

FJORD R E V I E W

LIGHTNING ROD

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Mixed Repertory

Garth Fagan Dance

Choreography by Garth Fagan and Norwood Pennewell

Nate Holden Performing Arts Center, Los Angeles, California, October 3-5, 2014

After an inexplicable 10-year absence from the City of Angels, this 44-year old, Rochester, N.Y.-based troupe roared back into town with power, grace and its unique brand of high-octane ebullience, courtesy of Ebony Repertory Theatre's Wren T. Brown. The timing, as it were, couldn't have been more propitious: It was recently announced that the smash Broadway hit, "The Lion King," choreographed by Tony award-winning Garth Fagan and directed by Julie Taymor, had become the most successful work of entertainment in history. Besting the box office of films including *Titanic* and *Avatar* and stage shows such as "Phantom of the Opera," the musical that opened in 1997 and is still running on the Great White Way, has surpassed \$6.2 billion in ticket sales from New York, national tour and international productions.

It's no surprise, then, that Fagan's signature Afro-Caribbean style was in evidence long before Simba, Mufasa and Scar romped through Taymor's magical, puppet-filled production. Of the four dances on view at the Nate Holden Theatre, including two West Coast premieres and one Los Angeles premiere, was Fagan's audience-wowing "Prelude (Discipline is Freedom)," from 1981, revised two years later.

With music by Abdullah Ibrahim and Max Roach, the work opened with a solo, performed in silence, by Fagan muse/rehearsal director Norwood Pennewell. Still dancing at 55 (and a member of the troupe for 36 years, but who's counting!), this sleek, bearded demi-God continues to have it going on: rock-solid balances in extension, quicksilver turns and fleet changes of position. Somewhat reminiscent of Harald Lander's 1948 "Etudes," this piece takes us from classroom-like moves—floor stretches and deep plies—to full-blown Faganism: The rigors of ballet are mashed up with corporeal pliability and uninhibited energy eruptions, fueling dancers into twirling Dervish-like diagonals and buoyant, gravity-defying leaps.

As dancers entered, including a gray-haired, albeit vigorous, Steve Humphrey, now 62 and an original company member from 1970, they became jubilation personified. Unisons, sculptural poses and detailed arm movements (airplane and windmill whooshings, finger-flutterings) punctuated the piece, where the body in motion becomes an ecstatic journey into, well, being human.

In “No Evidence of Failure,” we behold Natalie Rogers, 52, who joined the troupe in 1989, leaving in 2003 to have a baby, before returning as a dancer three years ago. (While raising her daughter, Rogers continued to be assistant rehearsal director and to direct the dance school.) Last year Fagan made this solo for her, and a second section that also featured the 31-year old Haitian dynamo, Vitolio Jeune.

Fagan, 74, has said he relishes seeing a more mature dancer on stage, and believes that just as older musicians, actors and artists continue working for years, so should a dancer. Because of Fagan’s technique—and probably having something to do with the water in Rochester—the master has a triumvirate of performers, Humphrey, Pennewell and Rogers (the latter two are Bessie Award winners) that defies the status quo; each an inspiration.

Rogers’ solo is glorious, her dancing astonishingly full-out. Set to jazz and reggae stylings by Monty Alexander, the work featured her executing eye-popping balances, springboard jumps and a dollop of hip-swaying. Rogers had total command of the stage, owning it, then sharing it with Jeune in sweet, neo-Cougar fashion. Two headstrong individuals, they frequently came together, as when the virtuosic Jeune wrapped his hand gently around Rogers’ waist. She, too, softened, flicking circles on his bare chest, clinging to him as he spun. A study in sincerity and whimsy, the work had the duo giving each other mock kisses as well as bumping bottoms, the dance an ode to joy in what has lately become more of an off-kilter world.

With “Lighthouse/Lightning Rod,” Fagan’s 2012 Brooklyn Academy of Music commission, the choreographer collaborated with Pulitzer Prize-winning pal, composer Wynton Marsalis (they’d worked together on Fagan’s “Griot New York” in 1991), and L.A. native, sculptor Alison Saar. Local audiences saw four excerpts of this work inspired by strong female figures—lighthouses—in Fagan’s life. Saar took this notion literally, creating fiberglass-covered foam-based structures, with a towering woman as lighthouse, one breast bared, clutching an armful of silver branches. Mary Peterson of “Lion King” fame, designed the costumes, with marine-themed purples and blues for the opening segment, as dancers moved fluidly, hopping forward on one leg to Marsalis’ rich, bouncy rhythms. Arms were also kinetic, collapsing and rising, fingers often dangling. If this is a day at the beach, we’ll take it.

The second excerpt, “Memories,” with a more languid score, gave us Saar’s blue thorny branches as backdrop to a contemplative Pennewell solo: noble walking, intense leg-lifting and explosive scissor jumps again proved that he is a terpsichorean force. As the branches were pushed towards center stage, a man’s head, lying horizontally, was revealed, while a trio—

Rogers, Jeune and Nicolette Depass (another company mainstay)—moved as one. Saar's 'Tree Soul' figure, a tall, copper-colored man, loomed over Rogers and Wynton Rice, while the final section "Lightning Rod," thrilled as dancers, including a terrific Sade Bully, shimmied, shook and occasionally paired off in Lindy Hopping/quasi-jitterbug fashion under Saar's jagged bolts of silver lightning, the metallic rods repeated in the troupe's black costumes.

Completing the program: Pennewell's third work for the troupe, excerpts from last year's "Gin"—not the liquor, but allusions to Eli Whitney's cotton machine. Set to an array of composers (Aphex Twin, Felix Laband and others), these four sections, while marvelously performed and featuring Faganesque touches—the alternation between stasis and swiftness, for example—felt lacking in choreographic focus, its artistic impulses not fully realized.

Pennewell, naturally, can't help being influenced by his mentor, but there can be only one Garth Fagan. That said, his dancers, including Adriene Barber, Andrew David O'Brian, Latisia Rivera, Davante Gilreath and Sarah Herbert, clearly love the man, his inimitable choreography and his ethos. Indeed, one leaves Planet Fagan feeling truly alive and—dare we say—filled with hope.

Source: <http://www.fjordreview.com/lightning-rod/>