

The New York Times

Turning 40, but Still Flying Through the Air Like a Picture of Ease

Garth Fagan Dance has been around for 40 years (it began as Bottom of the Bucket, but ... Dance Theater). And Norwood Pennewell has been with the company for all but eight

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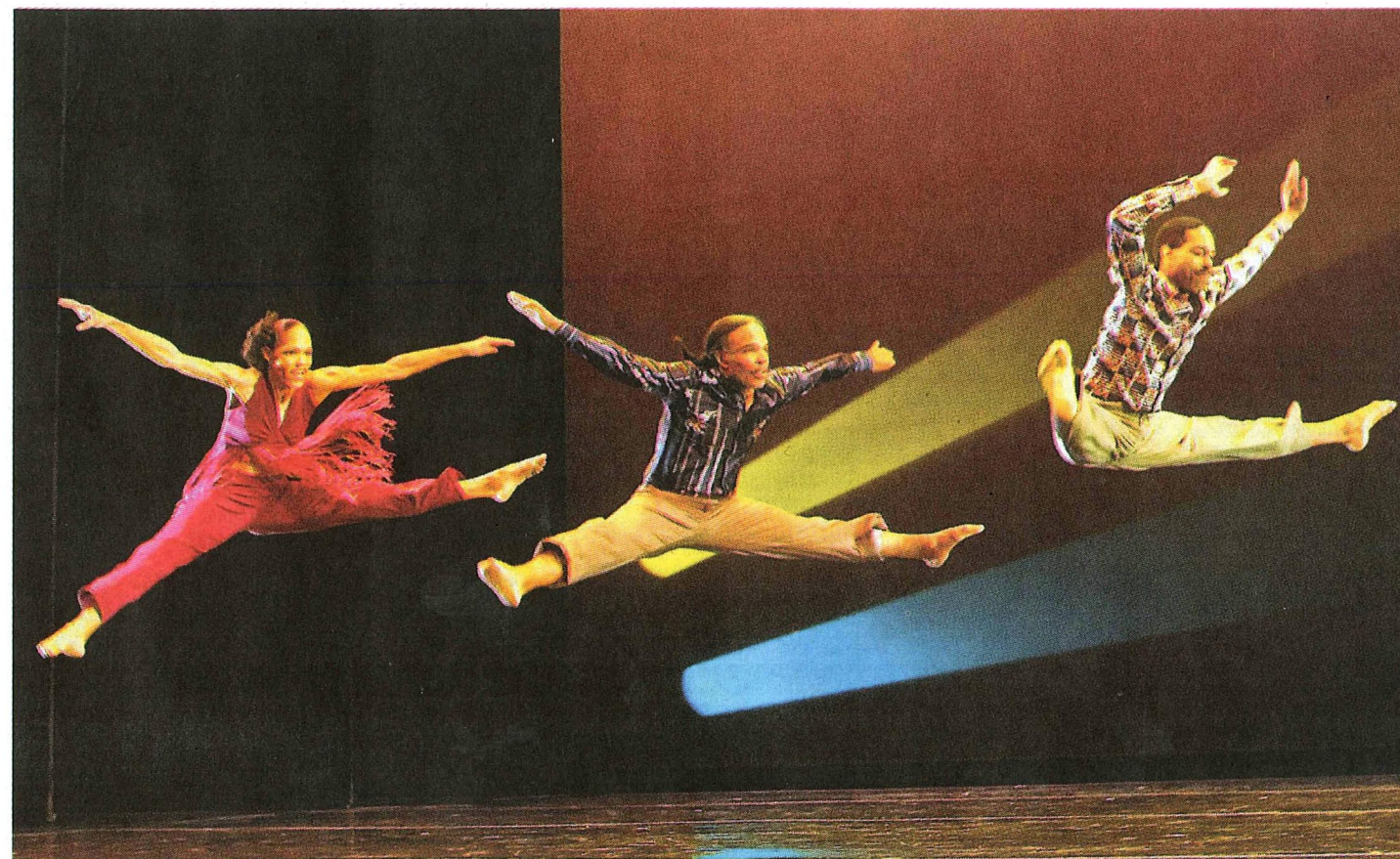
of those years, a remarkable career for any dancer, but more so in light of the exacting rigor of Mr. Fagan's oeuvre. You have to have serious chops to pull off those endless, off-center balances, disparate movement languages and space-eating leaps, and Mr. Pennewell — along with Nicolette Depass, the troupe's other miraculous veteran — never disappoints.

