



Fringe Fest 2013 Reviews: Garth Fagan Dance

by Casey Carlsen

By nature, the Fringe Festival varies widely in scope and talent. Let's just say, when it came to seeing **Garth Fagan Dance** on Saturday, it was good to come in from the rain knowing I was about to see expertise. "The spirit has to come out to grab you when we dance," Fagan told the eagerly awaiting audience of Saturday night's performance at the company's Chestnut Street studio space downtown, and indeed it did.

The company opened with the perennial favorite "Prelude," subtitled "Discipline is Freedom," which provides a primer of sorts to the work and structure behind company class and sort of gives me the feeling of being railroaded into productivity by a strict and loving parent. The piece showcases the distinguishing style and movement of the Fagan Technique and never fails to move me. Set to music by Abdullah Ibrahim and Max Roach, it builds in intensity and zooms in on the exacting movements and defining technique of Fagan's brilliance.

"Prelude" demonstrates the synchronicity of performance and the perfect rendering of each movement that has earned Fagan his lofty stance in the dance world. Five Bessies (the dance world's equivalent of an Oscar) are held by Fagan members, one by the man himself for his "Lion King" choreography. "Prelude" lays out the working parts of that winning style for us: the flexed hand and feet, the undulating torso, the downward thrusting arms from a low-bent torso position. Then there are the powerful impulses, like electrical currents, that course through a dancer's body, especially as they rapidly transition into another body level or explode into a turn or jump, often from a standstill, without the benefit of moving across the floor beforehand.

Fagan and his right-hand man, Norwood "P.J." Pennewell, both gave the audience glimpses of unfinished pieces that will premiere at the Joyce Theater in New York City next month. Fagan introduced his as an accolade of sorts to the contemporary woman, the woman who does everything and does it well, hence the name, "No Evidence of Failure."

The excerpt we saw was a solo for Natalie Rogers, a Bessie winner and longtime company member who returned to the stage last year after a hiatus to run the Garth Fagan Dance School.

The dance was a lovely, lilting, and conveyed a sense of busy multi-tasking. It also provided ample opportunity for Rogers to demonstrate her intricate, exquisite footwork and the full range of movement in her supple upper body. I was especially taken by a repeated phrase in which she reclined in an excruciatingly slow penche, one leg extended high behind her as she tilted her upper body, gaze and arm downward, reaching, reaching, reaching, before pulling up into a side leg extension without changing her standing leg. Then, in a captivating progression of choreography, she moved directly into a sweetly expressive pose in which her folded arm was propped up on her raised, extended foot and she laid her head sleepily against the crook of her elbow, and closed her eyes. Again: she closed her eyes after balancing on that one leg for close to a minute. Killer.

I liked the excerpt from Pennewell's new piece, "Gin," even more than the other two full-length works I've seen from him over the last couple of years. It began with five dancers spread out across the stage, performing independently of each other, seemingly intent on refining their own movements. Then one dancer, relative newcomer Roderick Calloway, stepped forward to the edge of the stage and executed a series of slow (again, slow is hard) extensions with a light grace, some supported only from a standing leg in half-pointe. From the front row, however, the strain showed in his gaze and a slight twitch around his mouth, rather as if he was staring into the muzzles of a firing squad. But I'm being nitpicky.

Pennewell's choreography then gave us two lines moving across the stage in formation before leaving veteran Shanon Castle alone onstage for a solo full of intense movement featuring taut thrusting, one leg rotations, and more, all accomplished without hesitation or error.

Next up was Vitolio Jeune, a fierce dancer and an audience favorite. Jeune explodes onstage. Clad in an open-buttoned, sleeveless shirt that whipped around as he moved, fueling his dramatic stage presence, Jeune brought to mind both Puck and Caliban. Leaping with wild precision he was a gorgeous tangle of limbs sharply bisecting each other mid-air, an otherworldly creature; hunkering down, head thrust forward, he was earth-bound, energy temporarily constrained. Norwell's choreography here is original and affecting and there is no one better to set it on than Jeune, with his ability to hit those high altitudes again and again in his jumps.

Also of note last night was Raven Jelks, one of the babies of the company but so compelling with her freshness and youthful energy that I found her commanding a lot of my attention. I wonder how she managed to become so fluent in the company's movement vocabulary in such a short amount of time. She is already very good. No telling how much better she'll become under the tutelage of Fagan and with the support of so many big sisters and brothers in her new family.

The final work shared Saturday night was from last year's premiere from Fagan, "Lighthouse/Lightning Rod" (excerpts from Lightning Rod 3 & 1). The final scene is especially riveting in its depiction of a rollicking party, the dancers partnered off and hamming it up with the jitterbug.

I'm looking forward to seeing the completed versions of Fagan and Pennewell's new works during their home season at Nazareth College Arts Center later this fall. Opening night is December 3. Unless I decide to roadtrip down to NYC to catch them at the Joyce. Hmm...

Garth Fagan Dance also performs Thursday 9/26, Friday 9/27, and Saturday 9/28 at 7 p.m. at Garth Fagan Studio Theater. Tickets cost \$16.

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