

# For Garth Fagan, a life choreographed by his love of movement



Garth Fagan with his dance troupe as they prepare to perform at the Nate Holden Theater in Los Angeles. (Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

By **VICTORIA LOOSELEAF**

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**G**arth Fagan has held his dance company together for 44 years, no easy feat. But mention another accomplishment — his Tony-winning choreography of the stage musical "The Lion King" — and Fagan breaks into a huge smile and rumbling laughter.

The source of his good spirits is the announcement last month that "The Lion King," which opened in 1997 and is still running on Broadway, has become the most successful work of entertainment in history, surpassing \$6.2 billion in ticket sales from New York, national tour and international productions.

"I am thrilled to smithereens," Fagan, 74, said during a break at the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center, where his Rochester, N.Y.-based troupe Garth Fagan Dance will perform four shows this weekend, in a return to Los Angeles after a 10-year absence.

"[Director] Julie Taymor and all my colleagues worked very hard on 'Lion King,' and I knew from what she had done before that it would be great. Around the world, whatever the language, people go bananas," Fagan said in his lilting Jamaican accent. He estimates that he spends 20% of his time checking in on "Lion King" productions around the world.

His work with his company is not movement for the faint of heart. Fagan's blend of Afro-Caribbean and modern dance is technically challenging, requiring changes in rhythms and speed. Dancers need to have a steel-like core allowing for effortless jumps and the ability to transition into quicksilver turns and jaw-dropping balances.

But it is dancemaking that inspires devotion from his 12-member troupe. On view this weekend are the West Coast premieres of Fagan's 2013 "No Evidence" and excerpts from "Gin" (2013), choreographed by longtime Fagan dancer, rehearsal director and muse Norwood Pennewell.

Fagan's signature "Prelude — Discipline Is Freedom," from 1981, and excerpts from his "Lighthouse/Lightning Rod," a Los Angeles premiere that was a 2012 Brooklyn Academy of Music commission, complete the program.

"Lighthouse," with an original score by Wynton Marsalis and scenic design by sculptor Alison Saar, was described by Dance Magazine as "multi-layered and fascinating."

As is Fagan himself. Dressed in colorful striped hat, shirt and cargo shorts, the choreographer said the title comes from the notion that "a lighthouse brings ships home safely, and lightning rods come when they want to, irrespective of what you're doing."

Fagan had worked with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Marsalis on "Griot New York" in 1991. They remain friends who understand each other's artistic impulses.

"For 'Griot,' I gave Wynton a poem," Fagan recalled. "This time, I said, 'I'm just giving you the title and I want you to come up with something that's going to work.'"

The resulting score (heard on tape) explores jazz idioms, from exuberant big band sounds and a haunting adagio to a high-octane finale.

But Fagan's choreographic process begins in silence, when he has the dancers learn the movement and rhythms. "They learn the parts of the body that they should and shouldn't use," added Fagan, "then I bring the music and their eyes light up."

For Saar, a native Angeleno and Guggenheim fellow whose solo exhibition "HOT house" is at the Watts Towers Arts Center through Jan. 11, this was her first work for dance. Her fiberglass-covered, foam-based sculptures include an enormous woman as lighthouse, with one breast bared,

clutching an armful of silver branches, jaggedy lightning bolts and a huge structure that, when revealed, is a man's head sprouting blue thorny twigs.

"On one hand, a lighthouse can be a beacon," Saar said. "On the other hand, there's this element of lightning, which Garth specifically asked for, and can be shocking and dangerous. I was taking creativity to that point where there's uncertainty and a bit of danger."

Fagan was elated when he first saw Saar's sculptures in Rochester. He did, however, ask her to change the color of the majestic figure's dress. "It was white, and I didn't want anything virginal on my stage. I want a woman of experience who had the enjoyments and dramas of life beyond virginity, so Alison put some beautiful print-like sculpture stuff on the white."

Fagan also champions mature dancers — the troupe ranges in age from 19 to 62. The oldest, Steve Humphrey, joined the original company in 1970.

"I wouldn't have danced with anybody but Garth," Humphrey said. "He had a certain look and attitude. His choreography hit part of my soul that I wanted to be part of. I would listen, watch, look at new dancers that came over the years and take from them. I was like a vampire of dance."

Then there's Pennewell, 55, who has been with Fagan for 36 years. His "Lighthouse" solo, "Memories," features walking, leg-lifting and explosive scissor jumps. "I'm not as pliant as before, and this is more introspective," he noted, "but because it's not that physical, I'm focusing on musicianship and nuance."

Natalie Rogers, 52, joined the troupe in 1989, leaving in 2003 to have a baby, with no plans to return to the stage. Pennewell and Rogers, another Fagan muse, were his assistants on "Lion King," and Rogers, while raising her daughter, continued to be assistant rehearsal director as well as to direct the dance school.

Fagan created "No Evidence of Failure" for her when she decided to resume dancing three years ago. Rogers said the dance, which also features 31-year old Vitolio Jeune, is a gift.

"It's biographical, because I feel I'm living that dance every day. I also feel physically challenged, but I'm not frantic about getting things perfectly right as before. That freedom makes my dancing stronger than ever."

And talk about stamina: Fagan, whose troupe has toured around the world — except Antarctica, he says — has zero plans to retire.

"Lord, no. I love the work, I love my dancers, I love choreography, and I always set myself new challenges and come up with new ideas. What would I retire to?"