So it seems appropriate that Mr. Fagan would share his ruby anniversary season, which opened Tuesday night at the Joyce Theater, with Mr. Pennewell, his longtime dancer and assistant. Each man presented a premiere; routine stuff for Mr. Fagan, who celebrated the occasion with "Thanks Forty." But "Hylozoic" is Mr. Pennewell's first foray into choreography.

Not surprisingly he uses many of the strategies and movement choices favored by his boss. But this spare, meditative work for 10 dancers, set to music by John Adams, Adam Rudolph and Yusef Lateef, is a promising, sophisticated start.

The dancers face off across the

Garth Fagan Dance performs through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-0800, joyce.org.



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Garth Fagan Dance From left, Nicolette Depass, Steve Humphrey and Norwood Pennewell in Garth Fagan's "Thanks Forty" at the Joyce Theater.

stage in columns. Like chess pieces come to aggressive, silky life, they crouch low, legs stamping as their torsos slowly churn. There is a precision to their movements but also an almost tossed-off quality; shoulders shrug at the end of confrontational phrases, as if to invite a fight

and laugh it off simultaneously.

Similarly, entrances and exits are softly happenstance. Motifs return like echoes. At the end the dancers mass upstage in one corner, and you think something major is about to bloom. But the structure unwinds instead, the way big weather can come and

go, following its own devices.

The fires of "Hylozoic" are banked in form. Of course they are: Mr. Pennewell's mentor Mr. Fagan remains an unrepentant formalist, and his best dances have a minute-by-minute clarity of structure that entrances. An excerpt from "Griot New York"

(1991), set to a sensual, we've-got-all-night jazz composition by Wynton Marsalis, astonishes in its just so-ness.

The scene is domestic. Framed by Martin Puryear's giant, curving spatula sculpture and dressed in his underwearlike costumes, Mr. Pennewell and Ms. Depass

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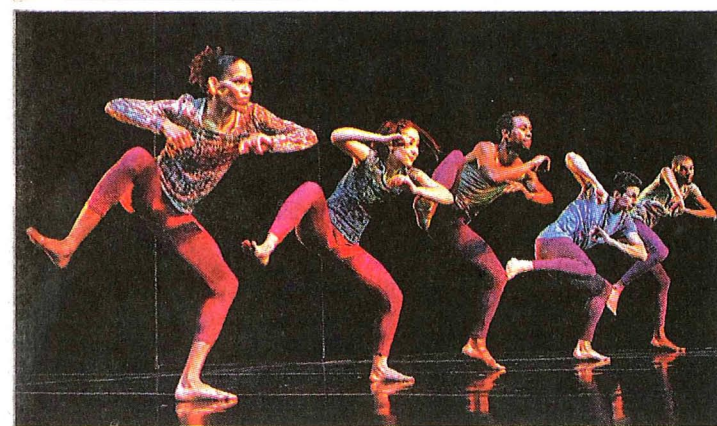
More photographs from the performance:

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twine and balance in a fiendishly slow pas de deux of stylized eroticism. The choreography is witty and muscular, a crystalline vehicle for two of modern dance's most ravishing performers. Like "Prelude: Discipline Is Freedom" (1981, revised 1983), which opened the program, it satisfies from step to step.

On a macro scale Mr. Fagan's meticulousness, unfortunately, isn't always so apparent. He tends to go for boilerplate sections (the prologue, the ritual, the celebration) and a circumscribed musical palette (thorny classical giving way to African pop, for example), as in "Thanks Forty," which has a bounding male section, a spiritual moment for the women and concludes with a dance party that works overtime to show how much fun the dancers are having.

Yet there are moments of interest and beauty throughout, particularly in Ms. Depass's opening solo, "MUSE-Work," set to Shostakovich. She slides between set-in-stone shapes, where modern dance meets ballet, then yields to syncopated Afro-Caribbean rhythms. The mood, as cool as it is fierce, springs from a constellation of devilishly specific details. And then it grows into something more.



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A 40th Anniversary

Garth Fagan Dance celebrates at Joyce (above, troupe members in "Hylozoic"). PAGE 7.