the box office and ushers address you, as if you should be familiar with the theater. It's in the mumblings of the sophisticated and diverse audience, some wearing beautiful gowns, others trendy casual.

This October night offers Garth Fagan Dance's yearly concert at the premier theater for modern dance in the country. It's a concert that will be repeated in Rochester this week — as it is every year.

The Joyce performance is important for Fagan and his company. Critics from national publications are there. The reviews can determine tours and donor support.

An older piece, *Prelude*, opens the shows and is a suitable warm-up that features Fagan technique in a foundational form, prepping the audience's eyes for the rest of the program.

Then it's onto the new: The performance will debut Fagan's latest work, *Madiba*, an homage to anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela. It will also debut the second major work by Fagan's protégé, Norwood Pennewell.

Yet beyond the new works, Fagan has something else to show his audience: a growing dancer. With Pennewell stepping more and more into an artistic leadership role as a choreographer, his duties as Fagan's longtime muse have been up for grabs. Filling the void has been Vitolio Jeune, an up-and-coming dancer who came to Rochester after being a finalist on *So You Think You Can Dance*.

The response from the Joyce Theater following his piece is overwhelmingly positive — the reviews are positive as well, praising Fagan's strong emphasis on details.

Eyes on Jeune

Those details are what Fagan demands from all his dancers and what defines his style. Fagan's best dancers — Pennewell and Nicolette Depass among them — show them well. Fagan and company members agree that Jeune, 29, also does and has earned an important role in the company.

"He is amazing," says Fagan. "He is talented and he works hard. The depth and breadth he has, not just in the technical stuff, which is difficult and fabulous, but just in the performance of it all. ... There's nobody else in the company who can do that solo, physically."

Fagan has already tested out new choreography on Jeune, calling him "vulnerable and open." Pennewell says Jeune is becoming an indispensable part of the company, helping to push all the company members to work harder.

"Mainly, Garth is just inspired. That is the thing we recognized in him when he first saw V (Vitolio)," he says. "In a year's time, we were like, 'OK, now we see what Garth is saying.' This guy is amazing. The thing that I love ... just watching him as a performer — it's something I've always strived for and it took me years to get there — is a certain level of abandon."

Jeune, entering his third year with the company, came in as a junior member with unusual celebrity status after the *So You Think You Can Dance* performances on Fox. His early performances with the company showed him as talented and determined, but still a wild card who needed time to master Fagan's disciplined poses and aesthetic.

He earned a spot as a permanent company member this summer at the Nazareth College Dance Festival, Fagan says. *Dance Magazine* featured Jeune as a dancer "on the rise" in May.

At the Joyce, Jeune gave a performance so intense that he's positioned himself as a natural successor as the company's choreographic canvas, a strong, malleable and trained body for the company's two choreographers to mold into their visions. In Fagan's timeless solo "Talking Drums," part of the 2006 repertory work *Senku*, his gargantuan leaps, pliable body, controlled movements and deep concentration arrested time. He's danced it before, but not as well as this night.

He also has important roles in the new works by Fagan and Pennewell.

Jeune says he's been putting in hours of sweat to find his place and calls Fagan demanding and a perfectionist.

"How Mr. Fagan works is very amazing," he says. "Sometimes he just shows up to the studio and then he just throws the movement at you, and you have to walk on it and constantly keep walking on it, doing it over and over."

Pennewell's lens

Liminal Flux is Pennewell's second work for the Fagan company.

Pennewell's first work for the company, *Hylozoic* — also the first work the company ever performed that wasn't Fagan's creation — debuted last season to mostly positive reviews, with one foreboding criticism: It looked too much like Fagan.

Questions about how Pennewell might distinguish himself from the choreography he's been steeped in for more than 30 years, especially as the dancer next in line to lead the company, were also in the air at Joyce this fall. The audience was buzzing.

It's a criticism Pennewell seems to have taken to heart. In *Liminal Flux*, Pennewell has started to break away from pure Fagan, not in movement, but in concept. Set in an urban dance club, using African-influenced, electronic dance hall beats, dancers are in costumes mimicking modern yoga gear, strolling both as groups and individuals to the groove.

It's Fagan, updated for a new generation.

"It's PJ commenting on his times, from his perspective," says Fagan, who kept distant from the choreographic process to let Pennewell (nicknamed PJ) create outside of his shadow. "It's very fresh and very youthful."

