

# The Gazette

A new nameplate for The Gazette in Montreal

## The king of choreography

### The Lion King's on-stage musical garnered a Tony award for Garth Fagan, who hadn't seen the film until being approached by Disney

By Victor Swoboda  
August 16, 2011



*Photo by Dario Ayala*

“Me and Disney?”

Contemporary choreographer Garth Fagan chuckled in perplexity when the Disney organization first approached him in 1996 about possibly creating dances for a new Broadway musical based on the animated film *The Lion King*. (A touring version opened at Place des Arts last Tuesday.) Fagan had won critical favour and prestigious awards for his work with his company, Garth Fagan Dance. A mix of African, Caribbean and contemporary dance, his style was athletic, animated and energetic, but it wasn't aimed at kids.

“The Disney that I go back to in my youth was *Sleeping Beauty* – those nice sweet prince-and-princess things,” Fagan, 70, said in a phone interview from his company studios in Rochester, N.Y., before the Place des Arts show opened, his voice lilting with the tones of his native Jamaica. “I'd had a big hit at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with a piece called *Griot New York* that had a sizzling duet for a man and a woman who were topless. So I just sent some stuff (to Disney) and waited to see what would happen.”

When Fagan learned that he was among the three finalists in Disney's far-flung search for a choreographer, he figured he should watch *The Lion King*. The film tells the story of the lion cub Simba, who confronts enemies including three evil hyenas and grows into the king of the Africa savannah, protector of such residents as a wise baboon, a warthog and a hornbilled bird.

“It was quite unlike anything I thought Disney was doing – I fell madly in love with it.” Fagan became still more excited after he was invited to see the musical’s costume sketches and puppets designed by Julie Taymor. Taymor would go on to win Tony awards for her costumes and direction.

Fagan came on board a project far removed from his familiar contemporary dance scene. He was accustomed to spending time on developing his own creative ideas for his company. The Lion King imposed a hasty deadline, and required dances with set themes and four-minute time frames to suit the Elton John score. When creating steps, Fagan also had to work around obstacles like Pride Rock, a mountainous promontory stage set where the pride of lions lives.

“When Pride Rock comes out of the earth, there’s a big hole down there. If you go plummeting down, your career is over,” Fagan observed wryly. “So I had to make changes. It was a good lesson. It taught me to overcome restrictions. And these were valid restrictions. The set had to be the set.”

Problems of another kind arose when choreographing for dancers who were wearing headdresses and arm bands and, in some cases, working with long poles. Initially the “gazelles” had paraphernalia on the head, arms and back. Ultimately, the backpacks were dropped.

“There was just too much business for them to do the nice high, tight leaps that I wanted. Julie understood what dance was.”

The dancers had to learn how to whip their heads quickly without the headdresses falling off. Rehearsal mishaps were common.

“We laughed all the way through because sometimes we discovered things we hadn’t planned on.”

Fagan had to forgo his abstract dance style for one that constantly moved the Lion King story forward. He also needed to show each animal character’s personality.

“While the lionesses could kill gazelles and feed the pride as the male lions slept, I wanted them to be sexy because they were wearing these beautiful silk costumes – sexy but with that killing instinct.”

Fagan won a Tony for his choreography and garnered fame that far surpassed his considerable reputation as a contemporary choreographer (his company has played the world’s most distinguished festivals). Fourteen years later, The Lion King still plays on Broadway. The Disney organization estimates more than 13 million people in 16 North American cities have seen the touring version.

Throughout all those years, Fagan continued to direct the company that he founded in 1970 initially under the name Bottom of the Bucket BUT. The name referred to the dancers from underprivileged backgrounds whom he recruited for his troupe.

Although Fagan came from a privileged Jamaican background – his Oxford-educated father was Jamaica’s chief education officer – he has always sought to open artistic avenues to kids who lacked a helping hand. Along with his company, he operates a dance school for children. He apologized for being slightly late for the telephone interview because he’d been at the school to watch creations by children attending his summer program from around the world.

“It was good stuff, so I was happy.”

One of his goals for *The Lion King* was to make sure youngsters coming to the theatre could see different styles of dancing.

“If they’d only seen hip hop, they could see ballet, or if they’d studied ballet, they could see African, Caribbean and hip hop and realize what a vast spectrum there is.”

Fagan planned to spend a few days in Montreal to help with the *Lion King* staging. But he might also have had an ulterior reason to come.

“Montreal has great food. That’s what I like most about Montreal – French food.”