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Garth Fagan

A Choreographer of Life

For more than 40 years, Rochester choreographer Garth Fagan has wowed audiences, been acclaimed by the critics, and defied age with his world-renowned dance technique

By Amy Cavalier

Critics have called Garth Fagan “a true original,” “a genuine leader,” and “one of the greatest reformers of modern dance.” Founder and artistic director of the award-winning and internationally acclaimed Garth Fagan Dance, Fagan is practically a household name as a result of his choreography in Walt Disney’s Broadway musical “The Lion King.”

The 71-year-old admits he was attracted to dance at the age of 16 for shallow reasons — the flashy clothes, nice cars, and high society. He stayed with it because he fell in love with it. And he changed the world of dance with his vision.

In the past 40 years, Fagan’s dance troupe has performed on all continents except Antarctica, touring throughout the United States, Europe, Africa, Asia, the Near and Middle East, North and South America, New Zealand, Australia and the West Indies.

“We’ve been to all those places representing Rochester,” Fagan says with a smile. “We sell out before we get there, so that’s been a big blessing to me.”

Fagan’s work has been seen by millions and reviewed by handfuls of dance critics and fine arts writers. For his ability to express cultural statements through movement to

his techniques aimed at producing well-rounded dancers capable of performing well into their adulthood, Fagan has been showered with praise, nine honorary doctorates and awards aplenty. But one of the most satisfying moments in Garth’s career came in pleasing his first and most important critic — his father.

“I really loved him and cared for his counsel so much,” says Fagan. “As hard as he was, he made the man I am.”

Act I - His Biggest Critic

Fagan was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in May 1940. He grew up in a large, nurturing family of 13 aunts and uncles. He describes his father S.W. Fagan Webster as an Oxford educated man and a Virgo. Webster was a strict Methodist and chief education officer for Jamaica; Fagan, a Taurus with a rebellious streak.

“He kept me under surveillance... heavy manners, that’s what they say in Jamaica for disciplining a child,” Fagan reminisces, “but he also taught me something about hard work, quality and criteria. He loved criteria. If you liked something, you’d have to say compared to what, and you’d

have to say what, where and why. You had to have some substance to back it up.”

Fagan’s father felt his pursuit of the art of dance was a frivolity, preferring his son to pursue a career in the medical field or science or math. That didn’t stop the young Fagan from following his own dreams.

Starting at the age of 16, Fagan danced his way from Ivy Baxter’s Jamaican National Dance Company, to Wayne State University in Detroit, becoming principal soloist and choreographer of the Detroit Contemporary Dance Company and the Dance Theater of Detroit. In the 1960s, Fagan had plunged himself into the New York City Dance scene, and by 1970, he’d landed a teaching position at SUNY Brockport and founded his own dance company in Rochester called Bottom of the Bucket But...Dance Theater.

In 1973, he decided to take the dance troupe to Jamaica.

“I wanted them to really see Jamaican society, how positive it was, especially upper class and upper middle class Jamaican society, to give them some nourishment as to all that they could become,” Fagan says. “We had no money in the company. I charged a lot of it on my dad’s charge card.”

Fagan reserved a box seat for

eight people for his father, all the while warning the dancers that he may not show up. Fagan's father did come, along with a full box of friends and family. Fagan recalls his father's words of praise, 'what a wonderful show. If you had told me it had cultural significance and intellectual content, I never would have fought you as hard.'

Two weeks later, Fagan's father flew him back to Jamaica, where they sat on a veranda and talked about the show. Fagan got up the courage to tell his father about the money he had charged on his credit card, and told him they could arrange a payment schedule. His father says 'you don't owe me a dime. I'm so impressed with you that you don't owe me a dime.'

About one year later, his father suffered a stroke. Fagan says he's thankful he brought the dance company to Jamaica when he did.

"I would have always been wondering what dad would have

thought," he says. "Is this a worthwhile endeavor?"

Act II – Bright Lights and Fast Cars

Fagan was big into social dancing as a teenager, winning prizes for the mambo and the cha cha.

"That's what everybody did, not as a career or art, but for fun," he says. "I was good at it and that was it."

Then he was introduced to the Ivy Baxter's Jamaican National Dance Company. Baxter was teaching gymnastics in his school and she convinced Fagan to come to her studio and take classes.

"I don't have any idea what she saw," Fagan says.

