

# Garth Fagan Dance

## Legends Night A Celebration of 40 years of Garth Fagan Dance

November 30, 2010

Leading off a week of concerts in Rochester, NY  
At the newly refurbished Nazareth Arts Center



Reviewed by Herbert Simpson

For a week every year at this time in Rochester, New York, its home town, *Garth Fagan Dance* performs the new works that have just been introduced in New York City and revives some classic Fagan achievements. This late fall home season catches up the faithful on Rochester's world-class, world-touring modern dance company. This 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary season opened with a crowded program introducing Fagan's newest work, plus the company's first work not by Garth Fagan, and a one-time performance of Fagan's delicious new dance for this occasion, that

showcased 20 company alumni whose ages range from about 35 to 65. To say that their 2010 opening concert was a celebration is an understatement. It was a festive jubilee.

A little more than forty years ago I was sent to report on the new special course in dance that State University of New York, College at Brockport had set up in Rochester's inner city. The beautiful young dancers turned out to be mostly novices in their late teens: few of them had ever had a dance class or even thought of taking one before this college-credit course turned up, taught by a mesmerizing young Jamaican named Garth Fagan. In less than two years those who literally stayed the course were committed to Fagan as their virtual guru who formed them into a small dance company he named, The Bottom of the Bucket, BUT....

During my sabbatical year at Carnegie-Mellon University, 1972-3, I was surprised to see The Bucket show up at a Pittsburgh conference of northeastern regional modern dance companies, mostly from colleges, but including some small professional companies. Chosen among the few who were to perform in a concert, The Bucket danced Garth's dazzling *Roots*, an African ritual dance presented through the prism of Fagan's distinctive, eclectic technique. I was startled at the sensation they caused. Everyone I talked to at the conference wanted to talk about nothing else.

*Roots* seemed to announce the beginnings of Fagan's own developing style, which combined Afro-Caribbean movement, contemporary modern dance, some of ballet's pulled-up, classical technique, and Fagan's own choices of movement he liked from disparate sources. With almost unbelievable discipline and strength the Bucket danced that piece, set to the music of Olatunji and Drums of Burundi, and had to encore its last section. Those screamed-for encores became a tradition at Fagan's concerts.

Of course, in succeeding years the company grew, dropped the "Bottom of the Bucket" name and references, performed with acclaim on every continent but Antarctica, and at one time or another won just about every available prize. Fagan, with his New York Performance Bessie Award-winning leading dancers assisting him, staged Duke Ellington's *Queenie Pie* and new ballets for New York City Ballet and Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre. He won an Olivier Award, a Tony Award, an Astaire Award, Australia's Helpmann Award, New York's Critics Circle Award and Drama Desk Award, and a lot of other awards for choreographing Disney's stage musical,

*The Lion King* on Broadway and in many countries. The company appeared on TV's *Great Performances*, and on the Academy Awards show, and opened the American Center in Paris, France. They toured this continent with trumpet virtuoso Wynton Marsalis performing *Griot New York*, an evening-long collaboration by Fagan+ Marsalis + sculptor Martin Puryear, which was also televised. And now for the 40<sup>th</sup> year celebration, as funding dries up in these tough times, Garth Fagan, thanks to his personal *Lion King* income, is the major support of Garth Fagan Dance.

No such irony was in evidence at the packed Rochester concerts. *Legends Night* opened traditionally with Fagan's iconic *Prelude (1983)*, meaningfully subtitled "Discipline is Freedom." It is a gorgeous progression of Fagan's favorite movement-motifs: impossibly long-held balances in high extensions, sudden whirlwind turns becoming freezes of statuesque penche' arabesques, superfast tight turns across the whole stage with arms windmilling in complex patterns, high vertical leaps that seem to happen without preparation. All that is presented in a "can-you-top-this" order that shifts in dynamic with the music and betrays passion and angst, becoming joy. *Prelude* is a perfect introduction to the whole company of dancers, and -- for those familiar with the piece and its performers -- serves as an indication of the growth and current condition of each dancer. This year's indications were mind-blowing, especially of Steve Humphrey, the one remaining dancer from the original 1970 company, now almost 60 and dancing if anything better than before, still jumping higher and turning faster than would seem possible, and with seasoned richness of communication. And Norwood Pennewell, 52 and looking almost 30, is still the finest male dancer in this company, or most others. The knowing audience was beside itself.

Next Pennewell and Nicolette Depass danced Fagan's lovely duet *Spring Yaounde* from *Griot New York (1991)*, an intense, romantic coupling of a man and woman clad only in dark bikini briefs. I'm told that Depass is 37 now, still able to appear almost nude onstage without embarrassment and dancing indefatigably on this night in every single dance, except the alumni romp. She has performed this duet with more passion but never looked quite as good as she did this time. And female dancers dream of a partner as perfect as Pennewell.

