

Garth Fagan (1940 -)

by Kate Mattingly

If one word could capture Garth Fagan's disparate pursuits and achievements, it would be "trailblazer." He is a pioneer who put Rochester, New York, on the dance map, turning this city into an incubator for world-class training, artists, and his company, originally called Bottom of the Bucket BUT... Dance Theatre and now called Garth Fagan Dance. He has created a movement language that embraces distinct techniques and ideas, and his choreography defies classification, spanning from *Prelude: Discipline is Freedom* (1981, revised 1983), which often opens his company's performances with a demonstration of technical prowess; to *Griot New York* (1991), his collaboration with Wynton Marsalis and Martin Puryear; to *The Lion King*, a musical that opened on Broadway in 1997. Each of Fagan's endeavors is a unique and unforgettable creation.

Born in Jamaica in 1940, Fagan performed with Ivy Baxter's Jamaican National Dance Company while still a high school student. In an interview with Sharon Fitzgerald in 2000, Fagan spoke about the significance of his training: "Ivy Baxter was very seminal because she was my first dance teacher, and she was one of the first people in the Caribbean, if not the first, to realize the value of our dance vocabulary. She had studied modern dance in Germany with Sigurd Leeder, so she was one of the first people to integrate the element of Caribbean dance--which is a folk-based dance with lots of African roots--into modern dance."¹

Baxter introduced Fagan to [Martha Graham](#), showing him the film "A Dancer's World," as well as to Mary Hinkson, whom Fagan describes as his "mentor and patroness and saint and goddess."² Growing up in Jamaica, Fagan was immersed in education and culture. It was Fagan's father, who was educated at Oxford and

was Jamaica's chief education officer, who told his son about the work of [Katherine Dunham](#) when he returned to Jamaica from a trip to London, but he did not support his son's desire to become a dancer. Fagan persisted.

Coming to the United States in 1960, and earning a degree from Wayne State University in Detroit in 1968, Fagan considered becoming a psychologist but kept dancing. He was a student of Martha Graham, [José Limón](#), and [Alvin Ailey](#), and performed in the companies of [Pearl Primus](#) and Lavinia Williams. Then two important events occurred: he was invited to teach at the Brockport campus of the State University of New York and he decided to create his own company. While working with underprivileged students he met while teaching SUNY-affiliated classes in Rochester, Fagan was inspired by the power and energy he saw in this next generation. In his own words: "This was 1970, so we'd just come through the riots and that whole period of unrest. I wanted to add my contributions... I thought that if I started with these dancers who had no previous training, then I could just teach them from scratch and I wouldn't have to waste time undoing the good work that other people had done."³

The distinctive movement vocabulary that Fagan developed combines the polyrhythms of Afro-Caribbean forms, the weighted movements associated with modern dance, the speed of ballet, and the risk-taking and experimentation of post-modern dance. The grace and athleticism of Fagan's dancers are almost superhuman: they exude stamina, perseverance, and dedication. Their fusion of sharpness and clarity, flight and rhythm is one of a kind. Yet the dancers deliver these heroic feats with a nonchalant demeanor. Fagan has crafted a unique regimen for his company

that involves not only a two-hour technique class twice a day, but also suggestions of books to read and discuss, as well as museums to visit.

When he established his company Fagan chose the name Bottom of the Bucket BUT... Dance Theatre to reflect the unassuming origins of his troupe and his dancers. In 1991 Fagan changed the name of his company to Garth Fagan Dance, reflecting the distinct, succinct, and contemporary nature of his work. Not only are his performers magnetic but they, like Fagan, attract awards like magnets: Garth Fagan Dance has been awarded five New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Awards, honoring Garth Fagan, as well as his dancers Norwood Pennewell, Steve Humphrey, Natalie Rogers and Sharon Skepple. Company members’ commitment to Fagan is phenomenal: Humphrey, one of the founding members, continues to perform with the troupe more than 40 years later. Pennewell, who has been with Garth Fagan Dance since 1978, also continues to perform, and, as of 2012, serves as Fagan’s assistant and the company’s rehearsal director. Rogers, now Rogers-Cropper, is currently the director of Fagan’s school and the company’s assistant rehearsal director.

When *The Lion King* opened on Broadway in 1997 Fagan’s choreography reached weekly audiences that numbered in the thousands and left an indelible impression. Fagan would go on to receive numerous awards, including the 1998 Tony Award for Best Choreography and the 2000 Laurence Olivier Award for Best Theatre Choreographer, as well as offers to choreograph other Broadway shows. Although he accepted the awards, he turned down the invitations to choreograph for other Broadway productions in order to nurture his company, his “first love.”⁴

In honor of his more than three decades of teaching at SUNY Brockport – he joined the Department of Dance in 1969 and retired in 2002 -- Fagan received a Chancellor’s Award and has also been named Professor Emeritus of the State University of New York. When he received the Distinguished Professor of Dance award in 1985, he became the first dance faculty member to earn SUNY’s highest faculty rank. In 2007 he reflected on his teaching when he received an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the State University of New York College at Brockport: “This honorary degree is the supreme honor because it’s coming from Brockport, the school where I started my professional career, meeting brilliant students, wonderful and supportive faculty and pushing brand new ideas in dance, the arts and life.”⁵

As disparate as his projects may appear, the through-line of Fagan’s endeavors is the intertwining of physical discipline and creative exploration. There is a kind of scientific rigor combined with artistic innovation that makes his choreography captivating, highly structured, complex, and deeply human. In an interview conducted in the 1990s Fagan spoke about his process: “To come up with a new dance I have to say what do I want to do? By new I don’t mean trendy or current, but rather new for me, something that I have not solved before or tried to solve before because I am not sure that we ever solve what it is we are working for... New as far as a new way of using bodies, a new way of using my own dance language, and using my own dance language in contrast to more accepted dance languages. It is not about trashing what has come before. What has come before is wonderful and it has brought us to where we are.”⁶

NOTES

1. Sharon Fitzgerald, "Fagan's Flight." *American Visions*, Apr/May 2000, 22-27.
 2. Idem.
 3. Idem.
 4. Susan Reiter, "Cause for Celebration," *Dance* magazine, October 2010: 34-38.
 5. "Fagan Receives Honorary Degree." *State University of New York College at Brockport*. May 12, 2007. Accessed September 7, 2012. Available from: <http://www.brockport.edu/news bureau/885.html>
 6. Garth Fagan interviewed in *Dancing*, episode 7: "The Individual and Tradition," 1993.
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