The transition from party dancing to concert dancing was easy, but Fagan says, he didn't value the art right away. Instead he saw the flashy lifestyle and a place he could learn.

"It took me on tours, and all the people in her dance company were the best dressed, fastest and most sophisticated people in Kingston because they traveled around the world, had sports cars and wore the newest clothes," he recalls. "I'm ashamed to say all my reasons for pursuing this were shallow, shallow."

While attending Wayne State University, Fagan met Pat Welling, a dance teacher that really "nourished" him. She helped him with his first solo, "Contemplations," which he danced in complete silence.

"That was really bold for the early 1960s," he recalls. "At that point, I was really beginning to taste it — dancing could be a career. I got great reviews, the audience went wild. Now that I look back on it, it was so vulgar, showing off tricky things you could do to engage the audience."

Following college, Fagan became a member of the Detroit Contemporary Dance Company and the Dance Theater of Detroit, serving as principal soloist and choreographer for both groups. He made his way to New York City and studied with the likes of the Martha Graham Company, and his friend and mentor Alvin Ailey. All the while, Fagan had his dreams set on forming his own dance company, one consisting of dancers who didn't have any previous training or "people dancing, as opposed to dancers portraying people," as he describes it.

"I always look for what's not been done," he says. "I didn't want to repeat what other people had done. I wanted my own voice, my own technique, my own way of moving."

Act III – Finding His Place

Before SUNY Brockport made him an offer to teach a dance class in the summer of 1970, Fagan had never even heard of Rochester before.

"It was just an exit on the freeway as far as I was concerned," Fagan says.



Fagan receives the Musgrave Medal from Former Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson in 1998 for his Contribution to the World of Dance and Dance Theater.

Fagan figured he'd teach in Rochester for a few years and then head back to New York City, the dance capital of the world. He taught at Brockport for the summer and was asked to return again in the fall. In the meantime, Fagan started his dance company Bottom of the Bucket, But...Dance Theater.

"That was because I didn't have trained dancers, and because we were the bottom of the bucket now, but watch what we were going to do," he says.

The company of about 16 dancers was based at the Education Opportunity Center on Andrews Street. In addition to performing, the company offered public classes, which were well subscribed to. But Fagan had much larger dreams.

"I wanted to create a company where my dancers were salaried, so they'd get paid for what they do," he says. "In my day, it was four to five dancers to one hotel room. I didn't want to subject my dancers to that because they're professionals that work hard on their bodies keeping them in shape."

Within two or three years, Bottom of the Bucket, But... was performing in New York City. Within four years, the dance company was performing with award-winning choreographer/dancers Twyla Tharp and Carmen De Lavallade.

In an early review in *The New York Times*, Anna Kisselgoff wrote of Bottom of the Bucket...But: "Garth Fagan, their brilliant choreographer and director, has literally worked wonders on several levels. His use of black thematic material has several features in common with that of other black choreographers. But he started mainly with performers with minimal dance training. As a result, much of his choreography is really an incorporation of street vernacular style into patterns that suggest dance. The method works superbly and is responsible for the rousing raw energy that suffuses the choreography."

In the 1980s, Bottom of the Bucket...But was changed to Garth Fagan Dance. Natalie Rogers-Cropper joined Garth Fagan Dance in 1989 after



The dance company in a 1993 photo. Photo courtesy of Steve Labuzetta

seeing a performance in Houston, Texas. She was just coming off of eight years of working as a dancer for several companies in New York City,

"I saw them perform and that was that, I moved to Rochester to follow my dream," she says. "The music spoke to me in a way that said 'that's what I want to be doing'."

Rogers-Cropper hadn't even been accepted into dance troupe, she says she just wanted to study the work and learn the technique. Immediately, Fagan saw talent in the young dancer and invited her to rehearsal. Within four months, she was a member of the company.

"It was the shortest time anyone had been here before they joined Garth Fagan Dance as a company member," she says. "I was very proud of that. I haven't looked back. It's been the same ever since, just wonderful."

Rogers-Cropper is now director of the Garth Fagan School of Dance and assistant rehearsal director for the company.

"Garth encouraged me to be

more consistent and you will rise to the highest level," she says. "Practice and perform at the same level, and suddenly your performance gets better and better. That's what I tell all my dancers now. You're worrying too much about the end result and not about the process of learning. You want to get there before you do the work."

