

# How Garth Fagan Keeps Dancers Aloft

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real deal," Mr. Fagan sighed.

Asked to explain the loyalty he inspires, Mr. Fagan modestly credits the salary and health benefits that his company provides. In the early years, he says, his dancers worked odd jobs to support themselves, but in the 80's he instituted a payroll. "I insisted that my dancers have a salary and benefits because you need that to learn how to budget, to lead an adult life," Mr. Fagan says. His dancers, however, also speak of the lure of the Fagan style, which fuses modern dance and ballet with African and Caribbean folk traditions, and incorporates an eclectic range of music — "from Bach to boogie-woogie," Mr. Fagan likes to say — using the music as counterpoint to the dance, rather than as its frame. According to Norwood Pennewell Jr. (known as P. J.), who has been with the company since 1978: "The magnetism has a lot to do with the inventiveness of the choreography. What keeps you, though, is the technique, and that's not just technique from the physical standpoint, but the whole philosophy — the maintenance of the body and the maintenance of the brain." He added, "To me, the

fact that I'm 46 years old, and I get up in the morning and am able to do this — it's Garth."

If there is a face of Garth Fagan Dance (besides Mr. Fagan's, which hasn't been seen in performance since 1980), it is Mr. Pennewell's: handsome and serene as a Brancusi mask, atop a body as lean and sinuous as a 20-year-old's. He still performs the standout roles in the company's repertory and new works, and he also leads the dancers every day in four hours of exercises (two in the morning, two in the evening), in the Rochester studio that they have occupied since 1989. A former Knights of Columbus hall, the room has high ceilings, stained-glass windows and six clunky chandeliers that resemble spritz cookies. If not for the large framed photograph of Mr. Fagan that gazes down on the dancers as they stretch to rhythmic soul tracks (like Sweetback's "Softly, Softly"), the room would look like a cotillion hall where children learn to waltz.

Clearly, technique and a paycheck are not all that holds the group together. "He's a father figure," Ms. Skepple says of Mr. Fagan. He agrees: "The kind of love and the fussing I give daily, they have to be my children. Only children would put up with that."

And it's a two-way street. "I'm there for them when they need help," he says. Mr. Fagan gave Ms Skepple



Mike Simons/Getty Images

Members of Garth Fagan Dance at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center last month.

away at her wedding in Jamaica in 1997. When he moved a few years back, he sold his previous home to Mr. Pennewell — at a generous parental discount.

Garth Fagan was born in Jamaica in 1940, to achievement-minded parents who were not thrilled when their son, at 16, began to dance and tour with Ivy Baxter's Jamaica National Dance Theater. "Hell, no!" Mr. Fagan says, laughing. "The dancers

were world-traveled, they were racy, they wore beautiful clothes, and not only did they look fast, they were fast, in the old-fashioned way." Mr. Fagan did not mind his parents' skepticism too much; back then, he said, he did not want to be a dancer: "I wanted to be an artist — a painter." Still, he dutifully went to college, at Wayne State University in Detroit, intending to study psychology. "My dad would say, 'Garth, discipline is

freedom.' I used to hate it!" he says. But somehow he choreographed countless college productions, and attended dance festivals around the country, and took classes with Martha Graham. Dance beat out art as Mr. Fagan's primary creative calling, and today his father's credo lives on in the subtitle of the company's signature work. "Prelude: Discipline Is Freedom."

The most intricate, sustained in-

vention Mr. Fagan has choreographed is the evening-length piece "Griot New York," which he made in 1991 in collaboration with Wynton Marsalis, who composed an original score and performed it live with his septet, and the sculptor Martin Puryear. In eight separate scenes, as Mr. Marsalis and his band play, dancers interact onstage with Mr. Puryear's outsize organic forms: an enormous clay vase, suspended upside down from the ceiling, that embodies fertility; a giant curling spatula, part frond, part hoe, that suggests planting and new growth; a staircase that implies death. At the "Jazz in Motion" festival, excerpts from "Griot" will be revived.

Why the confluence of performances this fall? "Taste, my dear," Mr. Fagan says, smiling. Still, there is more of Mr. Fagan to go around. Another Broadway play is in the works (discussions are under way and are still confidential), and Mr. Fagan is also contemplating an evening-length work for 2005 on the scale of "Griot." "Something celebratory," he confirms. "Most dance companies don't make it to 35." But what about the 70th anniversary? Will the company's young newcomers — like Mr. Thorne, Annique Roberts, 22, and Mr. Sanno, Mr. Sanno — still be dancing the Fagan technique 35 years on, playing uncles and aunts to a new generation of dancers? "I hope so," Mr. Fagan said. "It would be such a waste, not just of my life but of my predecessors' — Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham — if we chucked it up. There's such a strong American energy and texture to modern dance that it would be a crime if these youngsters don't keep it going." □