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American Visions

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DRAMA/A King Off Broadway

LANDMARKS/The Vindication of a Legend

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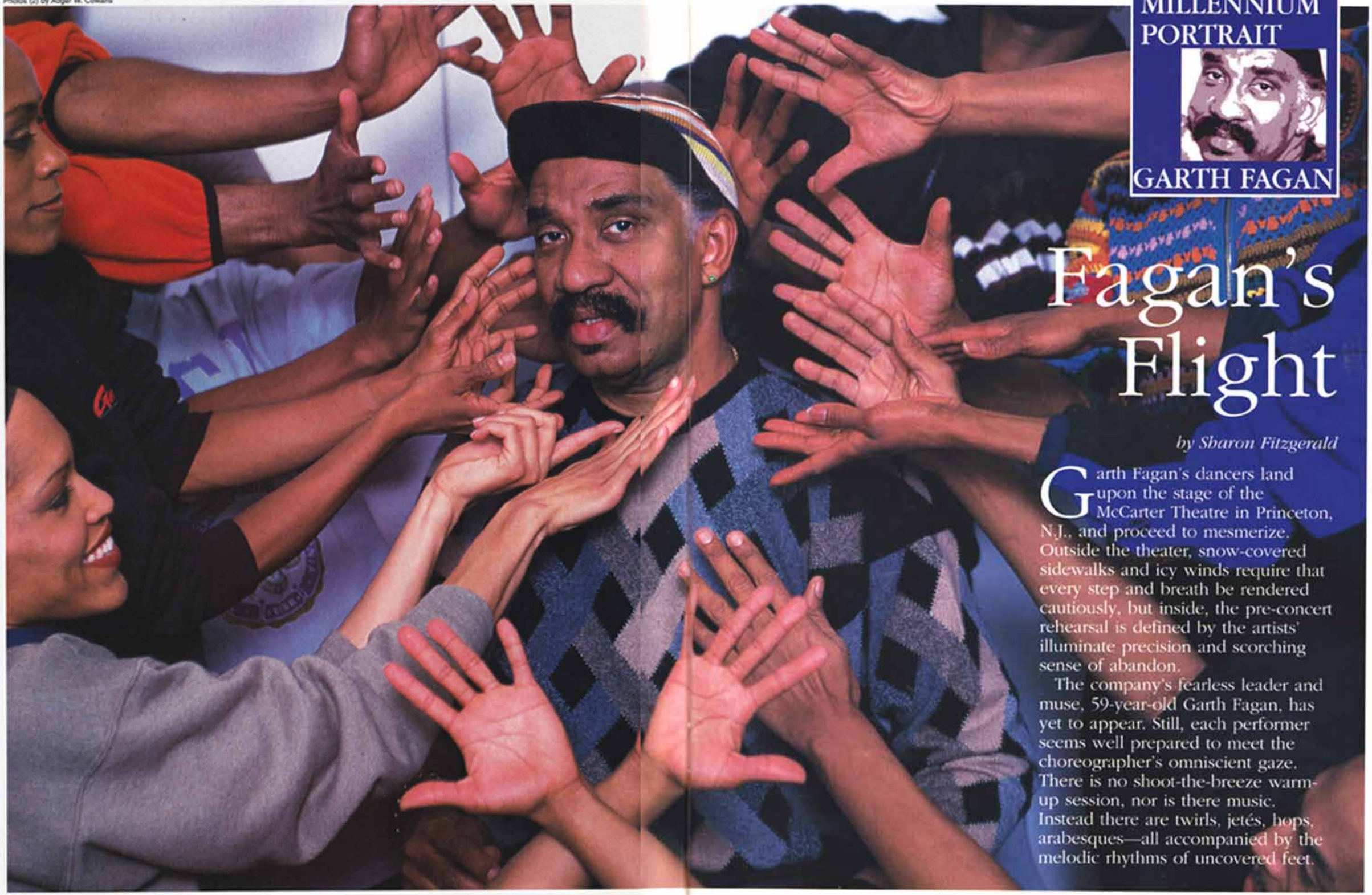

MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT

GARTH FAGAN

Fagan's Flight

by Sharon Fitzgerald

Garth Fagan's dancers land upon the stage of the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, N.J., and proceed to mesmerize. Outside the theater, snow-covered sidewalks and icy winds require that every step and breath be rendered cautiously, but inside, the pre-concert rehearsal is defined by the artists' illuminate precision and scorching sense of abandon.