Bill Ferguson is Fagan's artistic and administrative liaison and a dancer with the company. He teaches and choreographs for the Garth Fagan School of Dance. After graduating from the University of Missouri in Kansas City, Ferguson moved to Rochester to dance with Garth Fagan.

"Two months after I moved up here, we were performing in Sicily on a 2,500-year-old amphitheater that they had built a stage on for the [Garth Fagan Dance] company to perform on, and I've been hooked ever since," he says.

That was 1989. Ferguson married Nicolette Depass, the lead woman



Receiving the Tony Award for Best Choreography for his work on Walt Disney's "The Lion King" in 1998.

dancer with the company. He says Fagan's vision of what concert dance should be is very unique.

"The quality and depth of our artistic product, not only is unique to Garth...but the ability of Garth's work to show us our humanity and communicating clearly is one of those things that helps keep the integrity of the company and the quality of their work so deep and successful," he says.

Act IV – The Fagan Technique

Rogers-Cropper says she was drawn to the "humanness" of Fagan's technique.

"This was a means of expression that's very rare to see in the dance world, where the movement is contributing to a statement about humanity...that's what I wanted to do. It was a very powerful moment for me to recognize that without acting, through movement, you can do exactly the same thing and affect

people in the same way an actor would, without words, just with movement."

Fagan's style has been described as having the weightiness and the floor work of modern dance, the torso centered movement of African/Caribbean dance, the speed and precision of ballet, and the rule breaking experimentation of post-moderns. The company's "fearless" dancers are "able to sustain long adagio balances, to change direction in mid-air, to vary the dynamic of a turn, to stop on a dime," writes David Vaughan in "Ballet Review."

But Fagan's approach extends far beyond mastering dance techniques. He believes in nurturing the whole dancer. His father being a professor, Fagan says he reveres education, and it shows in the way he runs his dance company.

"My dancers are the brightest dancers on the planet because besides the work they do in the studio, I take them to jazz concerts, poetry readings, art galleries, and they have to discuss and rank how they liked whatever it is they just saw and back up their

opinion," Fagan says, admitting the practice harkens back to his own upbringing. "Just last night we read an article in The New York Times and we ranked it, and you've got to back it up."

By seeing things from all perspectives, Fagan says, you can share ideas with people and prevent yourself from becoming insular and removed. For a Fagan dancer, the skills they acquire in the studio are just as important as their understanding of their world.

"As we tour the world, I always have it in my contract that we have a day off to explore the art and culture of the country," he says.

In Australia, company members danced with the Aborigines, in New Zealand, the Maoris. In Africa, dancers tried different foods and learned different rhythms performing side by side with other dance companies.

"My dancers always meet with the audience after the show out in the lobby; that way you hear from the people who buy the tickets to your show; you experience the different walks of life."

An award-winning 40 years

- In 1998, Fagan received Jamaica's Special Gold Musgrave Medal for his Contribution to the World of Dance and Dance Theater and the Prime Minister's Award. In 2001, he was presented with the Order of Distinction in the rank of Commander by the Jamaican government.

- Awarded the Tony Award for Best Choreography, the Drama Desk Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, Astaire Award in 1998, as well as the 2000 Laurence Olivier Award, 2001 Ovation Award, and 2004 Helpmann Award for his work on Walt Disney's The Lion King.

- Fagan received the Golden Plate Award and was inducted into the American Academy of Achievement in 2001.

- In 2003, Fagan received the George Eastman Medal from

the University of Rochester for "outstanding achievement and dedicated service."

- Garth Fagan Dance's Mudan 175/39 was named third of the top six dance watching moments in 2009 by The New York Times.

- Named Fulbright 50th Anniversary Distinguished Fellow.

- Other awards include the 2001 Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award; a Guggenheim Fellowship; Dance Magazine's Award for "significant contributions to dance during a distinguished career" in 1990; the Monarch award from the National Council for Culture and Art; the Arts Achievement Award from his alma mater Wayne State University; and the Bessie Award (New York Dance and Performance Award) for Sustained Achievement.

Fagan says his technique is designed to keep his dancers performing well into their adult years.

"Garth really does take care of his dancers," Fagan's principal male soloist Norwood Pennewell says in an article in "The Wall Street Journal" by Pia Catton. Fagan's technique puts as much focus on the mind as it does the dancers' bodies.

"Fagan makes sure that we are educated in general — in every aspect of life. He keeps your mind, spirit, emotions and body always focused on getting better. You could spend 10, 11 years just learning movement or how to phrase your movement."

