

Choreographer Garth Fagan talks about the masterwork, “Griot New York”

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Norwood Pennewell Nicolette Depass in Garth Fagan's "Griot New York"/Courtesy Garth Fagan Dance

By Angela Allen

After jazz musician Wynton Marsalis watched the love duet “Spring Yaounde” in rehearsal, he tore up the music he’d written for that section of “Griot New York.”

The duet was the most beautiful dance he’d seen, Marsalis told Garth Fagan, “Griot’s” creator. And the third dance in the full-length piece, “Yaounde” features a novel kiss that travels from chin to mouth to forehead while dancers pull off leg extensions demanding Herculean off-center balancing. Marsalis was blown away.

“He sat down and composed a new piece with one hand on the piano and the other on the trumpet,” Fagan, 71, said in late February from his home in Rochester, N.Y., where the Garth Fagan Dance company is based. “It was a magical day.”

That exhilarating moment occurred more than two decades ago, when Fagan, Marsalis and sculptor Martin Puryear were cooking up “Griot.” In 1991, the almost two-hour piece debuted at Brooklyn Academy of Music, prompting reviews that praised Fagan for advancing modern dance’s vocabulary with fresh choreography. The New York Time’s Anna Kisselgoff called his work lyrical, idiosyncratic and original.

I would add profoundly human and intensely physical.

Portlanders had a chance to see [Garth Fagan Dance](#) bring back “Griot New York” at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in late February, a joint presentation of the Portland Jazz Festival and White Bird Dance, fitting for a Marsalis-Fagan collaboration.

“Griot” holds up two decades later, if the applause and post-show chatter were indications. Will it be a contemporary dance classic, the signature of the Garth Fagan company and dancemaker Fagan himself? So far, it lives on with dignity and élan.

But I had to track Fagan, the man, down to make sure how he sees his piece. Artists know when they’ve let loose a warhorse, and someone like this guy with a ponytail and unorthodox choreography insists on being cutting edge.



Fagan trained with Caribbean dancers Pearl Primus and Lavinia Williams, and in the U.S. with Jose Limon, Alvin Ailey, Mary Hinkson and Martha Graham. “I have many masters,” he said, recalling “MG sitting on my bedroom floor eating Jamaican jerk chicken.”

He moved to the United States and earned an undergraduate degree at Wayne State University in Detroit, Mich., following interests in psychology and in dance, and then moved to Rochester, NY, where he formed his dance company and began teaching. His straight-laced Oxford-educated father, chief of education in Kingston, Jamaica, and his son’s school principal, was not pleased with young Fagan’s decision to go north and dance. “Not one iota,” Fagan Jr. said.

His father was tough on him growing up. There were whippings and expectations of perfectionism. “Discipline is freedom” was Fagan Sr.’s mantra, which Fagan bridled against as any kid might. Today, Fagan credits his square father with “making me the man I am.”

When Fagan was 32 he returned to Jamaica to dance with a company of his own dancers. His father threatened to snub his son’s performance, but things took a turn for the prodigal son. Father Fagan did attend the show and subsequently was overwhelmed with pleasure when he saw Fagan and his eight dancers onstage.

“Griot” is about surviving urban life in New York, and about much more: AIDS and its devastation (remember, it was made in the early ‘90s, like “Angels in America”), the Holocaust, concentration camps,

Native Americans, slavery, living in high rises and hauling groceries up flights of stairs, dancing giddily on a Jamaican beach. It speaks to community, suffering, joy, grieving — and always — to resilience. “I have no patience with victims,” Fagan said. “You tighten your belt and move on.”

Though most of Puryear’s sketches were used for finished set pieces, Fagan rejected the sculptor’s idea for a coffin. “No coffins on my stage. I’m an optimist.”

The dance is composed of torso-center moves, off-center adagio extensions, dizzying chainees and other off-speed turns, fluid arm movements, on-the floor to in-the-sky choreography. In “The Disenfranchised” scene, one of eight in the piece, a man pulls his dying lover across the floor. High exuberant hops mimic the lindy hop in “City Court Dance.” References, rhythms, positions, patterns and movements range all over the dance map.

