

ALTDAILY

Review: Garth Fagan Dance

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Monday, April 19th, 2010 at 7:25 am

The performance by [Garth Fagan Dance](#) was the first of this year's Virginia Arts Festival. But this show did not start with a bang. It began in silence, actually...

The curtain opened to one man, slightly stage right, sliding through angular poses and extensions. He was surrounded by silence. There was no set; the backdrop was a solid black scrim. The sidelights beamed on him from the wings. The audience immediately ceased their program-flipping and seat-adjusting and zeroed in on his movements; he had our undivided attention. Two men and two women soon joined him, all entering the stage separately, and with individual dance combinations. The costumes for "Prelude," this opening piece, were simple; dark leotards and tights for the women, and dark pants for the men. Still in silence, they danced in a mix of independence and unison, noiselessly jumping and floating around the stage. And then the music began, a somewhat methodical piano melody. The dancers continued through isolations, extensions, and lunges interspersed with quick jumps and sharp arm movements. They made their way on and off the stage, and through various groups and patterns.

And then the music changed ... the tempo increased, the drums picking up the pace. The many dancers came across the stage, one after another, from wing to wing, in sets of leaps, turns, lunges, and chaînés (a series of turns on straight legs) that were performed with such power and speed that they inspired many exclamations of "wow" and bursts of applause from the audience. We watched as the line of dancers went back and forth, all moving with amazingly high intensity, in one wing and out another.

"Prelude" (which was choreographed in the early 80's) made it clear that this company had its own style; their expression of modern dance was a wonderful blend of all types of movement, showing evidence of jazz and ballet influences. This being my first Garth Fagan Dance experience, I could immediately see why the company has been so successful for the last 39 seasons. Garth Fagan began the company, and his own teaching method (the Fagan Technique), in 1970. Garth Fagan Dance has since toured the world (several times, I'm sure). Mr. Fagan has choreographed for shows like "The Lion King," and for companies like Alvin Ailey, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and New York City Ballet. He and his dancers have received multiple awards and honors. I was ready to see more ...

"Talking Drums," and "Light" (along with "Prelude – Discipline is Freedom), made up the first section of the show. "Talking Drums" was an excerpt from "Senku." The soloist, Vitolio Jeune, began the dance with a slow lunge to the side, cupping his hand to his ear, listening. While he shifted his weight easily through what would seem to be off-balance positions, his head was always tilted, listening. Rapid movements mingled with the steady balances. Vitolio then melted to the floor, performing a series of splits and stretches. This piece was performed with striking control and smoothness. I heard a woman say, from a few rows behind me, "It's like he didn't have any bones in his body!"

The music for “Light” (an excerpt from “Life: Dark/Light) was a terrific jazz piece (the word “groovy” came to mind when it began). Four women entered the stage in succession, each walking back and forth in different directions, crossing each other’s paths but never relating to each other. One had her hand to her ear as though she were on the phone; another was “holding her purse;” and another was “checking her watch.” They walked for several phrases of the lively music; I was anxiously waiting for the walking to transform into something else . . . then, as if they could read my mind, one by one, each woman’s walk was interrupted with hiccups of dance steps, as though they tripped over them (implying a break in routine, perhaps?). Eventually, the walking completely disappeared into dancing, the piece continuing with different groups of men and women, and introducing the first instance of partnering in the performance.

The rest of the show was made up of two longer pieces, “Mudan” and “Translation Transition,” (one with four sections, and the other with three, respectively).

For me, the highlight of “Mudan” (which was just choreographed last fall) was “Now Here,” the third section. Six dancers (three men and three women) danced both as a group and in pairs. The costumes were unitards, with each dancer wearing a different vibrant color. The colors stood out wonderfully from the black backdrop, creating beautiful shapes as the dancers moved. This section led into a marvelous pas de deux, the two dancers woven together in incredibly slow lifts and flowing extensions.

Hands down, my favorite music out of the entire performance was the music of “Translation Transition,” by the Jazz Jamaica All Stars. (I am so thankful the album information is in the program, because I can’t wait to get my hands on it). It was what I would call a fusion of jazz and reggae, and essentially, this music made it very (*very*) hard for me to sit still. Which made much of the choreography for the piece unexpected; a majority of the dancing was slow lunges with still arms, long balances, and unchanging formations. I suppose the disparity between the dancing and the music was intended to magnify the calm intensity of the movements (which it did), but as I swayed back and forth in my seat, bopping my head to the music, I often found myself waiting for the dancers to bust out into bigger and looser movements. In the first sections of the piece, there were a few instances where the dancers rocked their shoulders and hips to the beat. The women occasionally shimmied as they moved across the stage. In the last section, “One Love,” I got what I was waiting for. The dancers had on stylish street clothes, and had bubbly and joyful facial expressions. There was a definite build in momentum, culminating in a fabulous combination that brought the entire company together and filled the stage with a lively and fun energy that I would have loved to see more of.

This performance proved time and again how strong the Garth Fagan Dance company members are, both physically and technically. I was impressed with their ability to hold lengthy balances, throw their weight on and off center, explode into energetic (and sometimes wild) turns and jumps, and then stop abruptly with not one hint of wavering.

The unique style of Garth Fagan Dance is certainly a significant one; the intensity and purpose of movement never falters. And judging by the many explosions of applause throughout the performance, and the standing ovation the company received at the finale, Garth Fagan Dance has gained many new fans from this performance. Myself included.