Anthony Bannon, director of the George Eastman House, was a dance critic and filmmaker back when Garth Fagan Dance was billed as Bottom of the Bucket...But Dance Theater.

"He was a delight to be around, just a kaleidoscope of realizing what's possible; greedy about knowledge, and about making the most delightful hypothesis." says Bannon. "What if someone's arm was to go to the left and their big toe to the right, while upside down and twirling the right foot, and drawing I-shapes with the left arm? What if we were to create this seemingly impossible scenario, might it be possible? And if so, what would it look like? And if it seemed of interest, what in the world would you do next. And he hasn't changed one bit."

Act V – "The Lion King"

Walt Disney came calling in the mid-1990s, expressing an interest in seeing some of Fagan's work for "The Lion King". According to an article by Louise Levene in "The Sunday Telegraph," "the show came to life in 1994 when Walt Disney Theatrical Productions, flushed with the success of Beauty and the Beast began the search for a new stage hit. They settled on the monster-grossing cartoon feature "The Lion King", the heart-warming tale of a baby lion who

finally faces up to his responsibilities as the King of the Beasts."

"I hadn't seen ""The Lion King"" and what I knew of Disney musicals was Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Sleeping Beauty," Fagan recalls.

He wasn't sure why Disney would be interested in him. One of his more recent hits was Griot, performed with the Brooklyn Academy of Music with Wynton Marsalis composing the music and Martin Puryear doing sculpting.

"It was a big hit and one of the pieces that stopped the show was a duet for a topless man and woman called Spring Yaounde," Fagan says, wondering how Disney could be interested in the choreographer of such a sensual hit.

Nevertheless, when the Garth Fagan Dance Company performed in London, people from Disney were there. And in Long Beach, Disney was there. When Fagan got word he was one of the final three choreographers being considered, he called his friend Janet Lomax who had young kids and asked to borrow her copy of "The Lion King".

"I saw it and fell madly in love with it, and I said, 'Oh, I really could do this,'" Fagan says. "I'd been to Africa several times, had been all over Africa. So then I got all excited and inspired, and I went to meet Julie [Tamor, director of "The Lion King"] and we hit it off. In Chinese astrology, both Julie and I are dragons. We're demanding, we work hard, and we go for what it is, so she and I hit it off immediately."

Fagan was selected to choreograph Disney's "The Lion King" in the winter of 1996 and he immediately set to work on the movements with his lead dancers Rogers-Cropper and Pennewell.

"I wanted the broadest range of dance a Broadway show has ever seen. I wanted hip hop, because that was current at the time, African Caribbean Dance, modern dance, ballet," Fagan says. "It's all in there because I wanted the kids who saw "The Lion King" to see the dances that they knew and some other dances they didn't know,

for them to understand how rich and varied the world really is outside of what we know, and this is one of the blessings that traveling all over the world has given me, different tastes in food, drink, attitude. I mean, it's such a rich, rich, rich smorgasbord the creator has given us."

"The Lion King" premiered on 42nd Street in November 1997, and is still on Broadway, in London, Hamburg, Germany and Tokyo. It was also presented in Syracuse for nearly a month until early October. There are still eight shows a week being performed around the world.

Rogers-Cropper said Fagan has definitely left his mark on "The Lion King".

"That's what you want to do as a choreographer," she says. "You want people to be able to tell without looking at the program. I think that was just genius."

The experience is a reflection on the values which Fagan's father instilled in him.

"If you want quality, you've got to stick your neck out," he says. "Quality is not going to come easy."

The Final Act?

Since coming to Rochester in 1970, Fagan has taught for over three decades at Brockport. He holds nine honorary doctorates, including ones from the Julliard School, the University of Rochester, Nazareth College, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Fagan has choreographed for the New York City Ballet, Dance Theater of Harlem, Alvin Ailey Company, and the Limon Company, among his many accomplishments. The company boasts five Bessie Award Winners, one of which belongs to Fagan himself. That's the highest award in dance.

Fagan has turned over the reins of the Garth Fagan School of Dance to Rogers-Cropper, Ferguson and Pennewell. The school provides weekly classes for children, teenagers and adults, taught by current and former members of Garth Fagan Dance, as well as additional instructors trained in the "Fagan Technique." It also

hosts a Summer Movement Institute every year for three weeks in July and August. About 42 dancers participated in this summer's session.