Fagan carves space “so eyes have to work to enjoy it,” he said. “I add a little razz-ma-tazz to the arabesque, to the chaine. ... Great dancers love challenge. Good ones want to do the same things all the time.”

The dance opens with a poem, written by Fagan, in the voice of a West African storyteller, Griot. The poem sets the concept; the rest of the soundtrack is Marsalis’s haunting and sometimes melodic score that precisely fits Fagan’s unconventional choreography against the backdrop of Puryear’s abstract minimalist sculpture (a bridge? a jug? a heavy chain? a staircase — I’m sure about that one).

Fagan does consider the two-act “Griot” his masterpiece, though he says he has shorter favorites in his repertoire. It has been performed throughout the world, including in Australia, Africa and Austria. In Vienna, one critic wrote that the dance was greeted with applause reserved for grand opera.

“That’s why it’s lasted for so long,” Fagan, an enthusiastic talker, art collector and accomplished cook, said. “It speaks to a living city, it speaks to diversity in lifestyles and races. All the races, all the genders.”

It does simmer and bubble and reach some boiling points like a colorful stew with fresh and surprising ingredients.

Fagan hasn’t fussed much with this work in the past two decades, other than changing up the dancers.

Dance critics argue that Fagan, who won a Tony in 1998 for his whimsical choreography in “The Lion King,” is original, quirky and enigmatic. He doesn’t fit neatly into any contemporary-dance box.

“He treats the body in space in ways that are quite different from other dancemakers, plays uniquely with gravity and momentum, and is equally comfortable in the worlds of Broadway and modern dance,” said Janice Berman, dance critic for San Francisco Classical Voice.

Nor is his work Euro-centric, former Alvin Ailey director and dancer Judith Jamison was quoted as saying in the New York Times. “It’s Caribbean and polyrhythmic, it’s about sculpting space in a different way. He goes outside the boxes that are used, that dictate that we should look a certain way and move a certain way.”

“I know my ballet. I love my ballet, but not all dance comes from ballet,” Fagan insists. “I beg to differ with people who think it does.”

Discipline and perfection, part of his buttoned-up father’s formula for success, continue to rule Fagan’s approach to dance, while he runs his troupe like a family. “We all have days we could murder our sisters and brothers. We get upset, but we get over it pretty soon. Dance is father and mother of this company. I know the dancers’ lovers, their husbands, their wives, their children. I just want them to be with supportive people. That’s life. I’m a great-grandfather. I’ve seen it all.”

His company has 14 dancers – seven men and seven women — and several apprentices. Most have college degrees. “I like bright dancers. I like the cum laudes.”

Several have stayed with him for decades. Norwood Pennewell, who has danced “Spring Yaounde” for years, is in his 50s and has worked with Fagan since 1978. Steve Humphrey, “the man with the muscles” as Fagan describes him, is 60 years old; Fagan has been his only teacher. Nicolette Depass joined Fagan in 1994, Natalie Rogers in 1989. These longtime dancers give the company continuity, leadership and historical memory. “It’s very unusual to have dancers such a long time. But that is very important to me,” Fagan said.

The company is comprised mostly of African-Americans, though whites, Latinos and Latinas, and mixed-race dancers are part of Garth Fagan Dance. “It’s the world I see and I love: all the races all the genders and ages. We have dancers from 21 years old to 60. That’s a community. Some are tall and slender, some are a little plump. I like to see diversity: I like to see beauty – but with variations. It’s not six little maids all in a row.”

Six little maids in a row would neither reflect Fagan’s view of life nor inspire his human-centered, high-energy choreography. His broad-mindedness and rebelliousness coupled with breakneck-speed chainees and impossibly long and difficult arabesques make a brilliant mix that keep “Griot” and Fagan on our cultural radar.