

Review: Garth Fagan Dance Honors Geoffrey Holder Along With Carmen de Lavallade

By SIOBHAN BURKEAUG. 2, 2015

Photo

Garth Fagan Dance Adriene Barber and Norwood Pennewell in "Dance for/With Geoffrey," part of a Geoffrey Holder tribute at Lincoln Center. Credit Paula Lobo for The New York Times

The prodigious dancer, choreographer, painter, designer and actor Geoffrey Holder, who died in October — but not before reportedly dancing on his deathbed — would have been 85 on Saturday. Lincoln Center Out of Doors hosted a day of events in his honor, culminating in a performance by Garth Fagan Dance at Damrosch Park, with a prelude by Mr. Holder's partner of 59 years, Carmen de Lavallade.

Ms. de Lavallade, incomparably elegant at 84, needs only to walk onstage to make a crowd go wild. A standing ovation welcomed her at the start of "The Creation," which Mr. Holder made for her in 1970, pairing expansive gestures with James Weldon Johnson's poetic telling of Genesis.

Accompanied by the Ebony Ecumenical Ensemble — which opened the evening with some rousing gospel numbers of its own — Ms. de Lavallade, in a floor-sweeping red gown, relayed the poem with the kind of regal, magnetic amplitude that only she can muster, whether spitting out the seven seas or molding man from clay. Also joining her was an intergenerational cohort from the Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center summer camp, sporting props made with materials from Mr. Holder's workshop: a foil moon, pinwheel stars, a sun of gold lamé left over from "The Wiz." (Mr. Holder directed and designed the costumes for that production, winning Tony Awards for both.)

Mr. Holder and Mr. Fagan, whose company is based in Rochester, share Caribbean roots: Mr. Holder was born in Trinidad, Mr. Fagan in Jamaica. In "Dance for/With Geoffrey," Mr. Fagan orchestrated a hip-swiveling dance party to steel-pan music by Robert Greenidge. A group of women in red skirts entered first, throwing back their heads, followed by the men; they could have been the Carmens and the Geoffreys.

That carefree scene bookended a more plangent duet between Norwood Pennewell and Adriene Barber, invoking the romantic and artistic partnership between Mr. Holder and Ms. de Lavallade. They embraced and caressed as Mr. Fagan, planted in the audience, recited lines from a remembrance by Mr. Holder's son, Leo.

That homage came halfway through a program of mostly vintage Fagan — "Prelude" (1981-83), "Oatka Trail" (1979), "Passion Distanced" (1987) — showcasing his marriage of piercing lines and sumptuous curves, grounded gaits and springing leaps, accomplished by the likes of the gravity-defying Vitolio Jeune. It was a long night, ending with the new but dated "Thanks Forty (Five)," created in 2010 for the company's 40th anniversary and updated this year. The dancers' unflinching energy, right up to the end, was perhaps the greatest tribute to Mr. Holder.

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