The company's fearless leader and muse, 59-year-old Garth Fagan, has yet to appear. Still, each performer seems well prepared to meet the choreographer's omniscient gaze. There is no shoot-the-breeze warm-up session, nor is there music. Instead there are twirls, jetés, hops, arabesques—all accompanied by the melodic rhythms of uncovered feet.

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Photo by Bruce Gilbert

In the dancers' possession, the McCarter stage becomes a new universe, infinite, without boundaries. One woman, in black, ankle-length tights and a gray sweatshirt, orbits the area in a steady jog. She disappears periodically, and it is futile to anticipate when and where she will appear next: She might exit at the foreground of stage left and then re-enter—a split, Faganesque moment later—from the back corner of stage right. After several equatorial laps, she slices the floor diagonally, interrupting her incision at center stage with one expert skip.

Meanwhile, in neighboring spheres, other planets seek alignment. One male dancer wearing a black wool hat, black sweat pants, and a bright orange Nike sweat jacket tests and re-tests a leap that requires that he raise and turn his right leg at an angle that only an abstractionist could envision.

Another man, in red sweats and a gray shirt, secure in his axis, experiments with several stages of an arabesque. Satisfied at last, he launches into a breathtaking array of spins, swirling off the stage like a gentle tornado.

The stage director and crew are testing the lights, so there is no illumination in the house. But though Garth Fagan's arrival cannot be observed, his presence is felt instantaneously. A tidal wave of purpose, wry wit and charisma, he enters a space perceptively and leaves powerful, imaginative, astonishing things in his wake.

One is well advised not to blink when watching any of the works that Fagan has created. Whether it's his Tony-award winning choreography for the Broadway musical *The Lion King* or his collaboration with musician Wynton Marsalis and sculptor Martin Puryear on the full-length composition *Griot New York,* Fagan is never predictable, relentlessly original. While critics around the world comb their thesauruses for superlatives, he remains focused on inventing movements that explore the essence of humanity and that explode the oft-familiar vocabulary of dance.

When asked to define a word frequently associated with his achievements, Fagan does something that seems uncharacteristic: He stalls for time. "Transcendence? Oh, dear, I need some coffee," he says. "Well, it's not the real meaning, but I like to think of it in a Duke Ellington kind of way: beyond category. It's moving from one point to the next, one place to the next."

It has been nearly 30 years since the Jamaican-born Fagan graduated from Wayne State University in Detroit and accepted what he expected would be a temporary position at the Brockport campus of the State University of New York, just outside Rochester. His devotion to dance—ignited during his formative years in Kingston and augmented by his parallel lives as both dancer and student in Detroit—was about to take full flight.

Fagan was entering academia to satisfy the strict expectations of his Oxford-educated father, who was Jamaica's chief education officer. However, ever since his teenage years—when a gymnastics class had lured his attention away from soccer—he felt driven to dance. While still in high school, he studied and performed with the Jamaica National Dance Company, led by Ivy Baxter. He also took classes with Pearl Primus and Lavinia Williams. Jamaica's national company toured extensively throughout the Caribbean, including a performance at Fidel Castro's inauguration in Cuba, in 1959.

"Ivy Baxter was very seminal because she was my first dance teacher," says Fagan, "and she was one of the first people in the Caribbean, if not the first, to realize the value of our dance vocabulary. She had studied modern dance in Germany with Sigurd Leeder, so she was one of the first people to integrate the element of Caribbean dance—which is a folk-based dance with lots of African roots—into modern dance.

"She was a stickler for detail. We left rehearsals at 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning because we stayed until we got it right. She also showed me *A Dancer's World,* by Martha Graham, which was so articulate and so clear. I'd never seen men dance like that before. [Graham's] men were very virile and very male. I also saw Mary Hinkson, my first overseas-accomplished dancer who happened to be black. She is my mentor and patroness and saint and goddess right now. She was a Martha Graham star. She was so beautiful and sublime; she is still beautiful and sublime."

Discipline and academic excellence were paramount in the Fagan household, but there was also a profound respect for culture. "I was brought up in a family that believed in the arts," Fagan says. "They used to drag me to lunch-hour concerts in Jamaica. I don't know when it switched from dragging me to punishing me." He recalls watching his mother read the Bible while tapping her foot to Ellington. And it was Fagan's father who, upon returning from a trip to London, first told him about the work of Katharine Dunham: "He came back with stars in his eyes, talking about this brilliant woman and her choreography and how fabulous she was."

