

# HOUR STORIES

[HOUR DETROIT](#) / [FEBRUARY 2013](#) / ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

## All the Right Moves

Wayne State grad's choreography shines in 'The Lion King'

By Jim McFarlin



**T**he *Lion King*, the beloved and spectacular Disney-derived musical that now reigns as the highest-grossing Broadway show of all time, returns to Detroit Feb. 13-March 10 at the Detroit Opera House.

That means audiences will once again be thrilled by the rhythmic, eye-popping dance ensembles of Tony Award-winning choreographer — and Wayne State University graduate — Garth Fagan.

On the mantel next to his Tony, Fagan, 72, also owns a Drama Desk Award, the Astaire Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, and the U.K.'s Laurence Olivier Award for his breathtaking work in *The Lion King*. But the Jamaican-born dance icon, an artist every bit as colorful as the choreography he designs, says he mastered his technique and

incomparable style under the guidance of Ruth Murray, who founded the dance department at Wayne State in 1928 as Ruth Lovell Murray's Dance Workshop.

"I was a wild beast," Fagan says, but his sheer talent landed him a spot with the Jamaica National Dance Company before coming to America. As part of that troupe in 1959, he performed at the inauguration of Cuban president Fidel Castro. "I remember the Havana Hilton, where we stayed, because before Castro took over, people of my complexion couldn't stay there," Fagan recalls. "I remember a huge outdoor stage and thousands of people screaming with enjoyment. In those days, he was a good guy, a liberator. Things changed afterwards."

His father, S.W. Fagan, chief education officer for Jamaica, insisted Garth enroll at an Ivy League institution. He did — for one semester. "I will not name the school," Fagan says with a laugh, "but I was bored to tears. In Jamaica, you have every race represented."

On a trip to Detroit to visit an aunt, Fagan was captivated by the city's ethnic mix and soon transferred to Wayne State. While here, he founded Detroit Contemporary Dance with three other performers, serving as choreographer and principal dancer, then left to form Dance Theater of Detroit. "It was an integrated dance company," he says. "Maybe the first in Detroit."

Garth Fagan Dance, his 16-member company based in Rochester, N.Y., celebrates its 43rd year in 2013. "We've toured every continent but Antarctica," Fagan says, "so we've been around. The seniors help me corral the young ones now." Fagan keeps the creative process fresh by choreographing in solitude. "I love to sit alone and listen to new music, formulate ideas of what I want to do and don't want to do with it, then work on my movements."

While his other choreography might be overshadowed in the public eye by *The Lion King* dances he devised 16 years ago, Fagan doesn't mind. "More people go to Broadway shows than they'll go to see concert dance," he reasons. "Around the world, people come backstage and say to me, 'I first saw your work in *Lion King*, and I just had to come see the company. And I'm thrilled that I did.'"