Pennewell does include one major nod to his mentor, through his choice of music. One of the musical selections for the work dates to nearly 30 years, to a trip he took with Fagan to a Miles Davis concert in Syracuse. The experience turned Pennewell into a Davis fan, and ever since he

has wanted to use "Backseat Betty" in his choreography. He waited until he was ready for the challenge.

"The concert was amazing," Pennewell remembers. "Just to watch him, it was like a true jam band environment. ... Miles would go over to one musician, start playing this sound to whomever he would stand in front of, and the musician would gradually change whatever he was doing to whatever Miles just played. The entire group would pick up on that vibe. That's what I tried to emulate in the choreography. I tried to have those moments where there's a subtle change in the stage picture."

In addition to the choice of music, the title of the work helped him focus his choreography. Liminal means "a place between two phases where a person can end up," he says. Flux is the way energy flows between two points.

"I'm going to re-create some way where you can see energy flowing between two points, but also an area of sustained moment between two phases."

The work has some classic "Faganisms" — some movements that don't directly line up with the music, changing of scenes that don't line up with breaks in the music. Pennewell doesn't apologize for them.

"Even if I get as far away from his influence (in the aesthetics) as I can, there's always going to be a little Fagan nugget in there somewhere," he says. "There is always going to be a little something in there that's some sort of homage to or acknowledgement of all Garth has meant to me."

Yet forging his own choreographic voice while representing the company's storied history and look can be challenging.

"It can be daunting," he says. "I am so honored to have such an incredible luxury of the environment I'm in because everybody is so incredibly supportive and they want me to succeed. But they're not going to let me rest on my laurels either."

Fagan's own vision

Fagan's latest work, which breaks new ground, also is going to be heavily compared to his past dances. It's harder to compare one-on-one with his masterpieces than some of his other works.

The title, *Madiba*, is the African clan name for Nelson Mandela, who eventually became South Africa's president after leading the fight against apartheid.

He was Madiba before he was Mandela, Fagan says, and Mandela's life, to him, is symbolic of an ideal.

"What I was interested in was more the persona, the man of his caliber who could live through 2½ decades of incarceration and come out such a positive person, fighting in a racial society, the way South Africa was before him, feeling and giving," he says. "That's a big lesson to us."

The idea for the work stems back to a trip to Jamaica that Fagan took around the same time Mandela traveled there to accept an award. Fagan was to stay in the same room at the same hotel that Mandela had stayed in — and when Fagan checked in, the room had not yet been made up.

"Don't change a thing," Fagan begged as he ran up to the room, and jumped in the bed. "It was sincere, but a juvenile thing, just wanting to get the spirit of the man. His spirit is so strong and rich."

Working with such historical material could be prescriptive, but Fagan's abstract choreography does less to tell a linear story than it does to express Mandela's life in an impressionistic, snapshot manner.

For the first time, Fagan incorporates technological features into his choreography, and so he says he chose to use it in a way that hasn't been done before in dance. Pennewell wears a camera that records live as he dips and roams around the stage, trapped by a circle of dancers.

The live images are broadcast as the backdrop to the stage. The audience sees the first-person perspective of Pennewell moving across the stage with glimpses of the other dancers, the audience, even markings on the floor.

The totality creates an overall impression of disorientation with fleeting moments of memory and clarity — the mental state of Mandela while incarcerated, Fagan imagines.

Pennewell admits he wasn't sure how the video would enhance the performance.

"Conceptually, because we couldn't see the images that I was filming, transmitting, we couldn't see how that as a backdrop played against what we were doing on stage," he says.

But when the company had a chance to watch a recording of the Joyce Theater performance back in the Rochester studio, it was a revelation to members.

"For me, it was a guerilla documentary," Pennewell says. "In other instances, it reminded me of a surveillance camera that might have been posted in certain areas where the authorities might have congregated."

Wearing not only a camera on his head but also carrying a transmitter and battery pack while dancing was a challenge. It forced him to think about external movement, "making sure when Garth needed a particular image in the frame, I had to angle my head a certain way or that I was far enough from the image so I can get the full image," he says. "It was just another kind of choreography that I had to incorporate."

Fond reception

Fagan and company are used to standing ovations all over the globe, but there's something different about receiving one at the Joyce Theater. It's a tough audience, especially with cultural leaders, like Wynton Marsalis, who is collaborating with Fagan for a second time on a piece with a planned debut next fall.

On this night in October, the audience showed its satisfaction. Not only a standing ovation, but hoots and cheers, followed by positive reviews in the New York press.

"When you get the kind of reactions we got from them, it's amazing," Jeune says.