Yet his father disapproved when Fagan expressed the desire to make dancing his career. "'Concerned' is putting it mildly," Fagan elaborates. "My father thought it was a total waste of time. I come from a family of professionals and academics, and so why was I going to waste away my life?

"So I went to school, I got my degree, I was going to be a psychologist, but I still kept dancing. I danced with Pearl, I danced with all kinds of different people. At the time, there was no money to be made from dancing. We were 2,000 in a station wagon and 10 to a room. If I were to get paid from all of the free dance concerts that I did, I could retire.

"Around the time I was 30, I said: Oh, to hell with this. I'm going to make a dance company. That's what I see the need for and that's what I think that I can do best."

One of Fagan's responsibilities at the State University of New York was to work with disadvantaged students in Rochester. His charges' vivacity and athleticism impressed him; he also recognized that they were not the only ones looking for a break. As much as he had relished his years as a dance performer, he also had been frustrated by the limitations imposed on artists who attempt to create outside the accepted classical idiom. Moreover, it was time for his imaginings to take form.

"You have to remember this was 1970, so we'd just come through the riots and that whole period of unrest," says Fagan. "I wanted to add my contributions. I wanted to have the rhythms from

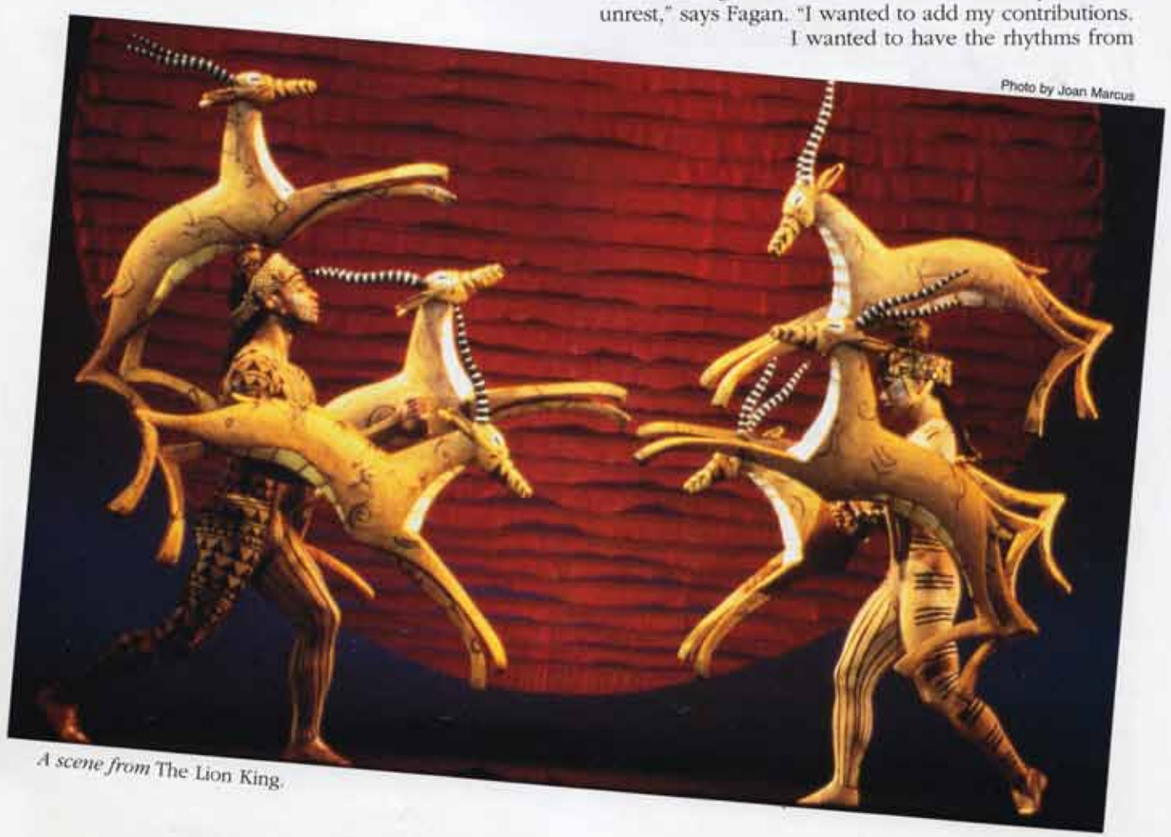


Photo by Joan Marcus

A scene from The Lion King.