*Hylozoic* (2010) is the first piece created for the company by Pennewell, who is known as “PJ,” and is Fagan’s disciple and muse and understood to be his intended successor. The program reads, “*Hylozoism – The philosophy that holds that matter is inseparable from life.*”

Choreography is by Norwood Pennewell; music by John Adams, Adam Rudolph, and Yusef Lateef; Lighting Design by Hideaki Tsutsui; and Costumes by Colette Hawkins. It looks like Garth, but it doesn’t look like Garth. One can certainly see the line of succession, but PJ gets his dancers into and out of positions faster than Garth does and with less portentous emphasis. Garth says that this is an indication that PJ is younger than he is. The dance moves with calm grace but not slowly, and it shifts emphasis from time to time but never loses flow or stops looking handsome. Pennewell seems more interested in exploring his dancers’ individual qualities than making them focus on his thematic ideas. Nicolette Depass was strong, stunning and queenly here, and Kaori Otani seemed to open out as never before in wonderful extensions and jumps. Similarly, I’m told that Khama Kgari, a small, compact dancer has been uneven, but his beautiful feet and huge jumps here made him look like the sort of scene-stealing virtuoso dancer cast in traditional ballets as the jester. The company’s new virtuoso, Vitolio Jeune, out-jumps everyone but Pennewell, who really showcases him here. This dance overall is pretty irresistible (and irresistibly pretty), but it does contain hints of more serious statement. And it is no one’s idea of easy movement. Other dancers in *Hylozoic* – all looking first rate – were Lindsay Renea, Shanon Castle, John Mercado, Michael Fernandez, Wynton Rice, Amshel Padilla, and Megan Evans.

Fagan’s new work for the season, *Thanks Forty*, had this note under the title: “*Big thanks to the dancers, artistic colleagues, staff, board, family, mentors, audiences and critics around the nation and the world who have enriched these forty years.*” Choreography is by Garth Fagan; Music by Dmitri Shostakovitch, Bonga Kuend, and Gerald Albright; Lighting Design by Jideaki Tsutsui; and Costumes by Lena-Marie Bell. It has little hint of the usual darker elements or effort to make a social statement that most Fagan works do. This is Fagan in more contented display of good feelings, and it is a memorably beautiful dancework. He says that the women were intended to provide a happy display of beautiful dance partly to compensate for the wildly varied showy males; but I found all the dance happy and beautiful.

Initially Nicolette Depass, the one-woman dance company on this program, appears in *MUSE-Work*, a reflective solo that shows her to be as strong as she is seemingly inward-looking, developing powerful linear, balanced six o'clock extensions into almost agonizingly slow turns. When she moves out, Depass might not find it "work," but, however beautiful, it looks murderously difficult to control so splendidly.

Certainly *JUMP-Earn* shows off the physical virtuosity of younger male company members Khama Kgori, Vitolio Jeune, Michael Fernandez, and Wynton Rice. Nothing mysterious about this spirited quartet, but it did seem at times to be on the verge of wildness. Then the women provide a unified beauty in *HEAL-Pray* that grounds the piece. Again, Kaori Otani seemed to be rising above her past work in top-level performing, but Lindsay Renea, Shanon Castle, and Amshel Padilla left no doubt that they belong in the splendid company

The end is a typical Fagan celebration. *FETE-Joys* unleashes the whole cast, led by Pennewell, Humphrey, and Depass in top form, in an exuberant party, fittingly to music called "Capetown Strut," that is all high-energy exhibition. They make it look less difficult than it is and seem to be having fun with it.

The special concoction for this occasion only was Fagan's *Alumni Reunion Romp*, set to music by Billy Bangs. Much of the movement was quotations from familiar older works. Many longtime audience members audibly reacted with delight to see the one other original company member, 65 year-old Roger Smith, now literally a graybeard, gamely still lifting women and repeating his famed signature movements from Fagan's 1979 *Oatka Trail* and joining the men in spirited unison passages from *Prelude*. The alumni

Included current staff members Natalie Roger-Cropper, Bit Knighton, and Bill Ferguson; also Roger Smith, Mary Greely-Miller, Jon Gourdine, Frances Hare, Paula Summit, Micha Willis-Scott, Danny Ayyette, Peggy Hewitt, Joel Valentine, Lavert Benefield, Keisha Clark, Annique Roberts, Lutin Tanner, Kevin Ormsby, Daniel Gwirtzman, Deidre Eli, and Vishal Shetty, plus a couple of last-minute finds not on the program. I guess their training with Fagan helps to explain why most of them still look younger than they are and can still perform those steps so well. The *Romp* was accompanied throughout by noisy excited response.

Two sections of Fagan's 1999 *WOZA* (music by *Lion King's* Lebo M) were scheduled to end the program, but with the addition of the *Alumni Reunion Romp*, the lengthy evening threatened to start to drag. So we got only *WOZA's* finale, *Come...Celebration*, to provide the traditional wingding conclusion. Led by Pennewell and Depass, it looked sensational and required a short encore. Anyway, on this program, pretty much every item wound up being a party.

Herbert M. Simpson

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