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## Dance Review: Garth Fagan Dance's "Lighthouse/Lightning Rod"

by Casey Carlsen

**G**arth Fagan creates in good company. His new work, "Lighthouse/Lightning Rod," grows with the combined powers of his uniquely stylized and gorgeously executed choreography, the bang-up score by jazz great Wynton Marsalis, and bewitching stage sets from Alison Saar, Guggenheim and two times National Endowment of the Arts Fellow. Saar's sculptures are a stand-out, bestowing dignity and a mysterious power to this production.

"Lighthouse/Lightning Rod" is Fagan's second full-scale collaboration with Marsalis; the first was the company favorite "Griot" (excerpts from "Griot" are included in some of the programs during Garth Fagan Dance's current slate of performance at Nazareth College Arts Center, which runs through Sunday, December 2). The new piece is complex in theme and widely varied in content. It has much to offer - the audience rose like a wave itself as the curtain closed on the final section - but can also, at times, overwhelm and befuddle.

As always when watching Fagan's world-renowned company, I luxuriated in the kinetic transport his dancers bestow with their exacting execution of their director's inspirations. Every new encounter with this company promises a study of almost otherworldly movement, and this current residency was no exception, especially when gifted veteran Norwood 'PJ' Pennewell was on stage.

His solo during the midsection, subtitled "Memories," evocatively communicated lingering loss. His dancing was minimal, contained, seemingly showing how grief can sap a person. Yet even when he seemed to be merely marking the moves rather than performing them full out - this was definitely intentional - his movements spoke succinctly and with complete focus. Pennewell is a superb dancer; he can make the most difficult moves appear effortless. His execution of a series of jetes while maintaining fluidly flowing arms belied its level of difficulty (try patting your stomach while scratching your head times 100). We are lucky to have him here.

However, other parts of "Lighthouse/Lightning Rod" lacked clarity for me. There was so much to sort out that it interrupted the flow. Maybe I was overthinking, but on the other hand, I also had the privilege of having Fagan dissect the piece for me in detail earlier this month

I knew, for example, that a section featuring slaves appearing in "Memories," the middle section of the work, was a nod to the atrocities endured by African Americans, referencing the necessity of keeping this chapter of history alive in our collective memory. It's not so much a lament, Fagan explained to me, but a tribute to those who found the strength to retain the dignity and the empathy that make us human.

In the piece Lindsay Renea and Shanon Castle beautifully portrayed two women holding their heads high and supporting each other in a show of calm strength in the midst of terror and calamity. Dancers in wrapped heads and aprons shuffled by, cowed toward the ground. Another woman was carried overhead, writhing in protest, while Castle and Renea stoically carried on with their inward-turned dance.

So, while there was much to admire in this section, it was disconcerting to have it suddenly thrust forward in the middle of "Lighthouse/Lightning Rod," which started out straightforward enough - dancers clad in blue and purple gauzy skirts and multi-colored leotards in an obvious maritime theme for the first section, called "Lighthouse." The movement here was light and jaunty initially, dancers moving in undulating waves as if getting a feel for the water, before turning desultory. It was a bit of a downer to watch the dancers

moving on a low horizontal plane during this portion of the lush music, heads and faces downcast as they scuttled frantically side-to-side like crabs. Perhaps they were paying homage to the female figure towering above them - Demeter-like protector, nourishing mother, guiding lighthouse.

And what a lighthouse! Gasps were audible when the curtain rose on Saar's creation. Constructed out of foam with a bronze-painted, African-featured head, the structure rose from the floor in a cone-shaped white dress flowing into a torso with one breast bared and an armful of branches. Equally impressive was the sculpture for "Memories," a giant horizontal structure resembling at first a tangle of thorny branches, but, when propelled fully on-stage, revealed to be merely brambly hair atop a ferocious head, glowing red eyes glittering from its face.

The eyes seemed to watch as Natalie Rogers, Nicolette Depass, and VitolioJeune danced together in a depiction of a consensual ménage a trios. This should have been steamier. Jeune exuded primal instincts, his movements smoldered with languid sexuality and vibrant passion, but they were neither well directed nor well received. It seemed as if he was making love to himself, the women each dancing alone with scarcely any interplay between them. Rogers ended up briefly in Jeune's arms, but it left me cold. Her technique, on the other hand, was startlingly spot-on for a dancer coming off an eight-year hiatus from the stage. Kudos to Depass as well for dancing into her second trimester of pregnancy -- and to Fagan for asking her to.

The final section of "Lighthouse/Lighting Rod" left me very satisfied. As promised, the choreography and music was, frankly, electric. The dancers were not left behind for a second as they shimmied and shimmered in their black leotards draped with silver sequined sashes, setting the audience hooting. The lighting here, by Hideaki Tsutsui, was brilliant. A shift down to a mustard-hued backdrop marked some subtle, albeit powerful transformation of the dancers' movement that I have no words for, only a remembered shiver of awe and a salute to Fagan for doing it yet again.

Garth Fagan Dance will perform Friday, November 30, at 8 p.m., Saturday, December 1, at 2 & 8 p.m., and Sunday, December 2, at 2 & 7:30 p.m. at Nazareth College Arts Center (4245 East Ave.). For more information or tickets visit the websites for Garth Fagan Dance or Nazareth College Arts Center.

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