MILLENNIUM PORTRAIT

GARTH FAGAN

black culture more apparent in the movements; I wanted to have lines from African culture more apparent in modern dance.

"For years it was said that we should not do ballet because of our derrières, so I put them out there. I'll do lots of my extensions with the gluteus maximus out to the audience, because I like that line—I like the way that our butts are rounded and exaggerated.

"I wanted these things included in the art form, and I thought that if I started with these dancers who had no previous training, then I could just teach them from scratch and I wouldn't have to waste time undoing the good work that other people had done. I did not want to waste time on training dancers who had had years of classical ballet or other modern forms—who knew one way of doing a movement or doing a step.

"Since I was developing a technique and a way of teaching, these students turned out to be my guinea pigs. I wanted the movement to be informed by what they were doing in part on the dance floors and what they were doing on the basketball courts and what they were doing on the soccer field. I wanted that because that was my background also."

Aware of his group's renegade status—and as a bodacious retort to potential naysayers—Fagan christened the company the Bottom of the Bucket BUT ... Dance Theatre. In the late 1980s the name was changed to Garth Fagan's Bucket Dance Theatre, and in 1991, Fagan put his name and his purpose succinctly on the line. "I was pretty bold when I just said Garth Fagan Dance, as opposed to Garth Fagan Dance Company," Fagan says, "but I liked the contemporary sound of it, and all three words had five letters."

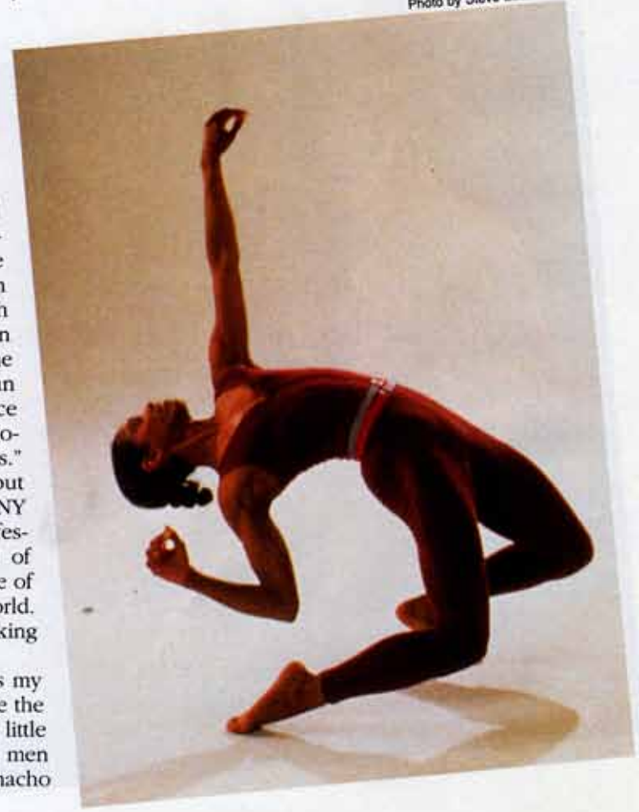
The billing may have metamorphosed, but Fagan's intentions have not. While teaching at SUNY Brockport (where he is now a distinguished professor, the first designated by SUNY in the field of dance), he made Rochester the home base for one of the most respected companies in the dance world. He remains an unwavering proponent of breaking new ground.

"My women move as fast and jump as high as my men," says Fagan, "so it's not a sexist thing, where the men do the big jumps and the women do the little girlie things. And my men are vulnerable. The men have a real virile grace, as opposed to being too macho or too lightweight."

Technically, the traditional dance structures are respected and upheld, but upon this foundation Fagan constructs and innovates with volcanic assurance. His choreography is devoid of clichés, yet all tempos, rhythms, placements, tensions, attitudes are accounted for: the deep-rooted base line of African dance, the ethereal speed of ballet, the uncanny modernist juxtapositions, the refined responsiveness of jazz, the sparkling narratives of the Caribbean. Fulfilled by musical selections that are equally diverse—from Monk to Brahms to Ellington to Dvorák to Glass to Roach—Fagan brings to the stage what one of his favorite artists and old friends, Romare Bearden, brought to the canvas: extemporaneous, multifaceted clarity and daring.

"Sometimes the music comes first," Fagan says. "Sometimes the movement comes first, and I have to search like hell to find the music. But what you never get from me is a stereotypical relationship between music and dance. It's more of a jazz musician's relationship between the movement and the music: Sometimes the movement takes over; sometimes the music takes over.

