



Garth Fagan Dance helps Frederick Douglass Institute celebrate 25 years

By James Goodman
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The Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies at the University of Rochester began its 25th-year celebration Tuesday on an artistic note.

Garth Fagan, founder of the renowned modern dance company that bears his name, was the keynote speaker, with members of Garth Fagan Dance performing at the Spurrier Dance Studio on the River Campus.

"Frederick Douglass provided the inspiration for us all," said Fagan about the abolitionist leader who published his anti-slavery newspaper in Rochester prior to the Civil War.

Members of Fagan's dance group performed three numbers — including *Madiba*, a tribute to Nelson Mandela, who led the struggle for racial equality in South Africa.

Fagan, who has been based in Rochester for more than four decades, was awarded the Frederick Douglass Medal by the institute.

He said that both his dance group and the institute are all about breaking barriers and opening doors.

Paul Burgett, a UR vice president who teaches at the institute, said that Fagan's contributions to African-American art and culture are an embodiment of the Douglass spirit.

Established in 1986, the institute has helped connect UR to the traditions of Douglass and put a focus on African-American and African studies.

The institute was created after protests by African-American students in 1985 as a way of improving race relations on campus.

But the reach of the institute goes well beyond Rochester.

"The Frederick Douglass Institute ... explores the intellectual dimension of this Pan-African idea that links Frederick Douglass, Mandela and Mr. Fagan in the same quest for freedom, creativity and expression — in short, the quest of the best of the human spirit," said institute director Cilas Kemedjio.

In its early years, the institute developed courses, brought speakers to the campus and held forums.

But problems developed over hiring and personalities. In 1999, about 200 students — concerned about the future of the institute — staged a sit-in outside the UR president's office.

A revamped institute put more of a focus on undergraduates.

Since 2000, the institute has offered on average 18 courses a semester, with 365 students enrolled in African and African-American Studies classes. Thirty students have graduated with a major in these studies over the past decade.

Based in Morey Hall, the institute has a director and a staff of three, with courses taught by faculty from various departments.

UR associate history professor Larry Hudson, who directed the institute after it was reorganized, told how the institute encourages students and professors from different disciplines to work together and helps promote an important legacy.

"The institute recognizes and keeps in our minds the life and work of Frederick Douglass," he said.