

November 13, 2013

Holding Joy Close, and Age at Bay

By BRIAN SEIBERT

“No Evidence of Failure” sounds like a phrase from an accident report in which the remains of a crashed vehicle give no clue as to what went wrong. At the Joyce Theater on Tuesday it was the title of a dance celebrating something that has **gone mysteriously right**: how the 51-year-old dancer Natalie Rogers, who returned to the Garth Fagan Dance company last year after an eight-year break, can still look so amazing.

The first part of Mr. Fagan’s “No Evidence of Failure” is a solo for Ms. Rogers, and it does not stint on the arduous balances, heroic but also insolent, that are one of Mr. Fagan’s trademarks. Ms. Rogers begins arched backward and swaying, bent but not broken. She spins this way and that, her hips and shoulders and quick feet taking pleasure in the jazz and reggae of a recording by Monty Alexander. Tilted way over, one leg raised high, she rests her head on an arm that rests on air — at ease in her strength, self-reliant.

That’s the position in which she is found by Vitolio Jeune, a split-leaping dynamo 20 years her junior. Their duet is classic Fagan, a meeting of two independent adults, two balancing sculptures that combine and complement each other without merging. Ms. Rogers holds onto Mr. Jeune as he whirls. As they incline away from each other in balances, she briefly rests her head on his mighty raised leg. Both serious and playful, they kiss on the cheek and canoodle and bump butts. But though they end with linked arms, they each stand on their own.

Ms. Rogers isn’t the only older dancer in the company. Steve Humphrey, 61, still spins through the repertory. And Norwood Pennewell, 55, is still as effortlessly graceful as an Olympic diver. As a choreographer, he’s growing. “Gin,” his third piece for the company, shows many lessons learned from the man in whose works he has danced for 35 years. In vocabulary, rhythm and composition, the dance closely resembles creations by Mr. Fagan, but it’s not a dull copy. “Gin” has a life of its own.

Much of its sophistication is musical: its four sections fade between a ticking in Sound string arrangement of Aphex Twin electronica and a pizzicato pluck in C
Perkinson’s arrangement of a Negro spiritual. In a segment of Yo-Yo Ma blueg
Pennewell wittily has the dancers act out the contrast between lethargic cello &



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fiddle and mandolin.

But there's a shadow over the dance. "Gin" alludes to cotton, which Lutin Tanner's lighting sometimes suggests on the back wall. And cotton necessarily suggests African-American history. Mr. Pennewell is subtle about this, but the solo for Ms. Rogers, insouciantly bouncing a foot as she leans backward almost to the point of falling, and a rich Fagan-esque duet for Nicolette Depass and Wynton Rice — these are scenes of a resilience that isn't just physical. Mr. Pennewell's dance, like the best of Mr. Fagan's, is evidence of spiritual strength.

Garth Fagan Dance runs through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; 212-242-0800, joyce.org.