Photo by Steve Labuzetta



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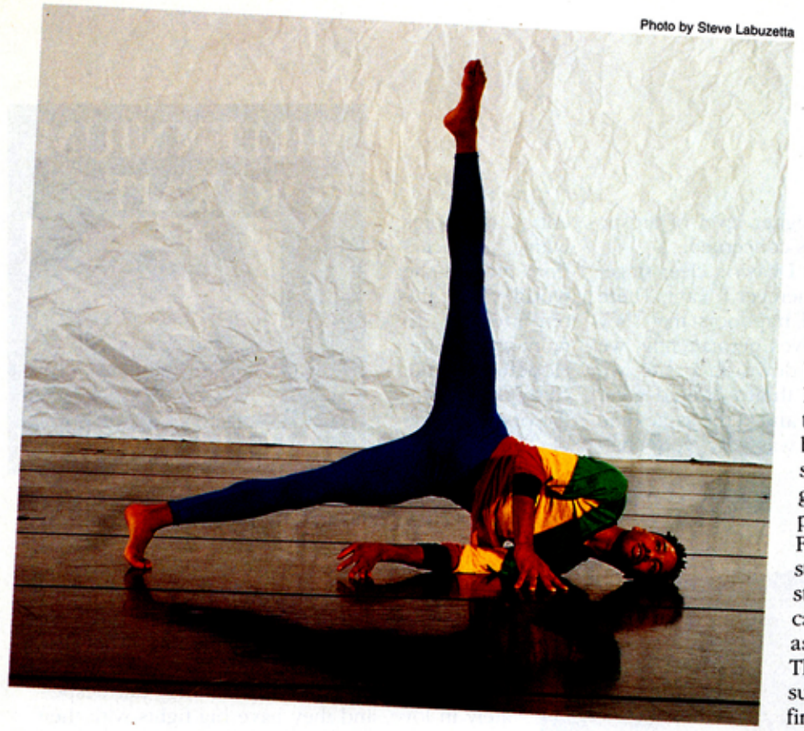


"It's more interesting than the traditional, old-fashioned way, where they are wedded together. That's boring. We've been doing that for 400 years. It's nice, and I'll do pieces like that, too, but I like a very contemporary, edgy relationship between music and dance."

In 1990, Fagan met with a friend, musician Wynton Marsalis, and shared a poem he had written while on a trip to Ocho Rios, Jamaica. Like much of Fagan's poetry, the words were introspective, part jazz riff and part ode to the fantastic and sometimes troubling forces to be witnessed in the world. The well-known opening to fairy tales could be supplanted easily by his first stanzas: "Myths of Time/Mylar Myths of Space/Natural Mystic/Legends yes of Place." To Fagan, no place manifested the hopes, complexities and contradictions of mankind better than New York City. He decided to examine the city's nuances, as a griot would, serving as both storyteller and guardian of truth.

A commission from the Brooklyn Academy of Music provided Fagan with a special opportunity in creating *Griot New York,* a full-length work. He could afford to ask Marsalis to compose an original score. He also was able to ask sculptor Martin Puryear to create works that, despite their stationary positions, participated in the dance. The eight-vignette piece had its debut in 1991 to rapt reviews. Critics and audiences acclaimed the work's depth and artistry. With each tableau Fagan deconstructs the society we create and endure.

An enormous gourd conceived by Puryear hovers over the stage in *Griot*'s first selection, Fagan's testament to urban mating rituals, "City Court Dance." The company progresses in a fashion that is unpredictable but understood by Fagan's audiences. Dancers ebb and flow through solos, duets and company work without a splash or wrinkle. In "Spring Yaounde," a passionate coupling performed by Natalie Rogers and Norwood Pennewell astonishes: The intertwined dancers echo each other's bodies so breathlessly that one suspends belief until the emergence of limbs and spirits is complete. In "The Disenfranchised," Fagan's dancers twist, jolt and stumble within the shadows of a steep, narrow, iridescent staircase—a metaphor for hope and ascent created by Puryear. Throughout, Marsalis' compositions survey the human landscape: He finds the revelry and the wailing in jazz, waltzes, calypso, Eastern tonalities and African rhythms.

"Whatever field you are in, you are always trying to make connections," Marsalis has said. "What makes a work rich is the complexity of relationships and your ability to show similarities. Not differences, similarities. That is what makes a work cohesive.