Fagan lives in Rochester's Park Avenue neighborhood and his studio is located on Chestnut Street. He has a daughter who died at age 3, a son with two children, and a great grandson. While "The Lion King" has catapulted Fagan's reputation for concert dance and acquainted it with more mainstream audiences, Fagan admits he's still the largest financial contributor to the company after 40 years.

"The ups and downs of the economy have really screwed us," he says. "Earned income is down,

bookings are down, not just with us, with everybody, because people need money for food, gas and Pampers, so to go to the theater, they don't really have discretionary funds. So we have really felt it, and the arts were always very marginal in America anyway from the economic standpoint."

Fagan says another problem is society's obsession with shows like "So You Think You Can Dance" and "America's Got Talent."

"Major papers don't have dance sections or dance critics anymore," he says. "It's changed. We're a lot more interested in amateurs than we are professionals."

Fagan admits, running a dance company would have been easier in

a bigger city, but he says he stayed in Rochester for his sanity.

"I like a smaller place when I'm choreographing a dance," he says. "I like solitude so I can focus on what it is I'm doing and saying and it's hard to find solitude in New York City. I like all the green fields, corn fields and old farm houses that I can drive 15 minutes outside of Rochester. That calms me down and soothes me...but if I am out of New York City for more than two months I feel completely uncivilized. Three months away from Manhattan is all I can survive. I need the fix every so often, the sophistication and clothing."

Rogers-Cropper says Fagan is a visionary and a genius who is "way ahead of his time."

"The thing about Garth is he's so focused on people and relationships, and he's passed that onto us," she says. "He's a father and a mentor and he can't help it. He always has to make sure that we're being taught. That's his thing. This is unique. In the dance world, the choreographer gives you the movement and direction, but in terms of that kind of nourishment, Garth has passed it onto us and now I'm passing that onto the young people."

Fagan's advice for dancers is "work hard and be vulnerable."

"When you're stuck in your ways, you keep repeating the same old, same old," he says. "When you're vulnerable, choreographers can get you to do things you had no idea you could do, and that the dance you're working on needs, not your good old tricks that have been done already."

Fagan shows no signs or desire to slow down, pointing out that Merce Cunningham worked until he was 91.

"No retiring," he says. "That's nonsense, because all that you learn in life, you put back into your work, and stuff that you didn't know when you were 20, now that you are 30 you know, and stuff I didn't know at 50, now that I'm 71, I know. That's how life works, and since this is an art form, great artists always put their life experiences into their work. I don't want to stop."

The critics

"Once in a while there comes a true dance original – a choreographer who breaks all, or at least most, of the rules, and creates a style, or rarer, even a technique, all of his or her own. Just such an original is Garth Fagan."

Clive Barnes, New York Post.

"It's a tribute to Fagan's thoughtful, disciplined teaching that his dancers have long careers and that even the newest recruits to the 14-member company...look as if they'd been born into Fagan's unique style of modern dance with a slight, but pungent, Afro-Caribbean accent. Which means that none of them gives signs of having ever studied ballet – and I intend that as a compliment."

Deborah Jowitt on Fagan's 40th anniversary piece "Thanks Forty" for The Village Voice.

"The dancers face off across the stage in columns. Like chess pieces come to aggressive, silky life, they crouch low, legs stamping as their torsos slowly churn. There is a precision to their movements but also an almost tossed-off quality; shoulders shrug at the end of confrontational phrases as

if to invite a fight and laugh it off simultaneously."

Claudia La Rocco on Thanks Forty for The New York Times.

"Mudan moves like wind chimes on a mercurial day. Pennewell and Benton merely anchor that blustery, then tranquil, spirit to human experience so it stays with us after the curtain falls."

Appollinaire Scherr on "Mudan 175/39" for Financial Times.

"Over the years — 37 and counting — Garth Fagan's Garth Fagan Dance has developed a unique dialect of dance based on rhythmic runs, off-center balances, wild curvetting spins and explosive, asymmetric leaps. And, oh yes, stillness."

Clive Barnes on "Mudan 175/39" for the New York Post.

"He doesn't just supply steps that marshal the huge cast in and out of action, he has also created distinct physical languages for all the performers who stalk, prowl and scamper about the stage until it pulses with the life of the savannah."

Louise Levene on "The Lion King" for The Sunday Telegraph.