



TheGrio's 100: Garth Fagan, icon of the modern dance

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Garth Fagan (Photo: Adger Cowans)

To most, dance pioneer Garth Fagan's most recognizable work is the Tony Award winning Broadway musical *The Lion King*. Yet to those familiar with modern dance, Fagan's entire work over his lifetime is quite revered.

During his life, the 71-year-old Jamaican American has toured Latin America as a dancer and studied with the greats, including Alvin Ailey, José Limón, and Pearl Primus. He has also produced commissioned pieces for *The Dance Theater of Harlem*, *The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*, and *The New York City Ballet*.

Yet Garth Fagan has gained great prominence over the last forty years for his work through his work as the founder and artistic director of *Garth Fagan Dance*, based in Rochester, New York.

Garth Fagan is making history ... through his innovative choreography, which incorporates ballet, Afro-Caribbean and modern dance. The 1989 Guggenheim choreography fellow's work is personal, often including autobiographical elements.

New York Times writer Anna Kisselgoff wrote of Fagan: "Originality has always been Mr. Fagan's strong suit, not least in his transformation of recognizable idioms into a dance language that looks not only fresh but even idiosyncratic."

Fagan's decades-long "curse" of passion for dance and his sense of humor continues to thrill audiences today.

"My curse is I love details, and I could eat, sleep and dream this," Fagan said in an interview with the [New York Times](#). "I love the process of going for perfection."

What's next for Garth?

Fagan is currently getting ready to put on a performance for the Brooklyn Academy of Music's 150th anniversary in September. He is working with celebrated jazz musician Wynton Marsalis on the performance.

In his own words ...

Fagan describes his love of dance as an art form: "Movement invention, coming up with new moves, new steps that nobody has ever seen before," he said. "I choose to put the essence of black culture in my work. While I use classical European composers, I still want people of the black diaspora to feel a little something, to see a little something different when they see my work."

A little-known fact about Garth Fagan's friends

Fagan was close friends with the late legendary writer Alex Haley, the author of the iconic *Roots: The Saga of the American Family* and co-author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Haley also served as an honorary board member of Garth Fagan Dance.

****THE GRIOT'S Q & A WITH GARTH FAGAN****

Q: What's next in this chapter of your life?

A: I am looking forward to my next collaboration with my dear friend and colleague, Maestro Wynton Marsalis, who is composing a score for a dance that will be premiered at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) Sept. 27-30, 2012 in celebration of BAM's 150th anniversary and Garth Fagan Dance's 41st anniversary. Joe Melillo, Executive Producer, who along with Liz Thompson in 1991, were instrumental in producing my World-acclaimed Griot New York with

Wynton, and sculptor Martin Puryear, is commissioning this dance. Through hard work, talent and invention we plan for this to be superb.

Q: What's a fact about you that many people don't know?

A: That thanks to my mother, Louise Walker's expertise and tutelage, I enjoy cooking exquisite, complicated, spicy meals for up to 16 guests at a time.

Q: What's your favorite quote?

A: I have two that sustain me, from my father S.W Fagan "DISCIPLINE IS FREEDOM" (which I used to hate when I was growing up) and from my dear friend, mentor and board member Alex Haley, "FIND THE GOOD AND PRAISE IT".

Q: Where do you get your inspiration?

A: That's a hard one because it comes from people like Nelson Mandela, ideas like Passion Distanced or a butterfly on a plane window fighting the turbulence as the plane taxis and, of course, music and poetry of all genres and centuries. Hours, weeks, months of solitude and contemplation, experimentation and rehearsal, plus my wonderful dancers, especially fellow Bessie award-winners Norwood Pennewell and Natalie Rogers-Cropper, all of these things and people, help bring the work to fruition.

Q: Who are/were your mentors?

A: My father, S.W. Fagan, 13 nourishing, DEMANDING, supportive aunts and uncles, Duke Ellington, Martha Graham, Mary Hinkson, Alvin Ailey, Jamake Highwater, Romare Bearden, Miles Davis, Sol Lewitt, Albert Huie, Ivy Baxter, Jose Limon, Lino Tagliapietra, Keith Jarret, Abdullah Ibrahim.

Q: What advice would you give to anyone who wants to achieve their dreams?

A: Analyze your dreams to find out what exactly you are aiming for, what is the required methodology or expertise. What talents, knowledge or experience do you bring to the table. Investigate those who preceded you or blazed trails in your area, so you can learn from their successes or mistakes, respect their accomplishments (you don't have to love them) and plan to work extremely hard, then work some more and more and more and more to you achieve your dreams.