"[Fagan] is talking about the modern world and addressing people coming together: How do you deal with the universality of things? How do you deal with the breakdown of old orders and the creation of new orders that still confirm the riches of the past?"

To actualize his vision, Fagan has needed more than capable bodies. "My dancers are just the very best," he has stated. "They dance to celebrate dance. They dance from the inside out. I want to see the human being behind the extension. I want to feel the spirit, the soul, behind the movement. I want to get that electrical energy which human beings pass between each other without words."

With *The Lion King,* Fagan was granted gifts that any choreographer would relish and challenges that would cause any artist to quake. The enormous Broadway budget and extravagant, no-holds-barred staging let him dream of making anything happen. Propelling dancers—costumed in full-scale, active puppet gear—through the production's phantasm within a not-a-second-to-lose time frame was an accomplishment that even Walt Disney could not have conceived.

"It was awesome," says Fagan, who, in addition to the 1998 Tony for choreography, recently was awarded an Olivier, Great Britain's equivalent to the Tony, for his work on *The Lion King*. "I had to keep the Broadway audiences entertained, but at the same time I wanted to

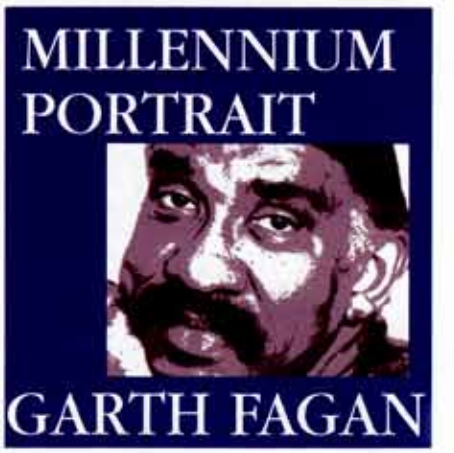
challenge them more toward a higher level of artistic expression where choreography is concerned.

"As you can see on my stages, I have a clear stage, where I can place the dancers wherever I want. There on the Broadway stage, we had trapdoors that they could fall into and injure themselves permanently, we had a stage that could go up and down on a rake, we had wires to fly on. All of these things offered great possibilities for growth on my part and at the same time put limitations on my work. So it was very, very challenging.


Photo by Steve Labuzetta

"We had discussed the fact that I wanted the dancers to be a part of the whole—a seamless transition from acting to singing to dancing—so that the show would have a unified form. Like when you see the grasslands come up out of the floor, and they start swaying and dancing around in the savannah. I wanted the response to be, Oh, gosh, the scenery is dancing."

Within Garth Fagan Dance there are now five winners of the Bessie—a prize coveted by New York's dance community. Today Rochester's undiscovered talent competes with dancers from around the world for the opportunity to work with Fagan. Hopefuls take classes at the studio or attend one of Garth Fagan Dance's residency workshops usually hosted by colleges or universities. Company members tend to remain for years.



"Without dancers, all of the great choreography stays in my head, in Merce's head, in any great choreographer's head," says Fagan. "We need the dancers to give it life and flesh. And unlike oil paints or acrylics, they talk back to you; and they get the flu; and they fall desperately in love, and they have big fights with their lovers, wives, husbands, gigolos, whatever they have; and you have to absorb it. Paint and canvas never do that."

It is only fair to acknowledge that paper, pencils and paint wait passively for the artist's arrival and energies, whereas dancers are called to a sweat-and-blood commitment. And it is clear that Fagan's dancers—who receive regular salaries and full medical benefits—work very hard. Company members take two-hour classes twice daily and then begin an evening rehearsal that can run between two and four hours. Because the group's intellectual suppleness is as important to Fagan as its floor work, his dancers are also expected to visit museums, attend concerts, read books, and discuss their ideas at regular gatherings. He is the boss, the teacher and the inspiration.

Considering how his dancers work to please him and to give form to his incredible dreams, it seems reasonable to ask: How would Garth Fagan the dancer feel about Garth Fagan the choreographer? "He would feel that he is a man who is impossible," Fagan replies. "He would say: 'God, this movement is delicious; this movement is eloquent. This makes it worthwhile being a dancer, because you are pushing the envelope. But boy, this stuff is hard.'

"I think that that is what he would feel. I know that he loves the movement, but he would realize that it is damn hard. I tell the dancers up front: This is not going to be a cakewalk. Even with the Broadway crowd, I had to explain this to them. I said: 'The reason that I chose you is because this is going to be hard stuff. Varied stuff culturally and intellectually. And I need you.'"